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Julie Becker: The Invisible is Real (Walter De Maria)

By Markus Muller



Slavoj Zizek most recently told an anecdote that could easily pass as just another urban legend: a Slovenian friend of his had to return to his office late one evening when he saw a married CEO in an office in the neighbouring building making love to his secretary on a desk. The two were so passionate that they didn't even realize that there was another building from which they could be seen. Zizek's friend called over and when the CEO picked up the phone the friend said: God is watching you! The poor man almost collapsed.

Just like Julie Becker's work this story is not about the surface structure of the really real but instead leads us to the very core of a psychoanalytical interpretation of the power of imagination (among other things). In 1996, and after three years of work, Becker had completed a project (which she considers to be a part of an ongoing process!) entitled *Researchers, Residents, a Place to Rest*. The project was made up of three parts. First, after entering the exhibition space, there was a waiting room. From there you proceeded into a second area in which two modellike structures were presented raised slightly off the floor. In addition to the models a number of cardboard refrigerator boxes were in what could be called the central space of the installation. The third scenario was a room that Julie Becker calls an obsessive workshop, storage or resource library.

The waiting room - one might think of a hotel, a train station, an airport, a transitory place per se - was fitted with the obligatory desk, chair, sofa, magazines, plant, and even a goldfish bowl in the Zurich version. It looked so real, just waiting for the spectator (patient, client, buyer, tenant, etc.) to proceed to whatever he/she was waiting for. Actually it took less than a second look to realize that more than one thing was oddly wrong about the situation. The strangeness began with the four exchangeable desk signs reading *WAITING ROOM*, *PSYCHIATRIST*, *REAL ESTATE AGENT* and *CONCIERGE*. Apart from the fact that one usually is either in the waiting room or with the psychiatrist, it also seems noteworthy that even in the age of turbo-capitalism one rarely meets somebody who is triple-shifting his professions. The *WAITING ROOM* emulated and signified a certain urgency for a change in the gross income of the person who was responsible for the carpet, or maybe it was just that the same room was shared by an interesting collective of professionals (old high-school friends perhaps?). However, the waiting promised the potential client/visitor shelter, comfort and help. Especially if looking to invest in a House of Usher.

If you took your time, checked in and actually waited (for what, there was no phone) you were likely to notice the plan (or was it a map?) hanging next to the desk. The top of the plan read *Facing North* (Or wherever you want) and its bottom had something like a *Line of Beauty*. (For those of you who were not with the Boy Scouts, let me tell you that any plan/map that reads *Facing North* (Or wherever you want) is not exactly useful but supposedly Blair-witched.) The two floor-plans of what were called the ground and second floor looked eccentric - one could see that at once. The left plan of

the ground floor placed you in the reality of the waiting room (called OPTIONAL ENTRANCE on the plan) as it read, loud and clear: YOU ARE HERE!. Once you knew where you were, you could pre-vision what waited for you behind the OPTIONAL ENTRANCE.

Just like in Georges Perecs Life. A Users Manual you could take a look on the map and into the future of your visit and into the present-pasts of those including (on the right-hand plan of the second floor) DANNY TORRANCE; ELOISE; or (on the ground floor again) Colorado Lounge & Jacks Desk. Someone with only an average knowledge of the history of cinematography and/or The Shining might never have left the OPTIONAL ENTRANCE to enter into the Colorado Lounge because he might still have unsettling memories of what Jack (Nicholson) had done to his family and others before his son (Danny Torrance) and the tough Colorado winter iced him in a maze.

The other Danny Torrance, named Eloise, is, as Chris Kraus said, also an invention of American pop culture. Eloise comes to us from the 1950s, the privileged heroine of a storybook (by Kay Thompson and Hillary Knight) set in New Yorks finest hotel (The Plaza)." Between the rooms on the second floor, signified on the plan as Dannys and Eloises, were a series of generically pearlstringed, ready for Hopscotch open shelters numbered residents and A Visitor. The other thing that seemed to turn the plan into a mythology were two headliners given to two rooms, one on the ground, the other on the second floor, that read: THE INTUITIVE APPROACH and THE OBJECTIVE ATTEMPT. Truth is the invention of a liar, says Heinz von Foerster, the by-now legendary cybernetic who founded the Biological Computerlab at the University of Illinois in Urbana, together with Norbert Wiener and Warren McCulloch.

