

... :: Julie Becker ...

by Peter Wollen

1. A glass helicopter. This is the image that sticks most in my mind. It was made by a glass-blower in Seattle, who made several prototypes before an acceptable helicopter was finally created. In Julie Becker's videotape of the Federal Building we see an actual helicopter which takes off from a launching pad on the roof of the Federal Bank building which she could see from her dismal apartment in Echo Park, a run-down neighborhood on the edge of downtown Los Angeles. The helicopter spirals up into the sky in her vision, surrounded by cloud streamers and floating bubbles. To me it seems like a dream-driven escape from the dismal landscape of Echo Park with its crumbling and distorted pavements, its mounds of rubble and its inner-city grunge. As Becker viewed the world from her own depressing and crumbling apartment, the vision of a helicopter, I think, must have seemed like the angelic vision of a martyred saint, a promise that there was a better world out there somewhere.

2. Boxes - specifically refrigerator boxes - play a striking role in Julie Becker's work. In her early piece *Researchers, Residents, a Place to Rest*, an installation involving a residential hotel, the refrigerator boxes remind the viewer of another type of residential space entirely. As Becker puts it, 'a refrigerator box, in American cities, can be the last refuge of the homeless'. In Anthony Hernandez's book of photographs of living spaces of the homeless in Los Angeles, published shortly before Becker began work on her installation, we see numerous photographs of such cardboard-box homes, looking eerily like the boxes in Becker's installations - boxes with 'windows' cut in the cardboard, boxes cut or torn to pieces in order to provide a seat or a back for a broken chair, boxes equipped with mattresses to sleep on, and so on. Becker's installation is just one step up from homelessness. The crumbling and desolate basement flat she inhabited in Echo Park was its prototype. Basements, boxes, broken, ... it is just another coincidence that all these things begin with a B, like Becker. Isn't it?

3. Cinema is probably not as important as it might seem in Becker's work, although *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest* certainly nods towards Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* and *Suburban Legend* consists of the image-track of *The Wizard of Oz*, although overlaid with a soundtrack of Pink Floyd music instead of the original Yip Harburg score and dialogue. This is done in tribute to the 'suburban legend' that Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* has some kind of occult, drug-driven relationship to *The Wizard of Oz*. Coincidence again - or had there been some covert sound editing? No. Apparently not. It just produces a tinge of the occult, of 'objective chance' as the Surrealists called it. Corners, however, are extremely important.

4. Death figures eerily in Julie Becker's world. In one of her most recent installations - part of the Federal Building ensemble - there is a heap of coffins in the basement. It is not the tenants' death, however, that is envisaged. It is the possible death of the skinflint landlord who has let the property deteriorate into squalor and chaos and is still brazenly demanding the unpaid back-rent. Of course, people do die where they live. Homeless people don't just live in refrigerator boxes. They die in them too. Coffins are just another kind of box, aren't they?

5. Everything seems derelict in Julie Becker's world. There are things scattered about, broken or fallen apart, deteriorating and abandoned. It all looks like a film set after the crew have left without anyone taking the trouble to clean up. Julie Becker builds models of spaces - hotels, banks, housing - out of the simplest materials, rough and ready, evocative of a certain kind of deterioration and decay. But, like tortoise-shells or snail-shells, even these spaces offer some kind of protection, a kind of hermitage,



perhaps. The maker of these models, these decrepit environmental installations, seems to be a kind of cross between a hermit and a survivor and, above all, a researcher. Among the imaginary characters in *Researchers*, *Residents*, *a Place to Rest*, the researchers come first. *Requiescat in Pace* comes last.

6. *Federal Building* is the title of a video-tape which reminded me of a cross between Peter Gidal's *Room Film* and a decaying children's TV program, with the camera constantly on the move, peering at indistinct objects, shifting into slow motion, then suddenly giving you a glimpse of the whole room. You are allowed only a moment's breathing space, a brief rest period in which you find your bearings before being plunged back into the enigmatic and the indistinct. It's as if the viewer had stumbled upon a home-movie made by some kind of extraterrestrial who had somehow ended up in - where? *Echo Park*, I imagine.

7. *Golden Force Field* is a recent project of Julie Becker's. She wants to create a 'Golden Force Field' in a gallery. But what is a Golden Force Field and in what form would it become visible. To everybody? To a privileged few? In her notes on this project, she asks herself, 'What is a force field? Is it something you can create or something that pre-exists human intervention? Did man invent this in his own home planet Earth? Or did Superman bring it back from his planet (Krypton) before the planet exploded? In other words, is a Force Field invented by God (Hanna Barbera?) or is something manufactured by a scientist (what kind of a scientist?) in a government laboratory existing underneath the earth in a secret location close to the Arizona/New Mexico border?' What is the frame of reference here? Is the artist a God or a scientist (or a cartoonist)? Is the artist creating or re-inventing popular mythology - the mythology of Superman and Krypton or the mythology of flying saucers and extraterrestrials in the American wilderness?

