



Installation view of the exhibition *Rooms in Rhymes* at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM), Tallinn, 2025. Photo: Diana Olesyuk.

Letters @ 3 AM (From The Land of Coming Events)

David de Rozas

In June 2013, I arrived at Los Angeles International Airport as an immigrant pursuing graduate school opportunities. That same month, I visited Downtown LA and felt an immediate, visceral connection to the metropolitan district. In a city defined by sprawling single-family neighborhoods, Downtown's dense urban ecosystem resonated with my family's memories and the many cities that live within me: grocery businesses, daily customers, the hustle of wholesale runs and credit sales, the weight of debt, and the constant flow of both internal and external migration. The district's multicultural neighborhoods felt simultaneously familiar and entirely new, helping reshape my sense of belonging in this city. As a newcomer, I found myself haunted by questions of memory and displacement: How do we connect ourselves to new places—their streets, people, language, culture, homes, city, or country? How do I build relationships, and with whom do we create bridges? Who am I here? Downtown provided some answers while deepening these questions. It became my anchor and way to locate myself in this city, as my own identity shifted and evolved as an immigrant in the United States.

By January 2017, Downtown was undergoing another urban redevelopment in its long history of transformations. This time, the metropolitan area was switching toward cultural industries and tourism. The district I first encountered seemed caught in a state of in-betweenness, somewhere between regeneration and erasure. Some called these changes “new beginnings,” others recognized them as gentrification, attempts at equitable development, or yet another form of racialized spatial planning. Downtown was being rebranded as “DTLA” and marketed as the region's primary commercial hub, its most significant job center, and a destination of national recognition. Yet I wondered if it had ever really ceased to be so, as the district I first encountered in 2013 could have been described this way. What did this new vision of DTLA come to replace, and what did it signify and substitute?

At street level, the changes were concrete and immediate. Home and retail lease prices climbed each year. Family businesses shuttered their doors. The communities that had populated these neighborhoods for decades began to disperse as land values increased. Real estate wealth generated dispossession and poverty in equal measure. I recognized this pattern of urban displacement from my experiences overseas and in my home country. Around this time, the city announced it would host the FIFA World Cup in 2026 and the Olympic Games in 2028. While the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily slowed rapid change, transformation soon resumed as residents and business owners struggled to keep up with rising costs. Many chose to move away or retire.

Over recent years, my research and practice have focused on the politics of memory as an embodied method and affective medium to conjure forms of collective restitution and environmental restoration. My work looks at places, bodies, and materialities (both human and more than human) as sites implicitly or explicitly shaped by the unfolding historical authority and institutions of power. After witnessing the demographic, economic, and built environment changes in the district, I felt compelled to critically research this unfolding urban renewal. Over the past years, I have conducted extensive fieldwork in Downtown neighborhoods through walking observations, filming current transformations, and recording individual testimonies. I have built relationships with residents, family business owners, community advocates, and grassroots organizations working in the district. My access to Downtown communities developed through daily interactions, trust-building, collaboration, and ongoing friendships, allowing me to understand their diverse needs, interests, and ways of life.

My friend Glenn once told me that you cannot claim a city unless you have fought for it. I began documenting Downtown's urban renewal in 2019, both as an affective gesture to the district that embraced me upon arrival and as a form of resistance against the forces threatening to erase its character.

This written and visual essay, titled *LETTERS @ 3 AM*, sprouts from *The Land of Coming Events*, one of my doctoral research projects that critically observes and documents the impact of Downtown Los Angeles's current urban renewal on its communities and environments. The new revitalization plan introduced updated land use and zoning policies that double the area where housing can be built, projecting 70,000 new units for an expected 125,000 new residents. Despite

Downtown representing only 1% of Los Angeles's land area with a population of approximately 85,000 residents, the redevelopment plan seeks to transform the metropolitan district into a thriving urban center driven by tourism, culture, residential development, and hospitality. Echoing similar urban redevelopment processes worldwide (New York, London, San Francisco), the Downtown revitalization project promises economic and social progress while potentially increasing inequality and class division.

The metropolitan area is the most ethnically diverse district in Los Angeles and the most significant illustration of the city's economic and social inequalities. Neighborhoods not yet fully redeveloped still host, among others, long-term low-income residents, a wide range of predominantly immigrant working-class family businesses, and the largest unhoused population in California. This broader 16mm film investigation visually and sonically examines the vocabulary of a metropolitan district undergoing a process of re-colonization by developers and the affluent that threatens the district's long-term low-income communities and the built environment. As the new redevelopment plan aims to complete a spatial re-writing of the city, Downtown Los Angeles functions as both locus and lacuna—a place structured around hidden experiences and repressed bodies, where the erasure of memory and history becomes materially manifest.