When you eventually left the WAITING ROOM and entered the second area of models and carefully positioned real-life cardboard refrigerator boxes, you immediately felt that you had left behind some of the classical post-enlightenment dichotomies. Everything that had been announced in the waiting room was right there before you: two models representing the plan - the ground floor and the second floor - with all the rooms mentioned lovingly furnished with loads of detail. Dannys tricycle; carpet designs right out of Kubricks para-neurotic writers-block drama The Shining; the intuitive-approach area, represented by a tiny room with a table, crystal ball and a photo by LA psychic Voxx, whom Becker had met and interviewed (which you learn of later on); pool-table; lovely (pre-mass-produced Mattel) DIY-dollhouse furniture; signs, signifiers and miniature texts that were made to measure scripts for every single scenario, and magnifying glasses to read them all with. Both models were lit up by a cluster of different out-of-scale, really real lamps that morphed the spectator into an Alice In-Between-Wonderland kind of construction-site of a specific life that seemed to be stranger than fiction. Even the model of the waiting room which you had just left was there and you realised that you were looking at a materialised threedimensional hypertextual structure of multiple cross-references that looked as if you were looking at it through somebody elses eyes - like John Malkovichs maybe or Gods or the eyes of some omniscient observer named Julie Becker.

In the terms of epistemology this was not only about subject-object relationships but also about what Heinz von Foerster calls the cybernetics of cybernetics. All that is said is being said by an observer (theorem No.1) and all that is said is said to an observer (theorem No.2), says von Foerster.

When you looked at the residential nutshells in the model of the second floor you realised that you were looking at/observing something that was created to look at/observe something and it was being presented in a situation that was used by someone to look at/observe...

The cardboard refrigerator boxes that were placed in the same room as the models revoked memories of childhood games and fantasies of creating your very own stage-set and recluse from adults. With a couple of blankets, two chairs, a big cardboard box and a lot of unquestioning imagination you could zone in and out of whatever you wanted. Grown-ups without kids often encounter the funhouses of their pasts as a common actual survival strategy of homeless people in first-world countries today.

The proportions of the tiny residents rooms (seeming to evoke a run-down hotel or minimalist shelter) in the second-floor model seemed to be pretty close to those of the cardboard boxes. And, as Julie Becker has pointed out in a conversation on Researchers.... the refrigerator boxes are also people - they take on human characteristics. Each of the boxes can be seen as a different side of oneself. The box faced into the corner with a chair on top is supposed to be the gloomy or depressed box. Its the box not capable of looking toward the outside for information - theres no way out of its melancholy state. This box is supposed to be having some kind of conversation with the box that you would like to be everyday but are not always. Its the most productive box, the best liked, capable of handling most any situation at most every given time.

You had to pass by some of the refrigerator boxes to get into the third area, the obsessive workshop, storage or resource library. Here a multitude of source material of everything you had, and

in some cases hadn't, encountered in the other two scenarios offered itself for further study, manipulation and even copying. There were videotaped interviews with Voxx, a non-stop LA-Oldies radio station playing, the notebooks of Danny and Eloise, written prescriptive profiles of the residents, slides, photos, and a working coffee-machine, all of which signified that you were in the brain," or rather in the centre, of the genetic and narrative engineering of this interactive Dolly-house of an artwork.

Julie Beckers Researchers... offered a radically constructed, post-Lacanian topography of multi-linearity that counteracted any kind of classifying stereotype. It created an unreal real reality that enabled the spectator to act in such a way that the total number of his or her possibilities grew. Researchers, Residents, a Place to Rest was as much a total installation as a stage-set; as much an architectural model of Flintstonian humour (remember those spareribs at the drive-in?) as an irritating Blow Up of horror-striking rear-window views. It was as much about the idea that seeing is believing as about the question of just what to believe after you have seen the project. Like in Zizek's story about the CEO, part of Researchers... fascination has to do with the spectators awareness of the observer.

What if we were just another part of the Researchers... in the sense that we, just like Danny, Eloise, the residents and Julie Becker herself, only exist as the result of being observed by someone? What if Julie Beckers Researchers... is just a stage-set to enter a multitude of Julie Beckers? What if real life is just us playing a multitude of specific roles before the eyes of a researcher/observer? What if we are not really ourselves but just play us in front of the eyes of the beholder? It is certainly more fun to be a player today than back in the world of 1984, and it actually is enlightening, sometimes a bit frightening too, that Julie Becker reminds us of this uncanny fact.