8. *Hopeless*. I feel hopelessly inadequate to try and interpret Julie Becker's work. Like many artists nowadays she comes up with idiosyncratic ideas, often outgrowths from incidents in her own everyday life, which she then begins to approach with the utmost seriousness, embarking on a kind-of idiosyncratic research project with the aim of creating a final work which is really the result bricolage, as the French call it - a do-it-yourself tinkering and improvisation. What is important to stress is that this process is one of great seriousness. It is a research project.

9. *Idiosyncrasy*. I looked this up in the dictionary and it said: 'A tendency, type of behaviour, mannerism, etc., of a specific person; quirk'. I think the history of recent art could be told as the transformation of the artist's presence from belonging to a community with shared assumptions to one of idiosyncrasy (or even obsession, serious obsession) and a sense of quirkiness, ranging along a scale from hilarity to deep depression. But perhaps this is just my own quirky idea. And is obsessive quite the same thing as serious? Can't it be fun?

10. Just the same, the key thing is that 'a Golden Force Field is actually in the room'. This is the artist's premise. But how the spectators, the visitors to the gallery, interpret the work is really up to them, I think, to the projection of their own idiosyncrasies into the materials the artist has offered them. 'Maybe the Force Field is "becoming" invented as you concentrate on it?' This is not quite the same as collaboration or partnership. It is more like the creation of a link which has to mutate if contact is ever to be made.

11. 'Karmic occurrence'. This is the phrase which Julie Becker uses to describe what her brother's stoned friends told her about the strange relationship between *The Wizard Of Oz* and *Dark Side of the Moon*. In a way, the ability to spot and interpret 'karmic occurrence' is a necessary part of the spectator's tool-kit. I don't think it's necessary to be stoned though. Only to have an idiosyncratic turn of mind and a vivid imagination. K is also for 'kickstand'. Julie Becker really needed one for her new installation, so she tried to buy ours, which Leslie had stolen from a video store, but Leslie wouldn't sell it. Instead she found some cut-price kickstands on offer in a mail-order catalogue and she recommended one of those instead.

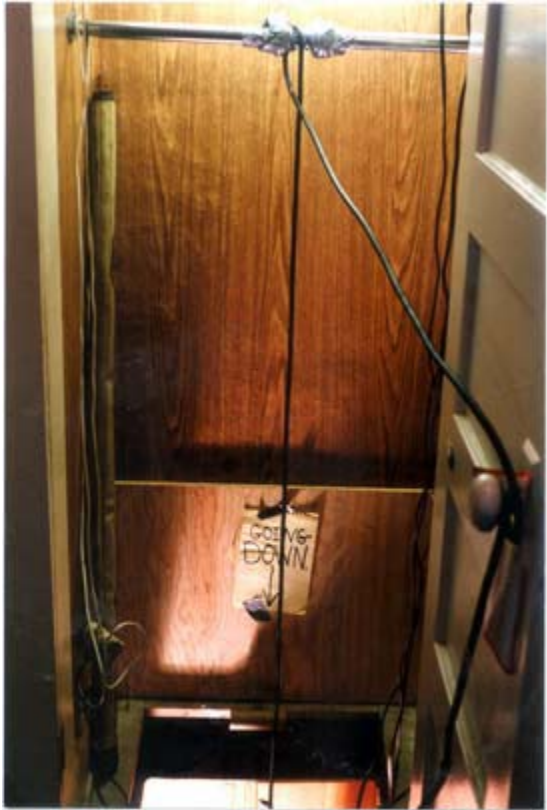
12. *Lions and helicopters*: when the Cowardly Lion receives his 'badge of courage' at the end of the movie, strange sounds, as if of helicopters, can be heard, as if - somehow - he is being awarded a purple heart for service in Vietnam. At any rate, this particular 'karmic occurrence' casts some new light on the imagery of the glass helicopter. Or does it? What eerie kind of hermeneutic universe am I being sucked into? Is this some kind of out-take from a *Star Trek Voyager* episode?

13. Mysterious forces seem to have warped all the walls in this particular episode. It is not going to be easy to return to safety in the mother ship. Call the model maker.

14. *Notes*. The artist makes notes. Notes are a crucial element of any research project. In *Researchers*, *Residents*, *a Place to Rest*, the residents write private notes about themselves, which they have left for us to read. They are not present but their research notes on themselves are. I imagine the residents lying down on collapsing, crumbling couches and psychoanalysing themselves, scribbling diagnostic

notes, bits of dreams and fantasies and responses to traumas, as they gradually disappear and fade away into invisibility.

15. Or were there any residents in the first place? Aren't they just excuses for an obsession with model making? Who really inhabits these sets and handles all these props? Poltergeists perhaps.



