

The American artist Julie Becker (1972–2016) lived and worked in Los Angeles from her years as a student at CalArts in the early 1990s until her premature death in 2016. Her work, comprising installations, sculptures, photographs, drawings, collages, and videos, is deeply shaped by the mythologies and the socio-economic realities of Los Angeles in the 1990s and 2000s. The city appears less as a backdrop than as the very texture of an imagination saturated with visual narratives, where cinematic projections and mirages of personal elevation are immediately overtaken by the massive housing crisis, class polarization, and insidious surveillance.

The exhibition *Attempts to be whole* at Forde (Geneva) presents a selection of works that form part of *Whole*, an open-ended and unfinished body of work on which Julie Becker worked from 1999 until the end of her life. *Whole* takes as its point of departure the studio Becker eventually came to inhabit for several years, located in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. From her window, the 1960s California Federal Bank building dominates the view, its rooftop heliport encircled by a pulsing red light that functions like a cosmic beacon hovering overhead, to the point of becoming the central character of *Whole*.

*Whole* was conceived as a total, processual installation, a kind of field of intensities composed of heterogeneous elements. These included a life-size sculpture of a fractured section of sidewalk from Sunset Boulevard<sup>1</sup>, interviews with former occupants of her apartment's basement<sup>2</sup>, and drawings in which Becker imagines, among other things, magical sidewalks, a mysterious structure pierced by a hole from which blue light escapes<sup>3</sup>, a money-producing machine, roller-coaster scaffolding, and a vacant lot transformed into an amusement park by local residents. Other sparkling fragments, glitter, mysterious objects, cauldrons, vapors of Christian Dior's *Poison* perfume, coexist with concrete, debris, grime, and other spectacular inside details<sup>4</sup>.

But Becker knew that *Whole* would be a "an endless exposing of parts and not ever reaching a whole,"<sup>5</sup> and therefore exhibited only fragments of it<sup>6</sup>. How to exhibit *Whole* without falling into it? How to give shape to a mental construction site with shifting contours, where everything seems to want to connect without ever stabilizing? How to give shape to something that by definition refuses completion?

"I asked you, What does it mean to be Whole? You answered, That's a good question. Because you'd been preparing this show called *Whole* for nearly four years, and you were starting to realize it would never be finished. (...) You said: 'There's always an attempt to be whole.' (...) you said that, and then you added, 'so I have tried to share that, that human process,' but when I asked you if being Whole is like being dead, you complained, 'But I haven't even had coffee yet!'"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It would appear that this refers to the sculpture *1910 West Sunset Boulevard* (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Markus Müller, "Julie Becker: The Invisible is Real (Walter De Maria)," in *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 2, 2000, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> A drawing titled *Untitled* (1999), containing numerous inscriptions and diagrams related to *Whole*, includes the note: "Inside detail is spectacular," as well as the question, "Is there something unexpected in the around?"

<sup>5</sup> "An endless exposing of parts and not ever reaching a whole" Julie Becker quoted by Chris Kraus, "Whole," in *Video Green*, 2002, pp. 199–205.

<sup>6</sup> In reference to Julie Becker's drawing *Untitled* ("Making money for the art project that will never be finished"), 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Kraus, "Whole," in *Video Green*, 2002, p. 202.

Destined to remain unfinished, *Whole* expanded to the point where it seems to keep Becker from working on other works<sup>8</sup>, extending to engulf her entire existence. How can we account for something that unravels as we try to grasp it? Ultimately a fragmented corpus, comprising a video, a sculpture (*1910 West Sunset Boulevard*, 2000), a series of photographs, drawings, collages, and notes, *Whole* is a work that is difficult to exhibit in its entirety and therefore even harder to contextualize. *Attempts to be whole* thus takes the form of attempts, inevitably bound to fail at being exhaustive. Some of the exhibited works are identified as belonging to the corpus, while several unaffiliated drawings extend its motifs, like occurrences producing a form of entropy.

