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Researchers, Residents, a Place to Rest

An Interview with Julie Becker by Bernhard Burgi

BERNHARD BURGI: Your huge and complex installation - RESEARCHERS, RESIDENTS, A PLACE TO REST- emerged from a prolonged and painstaking process. You worked on the installation from 1993 to 1996. One way to approach and interpret it might be to refer to Ilya Kabakov's term 'total installation', in which viewers are clearly free to move within the space created and immerse themselves in what feels like an atmosphere that produces a dream-like condition: The basic structure is a closed architectural complex divided into three sections, which contain countless elements, levels of reality, references and points of views. The viewer sees both miniature, minutely crafted interiors and lifelike environments. Visitors enter the installation through one such environment, which resembles a reception area and waiting room. This introductory space is subject to a number of interpretations. You've offered us several designations: 'Real Estate Agent', 'Waiting Room', 'Concierge' and 'Psychiatrist'. All are present in the room, waiting to be used as tools for preparation and investigation. Even though each evokes a different set of associations and fantasies, they are also interchangeable. The 'Psychiatrist' sign is especially titillating, with its implication that the spaces we are about to enter are not only physical but also mental.

JULIE BECKER: You enter a room, and you don't know exactly where you are. At first glance the room appears to be an office or a waiting room, maybe even a home office or the kind of reception area you might see in an industrial park in the San Fernando Valley. It is a small room, and very bright. Colours pop out at you. Everything is very still except for three goldfish swimming in a bowl. After a moment you realize that sounds are penetrating this room from somewhere deep inside. You can't quite identify what you're hearing. Is it Muzak? Is it techno? Is it nothing but the sound of machinery being operated in the back room? As time passes, you realize that the room isn't ordinary at all. It's all a bit hallucinatory, because things that seemed ordinary at first are completely skewed in this configuration. The shelf that holds the Kleenex box above the side table is just a little bit too high. The candy dish below it doesn't quite fit in here. It's the kind of cutcrystal doodad you might find at Grandma's house. The ochre Naugahyde love-seat is also, on further inspection, a sofa-bed. Yet it's obvious that this room isn't a bedroom. Who sleeps here? When and why? And isn't the lettering on the desk signs a bit too large? 'Psychiatrist'. 'Real Estate Agent'. 'Waiting Room'. 'Concierge'. It's unlikely that this is a public reception area, and if these signs declare a purpose - why more than one? The walls are bare except for a framed set of plans. Closer inspection reveals a map with a legend? -Ate Here. Does the map refer to some outside business project that the occupant is involved in? Or is it a map of the installation? You've just arrived here from documenta X in Kassel and you wonder, who's the 'you'? I think that the goal of installation art should be to create an experience through objects: an experience that transports viewers outside themselves and allows them to recognize a larger, more complex world. Dislocation, an uneasy coexistence between reason and intuition, a sense of touch and smell. If you stepped into a painting or a photograph, what would you find? All things are possible in an installation. I understand why you mentioned Kabakov - I think that his work transforms the depressed and dismal state of Russian history into a lyrical universe. He scratches the record of deprivation and remixes it into something poetic and charged. In my work I try to mimic the process of how we think and how we integrate ourselves into the world so that we can see without impediments. Locations taken out of books and movies: characters abstracted from real life, all of them interact within these walls and invite the viewer to travel with them. I hope that my work moves people - from one place to another!

BERNHARD BURGI: You've designed some of these rooms for specific characters, who apparently live in them, since traces of their lives are clearly visible. Two good examples are Danny Torrance, the young protagonist of Stanley Kubrick's film THE SHINING, and Eloise, a fictitious girl who lives alone in New York's Plaza Hotel. But certain rooms are for real people as well. In spite of the meticulous detail-such as pages of Dan 4s diary strewn on the floor-your structures certainly impart no sense of being in a dollhouse. They are airy clusters of spaces that open up before us with an overwhelmingly intense artistic density. I realize of course, that you leave it up to the viewers to find their way through your spaces and to pursue their own associations

and stories. But I wonder if you can tell me more about the residents and how they relate to the context that you've created.

JULIE BECKER: Danny and Eloise for instance, are extreme opposites in terms of both personality and class. Eloise lives in the fabulous Plaza Hotel in New York City. Danny's staying at the empty Overlook Hotel in Colorado just because his loser father happened to luck out and find a job there as a caretaker for the winter. Eloise is a precocious and overly dramatic little girl. Danny Torrance is an introvert. Do they find themselves together here, or in confrontation? Their characters are represented by two-storey rooms connected by a long, single strand of silver thread. A telephone wire, perhaps? A tightrope? But you wanted to know more about the other residents mil. You can find more information on them in the researchers' file or read the private notes they've written about themselves. I don't like calling them residents, but I have to call them something. These anonymous people are the subject of a study being carried out by all the characters in the installation. The viewer, by way of being in the installation, becomes a character too - a fascinating subject with a room designated just for them. They can assume the role that the researcher has left behind or be one of the researchers many fascinating subjects - an addition to the researchers daily activities, which are displayed by long lists, notebooks of things to do. Every character is available for exploration.