Beckers installation Suburban Legend (1999) focuses on a set of symptoms of culture that are based on Researchers... in very much the same way that picturepuzzles are a basis for Freud's Dream Work. As her own words go to show, Suburban Legend relates to a certain strata of the collective memory: My brother and his stoner friends tried to convince me that the Pink Floyd album, Dark Side of the Moon, through some "karmic occurrence" is an alternative sound track for America's most beloved family film, The Wizard of Oz. This rumour has achieved a cult status since the early seventies and continues to challenge teenagers today who spend endless hours trying to map the two. The rumour has it that synching begins with the third roar of the MGM lion.

To enter this narrative Becker gives us a pretty homemade everymans basement recording-studio set-up, complete with a wooden console for the technical goodies, a bench and a portable screen (as in those memories of endless slide shows of somebody else's holiday). You can sit down and watch The Wizard of Oz and listen to Dark Side of the Moon on headphones. No matter what your cultural background in this first world is, you most likely know either one or the other of these two common denominators. I myself liked Pink Floyd's album Wish you were here better, due to the fact that it had that one song which helped to pre-configure sexuality by enabling teenagers to dance the blues just so much longer (do you remember?). But the Dark Side was definitely considered to be the better album. I had almost no relation to The Wizard of Oz though, as it is not (and never was) the family classic in Germany as it supposedly was (or still is) in the United States. However it is, of course, known as an important and entertaining film in the history of the industry. I had never heard about any relationship between the two artifacts before sitting down on that bench in Eindhoven. "When I had to leave one-and-a-half hours later due to the fact that the museum wanted to close for the day, I had the almost euphoric feeling that someone had offered me the key to understanding the world. That may sound pathetic, but it was a mind-blowing experience. In her truly Heisenbergian Notes to take into consideration while viewing, Julie Becker points out that Sometimes the combination alludes to information that might be less obvious on the surface. One in particular occurs when the sound "ch-ching" of the song Money is heard as Dorothy steps out into Munchkin Land. The fact that The Wizard of Oz was (one of) the first full length colour movie(s) released and the most expensive one made in the United States at that time might perhaps be considered. To make the comparison easier for those just initiated, Becker supplies the spectator with a short and a long version of numerous coincidences on all kinds of (psychological and perceptive) levels. The short version offered about eleven match-ups that clocked from 03:13 to 42.:40; the longer one listed 62 of them, beginning at 00:2.3 and leading up to 1:41:28, when Pink Floyd sing: ...and I am not frightened of dying... right after THE END fades in.

As you go along realising these stupendous proofs you get all the more eager to find/construct some of your own. You can fast forward, rewind, repeat, or freeze the video and soundtrack anytime; there seems to be no limit whatsoever to your own ingenuity. Whenever I felt unsuccessful in furthering the Suburban Legend I instinctively synched the soundtrack with memories of my past, such as when and where did I hear Money for the first time? When neither of the two were successful I began doubting the machinery. Dark Side of the Moon, for example, has to be repeated over and over again to last the length of the movie, which might make you wonder if the whole experience isn't principally quite

uncertain.

Apart from all this there is an unmistakable fun factor, that is if you do like the music and/or the film and if you are interested in your own past for that matter. For example, you might still be able to remember that you once did indeed listen to certain LPs such as Quo by Status Quo for about a hundred times, but then of course you don't do that kind of unflinching devotional thing anymore (unless you are trying to research Suburban Legends). While watching *The Oz* you might begin to wonder if Jean-Luc Godard was right when he said that the soul would not trust her own eyes and what if *The Wizard of Oz* was actually developed only on the basis of a soundtrack - a soundtrack that didn't even exist when the movie was shot. As a matter of fact, the inter-relational binarily coded moiré patterns of *Suburban Legends* cover a huge territory: from *objet trouvé* to *Gay Science*. On my own personal memory lane I also met up with some of Douglas Gordon's pieces, including *Something between my mouth and your ear*, which, as he puts it:

is also related to this Roland Barthes idea that is, when you get to a certain age in life certain generations will become kind of obsessed with another time period. His idea is that you can't become obsessed or - obsessed is maybe too strong - or preoccupied or too interested in the time immediately before you were born, because this would be the time when your parents, even if you don't know your parents, it is a biological fact this will be the time that they were alive so the idea of residual influence is important. That is, if we all have babies, whatever we've been involved in in culture will somehow pass on to the baby and then when the baby is 3 years old they will get more interested in the 80s than the 90s. And this - although it sounds a bit fantastic - I remember me and a guy in London, a collector, and he's completely obsessed by 1930s jazz and that is exactly the time when his parents were first getting together years before they had him. So it doesn't seem such an outlandish idea, so although I physically probably never ever heard the Velvet Underground they were in the air. And actually the first time I went to New York my mother had said, "Oh, You've got to go to the Peppermint Lounge you really have to do that". And I was thinking, what the fuck were you doing in the Peppermint Lounge in 1962.

Following this idea of residual influence one could deduce that *Suburban Legend* goes to show that we are ultimately responsible for constituting the meaning of things.

While *Suburban Legend* is about probability and longevity of (hi)stories, Becker's *Golden Force Field* is all about (science) science and (fiction) fiction. - The *Golden Force Field* ...unites two strategies employed at key moments by the conceptual avant-garde: the generation of a work by following written instructions, and the insertion of chance in the realisation of an artwork.

The Zurich materialization of the *Golden Force Field* or GFF was a house-in-house-situation. Becker built a simple white cube that had eight corners inside. Before you entered the cube (or *Operation GFF* for that matter) you were introduced to the whole phenomenon by means of a photographic document of what, without any doubt, must be called a very dynamic and very golden apparition of vectors that focuses on the centre of the back wall of the artist's studio. Just as silence is sung about as being golden, the room, everybody in the room and everybody in the photograph are veiled by golden rays of light woven into visual material, strange yet comforting to look at.

Inside the white cube was yet again another minimal set-up. A reading table (no chair), lamp, the *PERSONAL NOTES FOR GOLDEN FORCE FIELD* by Julie Becker on top of the table, and a deluxe version of this text to the right of the exit were found in the cube. (The deluxe version was framed and sprinkled, no, almost totally buried with gold dust, which was seeping out of the frame leaving golden traces on the wall and a pile of gold-dust on the floor.) In each of the sixteen corners of the cube you saw pre-Columbian (sort of) suns, gold-dots as Julie Becker calls them.

These generic gold-dots are powerful enough to enclose space, however public or private, creating what others have described as an invisible shield, a transparent matrix, or a FORCE FIELD. They are available quickly as the time it takes to get to an office super-store from where you are currently standing... and home again. Place a sticker in the corner of your room on one wall at about shoulder height. While you're there, place another dot on the

wall that bisects the dotted wall. Now you should have two dots, perhaps an inch apart at ninety degrees to each other.

Repeat this pattern in every main corner of the room. In a typical square room you will have a total of eight dots, two in each corner... Place all of the dots at the same height... When you are through, you should be able to view at least one or more golden dots from any position in the room, standing or sitting. If not, adjust the dots... What you will create is a GOLDEN FORCE FIELD... Upon entering and absorbing your brain will automatically create associations (and include past experiences however insignificant) to the colour gold. Compare the feelings you have being in this room with those of being in a regular room.

What have blue tits in common with the GFF? Blue tits are a common species of bird in Europe. In 1921 they began removing caps off bottles in England and drinking several inches of milk before moving on. Almost overnight, blue tits all over Europe were doing the same thing. Ornithologists were baffled because the new practice spread so fast. The tits had somehow acquired the same skill all at once, without being taught by other tits.

This rapid spread of milk guzzling among blue tits was due to morphic fields, according to biologist Rupert Sheldrake. Morphic fields are non-material regions of influence that seemingly have no boundaries in space and time. Like Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, they are the deepest influence on behaviour, transmitted across the ages, linking us all to shared themes and strategies for survival.

Julie Becker's GFF might be a possible visualisation of what Sheldrake calls a morphic field. It is a proposal to interface individual experiences with collective ones. By developing the idea of participation one step further, the GFF is an example of the ongoing process that Becker started with the Researchers....