Julie Becker never fully explicated *Whole* (or her other works), but instead disseminated its coordinates. While in her seminal installation *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest* (1993–1996), Becker drew on the economic realities of American urban experience<sup>9</sup> and cinematic mythologies by displacing characters from their original fiction into an open scenario, keeping her own living conditions at a distance, in *Whole* these elements merge and seep into one another<sup>10</sup>.

*Whole* is based on the following story: Becker moves into an apartment owned by the bank she sees from her window. In exchange for reduced rent, she is allowed to occupy the basement on the condition that she sort through the belongings of the previous occupant, a stained-glass artist who had died of an AIDS-related illness. Which she did not do. Instead, she cut a hole between her ground floor and the basement, and this story was incorporated into *Whole*.

This narrative, which Becker shared with certain people in her circle<sup>11</sup>, most notably her longtime friend Chris Kraus, circulated widely<sup>12</sup>. While the veracity of this story may now be questioned<sup>13</sup>, yet attempting to disentangle what is factual and coherent from what is arranged risks refusing to fall into the hole and possibly find something there (rather than nothing). This story offers a way of approaching the real that may be truer still, of addressing from within the lived external reality of the 1990s and 2000s and the one that continues to unfold again and again. Los Angeles and its “alter ego Hollywood” embodied cultural hegemony, yet as Mike Davis wrote in *City of Quartz*, Los Angeles remained “vulnerable to the same explosive convergence of street anger, poverty, environmental crisis, and capital flight that made the early 1990s its worst period of crisis since the Great Depression.”<sup>14</sup> *Whole* takes part in Becker’s everyday reality and, reciprocally, her living space becomes part of the work. What might appear as self-referentiality is rewritten into a mythology Becker

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<sup>8</sup> According to what is known from Becker’s work to this day.

<sup>9</sup> Chris Kraus, “Falling into the Whole,” in *Video Green*, 2002, p. 215.

<sup>10</sup> Such as the flooding of the basement that Becker is said to have documented, and which appears in *Untitled (Tiki Bar)* (2001).

<sup>11</sup> *Whole* was discussed as early as the early 2000s by Markus Müller in his article “Julie Becker: The Invisible is Real (Walter De Maria),” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 2, 2000; and by Mark von Schlegell in “Sparkle Girl,” *artext*, February–April 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Chris Kraus, “Whole,” in *Video Green*, 2002, pp. 199–205. Kraus refers to the place house “During the three years you lived there, the place changed hands several times, it kept being bought and sold. Except no one knew what to do with it, because Echo Park hadn’t gentrified yet and the real estate market was flat.” p 202–203.

<sup>13</sup> As mentioned in the press release for the exhibition *W(hole)*, held at Del Vaz Projects, Los Angeles, February 4 – April 8, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, Verso Books, 2006, p. 9: “Despite the mountain of gold that has been built downtown, Los Angeles remains vulnerable to the same explosive convergence of street anger, poverty, environmental crisis, and capital flight that made the early 1990s its worst crisis period since the early Depression (...) the arc of decline that began in the early 1990s: slowly bleeding high-wage jobs, skilled workers and fiscal resources.”

constructs herself, granting her spaces a fictional dimension that blends with collective narratives, cultural references, and the fractured myths haunting the American Dream at the end of the twentieth century, until its exhaustion. In other words, fiction and reality cease to function as categories. What might look like confusion instead reveals intense subterranean activity, where thresholds drift within the same chaotic space.

After all, Los Angeles itself is a city and an image that embodies the imaginary, producing its own myths—and its own disillusionments. Becker does not so much seek to denounce them as to capture their hopes, their anxieties, the infrastructures collapsing beneath our feet, the porosity and impermanence of things. By reclaiming myth-making as her own, she reveals its affective and political thickness. Becker's metafiction (or metanarrative) play an indispensable role in *Whole*, allowing things to exist mentally, where addressing her fantasies requires inventing the material conditions for their existence. Something like cutting holes, or perhaps a way of entering a more atmospheric state of consciousness in order to perceive the city in its social and practical dimensions, as if slightly withdrawn, hovering just above it, as though simply living in Los Angeles required a slight form of dissociation.