In my contribution, I seek to use film and new media as memory devices to critically document and interrogate the overlapping dissonances, contradictions, and multiple layers of reality of this late but radical urban transformation. I examine ongoing processes of urban renewal and their lingering, ghost-like echoes by asking whether Los Angeles's so-called "birthplace" continues to reproduce its own historical contradictions and the city's persistent cycle of leaving behind, forgetting, and creating anew. *The Land of Coming Events* approaches Downtown as an evolving material archive—one that both remembers and necessarily forgets, inquiring how the erasure of memory and history becomes tangible, shaping a place defined by presences and absences in its social, cultural, and built environment. Downtown emerges as a haunted location, reflecting how life, time, and space are managed amid the structural racism and inequalities that have shaped both Los Angeles and the broader history of the United States.

LETTERS @ 3 AM is a real-time written and visual meditation that chronicles the day-to-day life of a place that is neither fully

present nor totally absent. It merges an embodied diary with experimental ethnography, seeking to imagine new methods to unflatten the metropolitan district and mobilize its liberatory energies. The broader research project involves situated filmmaking—or what I prefer to call ‘walking with and being with’—drawing from experimental autoethnography, where embodied practice becomes both instrument and archive, and Ursula Biemann’s counter-geographies, which reconceptualizes space-subject-movement relations while functioning as a cultural practice that symbolically redesigns dominant spatial narratives by foregrounding marginalized experiences and alternative ways of knowing and making place.¹ This approach blends art, ethnography, memory practices, critical historiography, performance, urban studies, and activism as interconnected practices rather than separate fields. The camera becomes a tool of resistance by documenting overlooked stories and threatened spaces, challenging the myth of neutral documentation through committed witness and solidarity.

To document the unfolding redevelopment process, I spent over a year walking and talking with residents, weaving together what may be called an “affective mapping” of Downtown. I focused on the social and built infrastructures—street corners, shops, buildings, parks, intersections, the river—where layered temporalities and different scales of past and present urban renewals become visible simultaneously.

I sought out places threatened by change: shops closing, buildings being demolished, ‘FOR SALE’ signs replaced by ‘SOLD’ ones, and new constructions rising. I walk with Downtown through its many temporalities, scales, materialities, and tremblings. My drive is both visceral and specific; often uncertain but always necessary. At the community level, I focused on long-term residents and small family businesses, particularly those occupations at risk of disappearing—clockmakers, tailors, shoemakers, knife sharpeners, piñateros. Through conversations about their life journeys and crafts, I learnt how current urban renewal affects their daily lives. These walks and conversations created an ever-expanding relational map of Downtown that continues growing. My filming compositions merge the ordinary and extraordinary, the governed and ungovernable, foregrounding the district’s intimate and imposing scales. Each shot attempts to hold these different scales in productive tension, revealing how macro-level urban policies manifest in micro-level embodied experiences.

¹ Biemann, Ursula. 2006. "Writing Counter-Geography." BUALA. <https://www.buala.org/en/to-read/writing-counter-geography>.

The daily practice of ‘walking with and being with’ is a crossroads involving ethical and political complexities. How to speak with and relate to spaces of vulnerability while honoring the agency of those who choose not to be seen or fully known? If reality is always delicate, there’s a necessity of fragmentary knowing—an acknowledgment that my/our perspectives reflect partial truths. Many encounters remain unfilmed, many stories untold, by design, respect, and choice. The right to opacity is also a form of resistance against the idea of ‘document’ itself inherent in archival paradigms. Walking with and being with implies movement and togetherness that embraces impurities, deviations, and incompleteness. *LETTERS @ 3 AM* approaches the metropolitan district as a complex, layered narrative—a world made of many worlds that resists containment under a single narrative through a multidimensional perspective blending methodological imagination. This broader research changes as much as it documents change, creating what might be called a methodology of mutual transformation.

The fragmentary, diaristic structure of my contribution, made up of a photo essay, this text, and film excerpt, reflects not on methodological inadequacy but on the fractured reality of individuals, communities, and locations navigating constant change. What emerges is an ongoing archive of Downtown’s pasts-presents-futures—incomplete, affective, and relational.