16. Propp's Morphology of the Folktale is how I first came into contact with Julie Becker, when she became interested in how narrative worked. I made an audiotape for her in which I improvised a Proppian tale with all of the episodes in the correct sequence. When she found out I hadn't kept a copy for myself she offered to bring me one, but it hasn't appeared as yet.

17. Questions without an answer? Mazes without an exit? Stories without a plot?

18. Recently I visited the Plaza Hotel in New York. It was in renovation. I had wanted to sit with a martini in the Oak Room bar, but everything was closed, covered in dust-sheets. Empty. Nobody there. Just ghosts: Cary Grant, the bellboy, Mr Weltner, Mr Nelson, Mr Wade.

19. Somehow everything in Julie Becker's work is both very simple and yet very hard to comprehend. Take the Golden Force Field, for instance. On one level, it's very simple. '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 90 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. If a door conceals a corner while it is open, place one of the dots further out from the corner so it is visible with the door

open. Place all of the dots at the same height. If the room has more than four corners (= more dots) place two dots at 90 degrees to each other similarly in each corner. 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 your dots, or add the necessary dots to complete the curriculum.' Curriculum? I'm back at school!

20. Time now to re-visit the Plaza Hotel, home of Eloise, one of the inspirations for Researchers, Residents, a Place to Rest. Eloise was a resident in the Plaza, not just one of the guests. I thought it might be worth researching Eloise. She has the run of the hotel, whose key feature, for Eloise, is the elevator: 'If I want to go anywhere I simply take the elevator. For instance if I happen to be on the second floor I just press that button until it comes up and as soon as that door is open I get in and say "5th floor please" and when those doors clank shut we ride up and I get out on the 5th floor and as soon as that elevator is out of sight I skibble up those stairs to the 8th floor and then I press that button and when that same elevator comes up and as soon as that door is open I get in and say, "15th floor please" and then when those doors clank shut we ride up and I get out on the 15th floor and as soon as that elevator is out of sight I skibble down to the 12th floor and press that button and when that same elevator comes up and those doors open I say "the lobby please" and then those doors clank shut and we ride down without saying absolutely one word and then I get into the next elevator and go all the way up. Then I get off at the top floor and look in the mirror at me.' The elevator is the central element in Federal Building. It sways its way precariously up and down the dilapidated lift-shaft from basement to the roof where the helicopter stands. I like to imagine glass helicopters landing on the roof of the Plaza Hotel. In Federal Building a sign says 'If you can keep your head in this confusion you just don't understand the situation'. That makes a lot of sense to me. Later, in an interview with Julie Becker, I came across the phrase, 'I entered a delirium of digression'. My own experience exactly.

21. Unexpectedly the soundtrack, of Federal Building is of Mexican music. To me it sounds like Lola Beltran, one of my favourite singers. I meant to play a Lola Beltran tape to Julie Becker but in all the confusion, I forgot. Another failed research project, another research note unmade. Research can continue indefinitely, leaving nothing but incomplete shreds of information, disconnected from their original context and never finding a satisfactory new home.

22. Verisimilitude. In Federal Building one item of flotsam and jetsam is an old issue of Artforum,

drenched in water and sodden. However, there is a map of L.A. on the back cover which is still legible. It tells you where to find the Pace Wildenstein Gallery. The magazine wasn't drenched artificially - it really was drenched by the flooding of the artist's Echo Park apartment. I looked for Echo Park on the map but it is not marked. Obviously it is not a significant location unless you are interested in urban decay and drug deals and drive-by shootings - the side of L.A. which lurks in the shadows of the fantasy.

23. 'Why would people want to make slides out of these pictures?' asks my eight year-old daughter, picking up part of the publicity package that Julie Becker's gallery sent me. 'It's a normal house.' In one way, she is right. But, of course, it isn't a normal house at all. It is a haunted house, haunted by the ghosts of its absent residents. Everything in Julie Becker's world seems to be haunted in some way. She is preoccupied with poltergeists and the problem of filming them - a kind of extension of Victorian spirit photography. In Julie Becker's spaces we get the impression that, in her own words, there is 'a ghost moving through the walls'.

24. X is the sign of an unknown factor. It's both the artist's and the viewer's attempt to identify this mysterious, unattainable, unknown factor that brings about the 'delirium of digression' Julie Becker talks about. X marks the spot not so much of a crime as of a mystery - an enigma which perhaps has no clear answer, just a provocation to thought.

25. You have to participate in Julie Becker's work, to look for clues, enigmatic points of reference which enable you to make a connection, to follow a trail, to reach a provisional destination, to re-double back on your tracks, to initiate a new research project, to gather odd scraps of information, to rely on guesswork, to suddenly see something in a different kind of way, to take nothing for granted, to wonder why...

26. Z is for Zero. 'Just blow the fucking house apart.'

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