In the video *Federal Building with Music* (2002), Becker stages a scale model of the bank,—nicknamed “CalFed”—and slowly guides it through a hole cut into the floor of her studio, linking the ground floor and the basement. Pulled into this handmade vortex, guided by a note reading “Going Down”, the bank falls and falls again in a gravity-defying descent. Intermittently, shots of its double appear, the real building overlooking the Echo Park neighborhood. Stuck in its verticality, the monolith does not sink, yet it would disappear the same year, acquired by Citigroup<sup>15</sup>.

The basement appears clad in characteristically American wood paneling<sup>16</sup>, with a projection and numerous elements later found in the *Whole* photographic series. This may be the work in which Becker's sense of humor is most evident. Shot in VHS quality, close to found footage, the camera at times seems to have been set aside, allowing the recording to continue uninterrupted. The fall of the miniature bank is slowed down, rewind, stretched into a loop. Soap bubbles regularly float through the interior and outside. They could be speculative bubbles passing through walls, capturing the invisible real estate transactions that shape reality. The shimmering lightness contains structural violence, prefiguring the rapid gentrification of Echo Park and its surroundings. The final shots move in close on the helicopter, then the city. The video's soundtrack comes from a Mexican Technobanda group, taken from a cassette Becker reportedly found in the bank's parking lot<sup>17</sup>.

The photographic series *Whole* reprises many elements visible in the video, yet the medium itself renders them smoother and more constructed. In *Whole (Projector)* (1999), the view of the bank and its approaching helicopter at night is visible. In the foreground, a luminous shadow, something like a poltergeist<sup>18</sup>, haunts the image. Is this Becker's hollowed presence, announcing that reality will only manifest through distortion? *Whole (Notepad)* (1999) and *Whole (Going Down)* (1999) appear to depict the same space from different

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<sup>15</sup> Citigroup is part of the “Big Four,” the four largest American banks.

<sup>16</sup> This type of interior can also be found in the iconic Great Northern Hotel in *Twin Peaks*.

<sup>17</sup> In the 1990s, the population of Echo Park was predominantly Latin American.

<sup>18</sup> Ghosts appear in several drawings, as well as in a photograph titled *Poltergeist* (1999), which shows a television set in the corner of a bedroom broadcasting Spielberg's film (1982), with a burst of light spreading beyond the screen up to the ceiling.

angles. One observes the duct through which the model bank is pulled toward disappearance and a television placed on the floor broadcasting a warped wooden panel.

In *Whole (Screen)* (1999), a projection screen shows a section of the paneled wall in front of that same wall. The CalFed model rests on a foamy olive-green carpet, still suspended but now below the hole. A thermometer. A perfect bubble floats. The image intensifies a sense of uncanniness through its play of scale. Staged interior photographs already appear in Becker's earlier work. *Interior Corner* (1993) and *The Same Room* (1993–1996), made while she was still a student, depict spaces whose scale remains ambiguous, it's hard to know whether they are reduced models or full-size rooms<sup>19</sup>.

*Whole (Bar)* (1999) centers on a tiki bar in the basement that was apparently installed by the previous occupant. Details proliferate. Balustrades and a decorative lintel frame the bar. A pair of Nike sneakers. A beaker from which shimmering smoke escapes. A small purple perfume bottle radiating a chemical promise. A small sign reflected in the slightly distorting mirror reads, "If you can keep your head in all this confusion you just don't understand the situation," encapsulating the impossibility articulated in *Whole*. A note reads "Mysterious Objects in production Take 1." Becker appears to have rebuilt the bar before renaming it the "Mysterious Object Bar."<sup>20</sup>