Her most catchy work, as far as the reality, mythology, fact and/or fiction of The Great Family of Man is concerned, is titled A Place Called Lovely (the title of an exhibition that was also used as an announcement in poster form). Becker took a Time Special Issue cover announcing the happy pre-Greg Venter New Face of America. It had obviously been created by computer manipulation which averaged the diversity of skulls, skins, eyes, ears, mouths, and hair of thousands of new Americans in an effort to form the human essence, to put God in a nutshell by demonstrating that the diversity of man proclaims his power, his richness, and that unity demonstrates his will. The result looks so much like Julie Becker it is unnerving. She manipulated the image only by inserting her own eyes and mounted the image on a piece of wood that looks as if it came right out of one of the classical cosy restaurants Dan Graham photographed for his Homes for America article in Arts Magazine in the 60s.

Albrecht Durer painted an astonishing Self portrait in Pelzrock some five hundred years ago and, as we know today, this self-portrait missed everything that was supposedly individual. Durer painted himself as he wanted to be seen, not in the least like he really looked. He wanted to paint something to last forever; he painted himself facing the spectator. In the European painterly tradition before Durer, that specific pose was exclusively reserved for one, the One, for Jesus Christ alone. The painting is, of course, on wood. We are way past that, but, nevertheless it seems to be of more than limited interest to ask: What does constitute identity today?

The project Julie Becker is working on right now is called Whole. It will once again be labelled a total installation of mixed media, sculpture, film, photography, drawings, you name it. For one thing there are photo-studies of sidewalks and magically childbook-like illustrations of sidewalks. Then there is a really real concrete sidewalk that brings in the dingy and glitzy aroma of rundown Hollywood Boulevard and turns into a hyper-realistic 10 x 10 x 10 foot sculpture of a ruptured sidewalk that looks like a mixture of an earthquake site and a Caspar David Friedrich. This structure surrounds a hole emitting mysteriously blue light. With a multitude of hints in your mind that suggest Grauman's Chinese Theater and the Walk of Fame turning into that tourist-trodden late capitalist anti-utopian lower class residential streetlife, you eventually come to a small screen that shows you shaky footage of a view of a solitary generic office building. It reads California Federal, it is obviously a bank and it is a big one. Next thing you see is the same building hanging in mid-air. Shaky. It looks like the California Federal has suddenly become a shoe-string operation. The surrealism of the scene turns into a perfect model of the building you had seen outside the window, which is pulled down through a Texas Chainsaw Massacre-hole in the floor. Cut. Next shot you see the model of the California Federal coming down from that hole. It is being lowered slowly, ever so slowly. Cut. Next shot you see the California Federal rising in front of you as seen from the parking lot. Cut. Next shot you see the model (?) sitting in front of a wall with wooden panels. Next to the model (?) is a screen showing a single-slide projection of an image of wood panelling. Cut. You fly around the California Federal, obviously in a helicopter. Cut. You

are on top of a building. Cut. Close-up of the California Federal (which one?). Cut. You are still on top of a building. A helicopter comes and lands on the building. It looks as though you could be on top of the California Federal. The whole series of images is held together by an unbelievable soundtrack of raunchy Latin-American, maybe Mexican, MUZAK that comes from a cassette which Julie Becker found on the parking lot of (now you take a wild guess)...

Next to the screening of the film you will find extensive The making of material, material that suggests that the California Federal is actually a building seen right from Julie Beckers studio. And you can find a notebook that has documentation of a real dispute with her landlord because of a flood in a basement room she rents, with court records, letters claiming her losses which included film footage, equipment etc. You can even look at interviews with former tenants of that basement and at one time you have to begin to learn that the basement and the way it is documented in the photos and all other material seems to preserve and actually archive every single trace of its last tenant, a young man, who has suddenly died (of AIDS, drugs, cancer?).

Is the California Federal Julie Beckers landlord? Is everything connected to everything else? To us for that matter? Is this about six degrees of separation? Has there really been a flood in Beckers studio? Does the music in Whole suggest that the California Federal is exploiting Americas most important (to become majority) minority? Is Whole political like in Fight the Power?

Truth, according to Lacan has the structure of fiction. Dreams are the hidden truth, which are to be suppressed most of the time to establish a social reality. Reality is only meant to be for those who cant stand dreaming. If you cant stand the dream, stay out of Julie Beckers work.

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