BERNHARD BURGI: It's interesting that you're reluctant to give a verbal definition of certain characters who live, at least temporarily, in the installation's model rooms, especially since the viewer wanting to discover something about their personalities and roles is then forced to rely on an interplay of objects, notes, Besides, in the context of the configuration as a whole, these residents carry no more weight than, say, the plain, empty cardboard boxes in your installation, which suddenly seem to embody human traits and moods through their suggestive placement. One might, of course, be tempted to read a linear narrative into the work and - as in a conventional novel or play - assign leading roles to the residents as a key to understanding. But this direct approach leads to a dead end. It is also cancelled out by what happens in the past room, which takes us into a fullscale space once again. A kind of back room - incorporating elements of storage space, study and archives - this final area is filled with source material and information. It is a visual demonstration of a situation totally in flux, in a state of unavoidable transformation.

JULIE BECKER: The back room is the brain centre of the entire installation. It's the workshop, the storage room, the library. It's not a separate entity. This room contains different versions of objects exhibited throughout the space. But here the outtakes aren't thrown away. They're put together to become something else. Behind this wall the viewer finds videotaped discussions with Voxx, the twelve invented personality profiles, brown sleeping bags, recordings from an oldies radio station in L.A., notebooks belonging to Danny and Eloise, cigarettes, coffee and so on. Photographs reduced elsewhere are here in their original size. There are files, drawings, motivational stickers, an unfinished painting of a cabin in the forest, and a photocopier to copy any materials you might want to take with you. But just as on an art-directed movie set, everything is arranged with a specific intention. And that's not all. The way this room is presented makes people wonder exactly what the role of the viewer is. Are viewers actually studying topics raised by the exhibition, or are they just trying to figure out what they want from the installation and what I want from them? What exactly do we mean when we describe something as being 'behind the scenes' Where is it? What position do we normally take when viewing a situation?

BERNHARD BURGI: Is the viewer in an inner world turned inside out? Does he find himself immersed in a world full of memories, burgeoning ideas, phantasms, disillusionment, a quest for meaning and hope? Does he experience this world as an area pulsating with energy, inhaling and exhaling, obviously a structure of uncertain duration and composed of many bits and pieces? A place to rest, despite its fragility? Does (he) see the installation as a mirror of the mechanics of his mind, of mental processes that find only momentary shelter here, of a brain trying to understand the logic of a coherence that keeps it all together? You once spoke of 'looking with everything you have'.

JULIE BECKER: I'm not sure about an uncertain duration of time. The way you put it makes it sound sort of depressing. It's also supposed to be fun, you know. Some things in life are truly harsh and disturbing. If anyone can find a way to be less cynical - well, all the better. Thinking, you know, can be completely suicidal. Sometimes its better to just zone out. And that's what I'm doing here.
RESEARCHERS AND RESIDENTS throws the viewer into an unfocused state. It's like getting in your car and driving without any particular destination. This kind of openness can be scary, but it's also potentially comforting and challenging. In this project you can route yourself, create your own itinerary.

You can follow the plans in the front office. Or you can see it as a network through which to progress. You can draw your own conclusions from connections already there. Of course, if we tried looking at the world 'all at once', most likely we would go nowhere. Nonetheless, I like the possibility of looking at everything in the world, especially at the same time. I call it the 'incredible disappearing experiment'. Who knows what would happen if we could actually do it? In order to create this project, I did make an effort to 'look with all of myself', as we discussed in our first meeting at my house. I tried to figure out how space, time and the human beings that live within space and time coexist. Some people think my work is like a home-made CD-ROM because of its non-linearity, its various entrances and exits. I think this is pretty funny, because we wouldn't have come up with 'being everywhere instantly' if our minds were not there already. We should be talking about how, in a conceptual sense, this technology is so similar to the way we think. When I made this installation I was living and working in a storefront studio in Echo Park, an all-but-condemned apartment building that was also the scene of numerous drug deals and drive-by shootings. Every area of inquiry I set up within the installation led to another question. I didn't set out to create a history of the world! But living in this tiny space, I entered into a kind of delirium of digression. I guess you might say that the installation folds back upon itself.

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Bernhard Burgi was the founding director and curator at the Kunsthalle Zurich.

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