The drawing *Untitled (Tiki Bar)* (2001) schematizes the same underground space, adorned with a rainbow sticker and marked by a laconic warning, "Floods are coming." In *Untitled (Building Plan)* (2002), a helicopter lands on the bank's roof, whose interior is revealed in section, bearing the transparent inscription "Money Money Money." Architecture becomes mental, porous to economic flows and imagination, now inseparable. *Untitled (roller coaster scaffolding)* (2000) presents a roller-coaster structure and, once again, an approaching helicopter. Notes suggest a kind of synopsis, "The inhabitants of this Los Angeles Wasteland have turned this zone into a roller coaster (park)," alongside what seems to be indications for film shots where the California Federal Bank is manipulated, mentions "Whole city." These drawings most explicitly approach the ambitions of *Whole* while simultaneously dissolving its contours. In *Entertainment Center* (1996–97) and *Mysterious Round Object and Incomplete Chair* (1996–97), which precedes *Whole*, objects float on the surface of an almost empty drawing plane alongside furniture elements. These transitional spaces, neither fully inhabited nor strictly haunted, establish a liminality that runs throughout Becker's work.

The exhibition *Attempts to be whole* contains a double back, a little larger than a corridor, concealed behind a wall made of drywall and aluminum profiles, which shelters archives arranged in an anarchic and fragmentary manner, documents produced around and about the artist. Conceived as a reference to the back room of the installation *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest*<sup>21</sup> this space is intended to host participatory workshops throughout the exhibition. All materials are made available to the public and function as a non-exhaustive state of the art.

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<sup>19</sup> This is the hypothesis put forward by Jean Watt in her essay "View from the Inside Out: Julie Becker's Los Angeles," 2024, published on [eastofborneo.org](http://eastofborneo.org).

<sup>20</sup> This information is provided by Chris Kraus in her text "Whole," in *Video Green*, 2002, pp. 199–205. A photograph of the bar seen from another angle also exists, titled *Mysterious Object*.

<sup>21</sup> "The back room is the brain center for the entire installation — it's the workshop, the storage room, the library. It isn't separate. 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." Julie Becker, *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest*, interview with Bernhard Bürgi, Kunsthalle Zürich, 1997.

In the wake of Julie Becker's passing, a substitute narrative shaped a posteriori has gradually formed a discourse around her striking body of work and uneven career. The myth of the promising artist whose life ended tragically tends to overshadow what she produced, in favor of a fetishization of her life on the margins of the art world, marked by precarity, dependency, and instability. Becker did experience housing insecurity, yet the lived or merely traversed spaces present in her work never allow themselves to be reduced to autobiographical contingency<sup>22</sup>. As her work took shape, her living conditions and her work mutually distorted one another, creating zones of permeability that still seem to open breaches, allowing us to move from one place to another<sup>23</sup>.

*Whole* manages to drive a wedge into our world. These works reach us with an almost disarming proximity. By remaining an open work, it leaves room for us, as if Becker's ultimate aim were to make us act, to prompt us too to seek out occurrences and coincidences, to detect enigmatic sublimity, to uncover clues, to practice intuitive approaches as much as derealization, to fall down the rabbit hole, to return, and to fall again. What is at stake is producing a rift in reality, the very same gap into which, since the housing crisis of the 1990s and the subprime crisis of 2008, the gentrification of Echo Park and the persistent precarity of life as an artist have poured. In the triptych *Watering* (2015), Julie Becker writes, "I must create a Master Piece to pay the Rent? How Do I do this?" and answers herself, "Circles circles, lots of round and round we go...."

Fiona Vilmer, december 2025.

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<sup>22</sup> See in this regard Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1996. "Thirdspaces" are spaces that are simultaneously lived and imagined, characteristic of postmodern urbanism in Los Angeles.

<sup>23</sup> Julie Becker, *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest*, interview with Bernhard Bürgi, Kunsthalle Zürich, 1997.