I find myself questioning whether the fragmentary nature of *LETTERS @ 3 AM* truly serves my declared intentions. Does its diary-like form honor the multiple narratives of Downtown’s communities, or does it risk centering my own perspective over the voices I seek to amplify? The precariousness I wish to convey, in both the celluloid medium and in residents’ stories, may be most present not in what I document but in the gaps, the refusals, the opacity of what remains unseen. Setting the tripod, framing, rolling, writing, editing, and cutting are inevitably glimpses of my own subjectivity. The fragments that remain, a clockmaker’s hands, a shuttered storefront, construction dust settling on Broadway, feel simultaneously too much and too little: too much in their aesthetic condensation of a day into memory, too little in their capacity to carry the full weight of resilience and solidarity.

I recall an archival collection of hundreds of 1950s Bunker Hill polaroids, taken to catalog the neighborhood before its erasure. Their bureaucratic function was to document what needed to be destroyed.

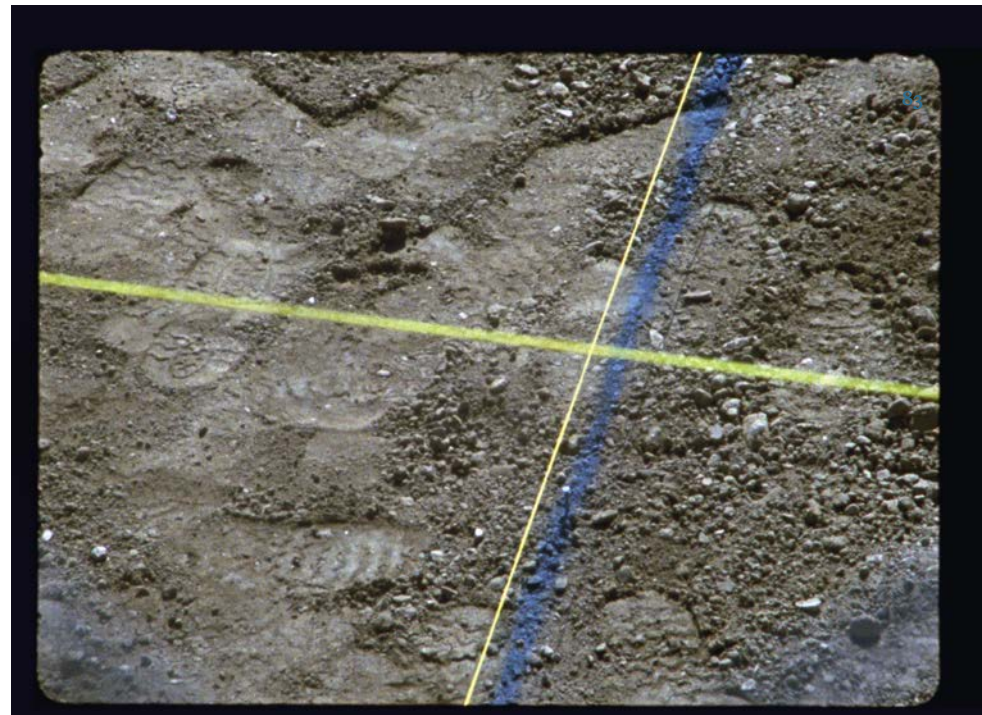
My 16mm research seeks a different purpose, yet the documents, in their form, at times remain hauntingly similar. Can a methodology that embraces incompleteness and fragmentation still serve as resistance against powers that demand total transformation? These questions remain unsettled, haunting the work itself as much as Downtown's ghosts haunt its changing environments.



*The Land of Coming
Events:*

Image List

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Construction site at 232 Judge John Aiso St. April 2024. | 13. Carlos. 629 S Hill St #409. February 2024. |
| 2. Joe's Auto Parks Parking. 215 S Broadway. February 2023. | 14. 1348 S. Flower st. October 2024 |
| 3. Building side wall. 845 Olive st. June 2023. | 15. Fallas Paredes. 458 S. Broadway. February 2023. |
| 4. Joe's Auto Parks Parking. 633 S Spring St. July 2023. | 16. 1455 N Main St. July 2023. |
| 5. City Sightseeing (Hop-On Hop-Off Bus), at 330 S Broadway. July 2024. | 17. AVA Arts District. Apartment 3D tour. August 2024. |
| 6. Building wall. 933 Wall St. July 2024. | 18. Ross Cutlery, 324 S Broadway. June 2023. |
| 7. LA Superstar. 528 S Broadway. June 2020. | 19. Carpenter. Construction site. 138 Mesnager St. June 2023. |
| 8. LA Superstar. 528 S Broadway. August 2022. | 20. Carlos. 629 S Hill St #409. February 2024. |
| 9. LA Superstar. 528 S Broadway. August 2022. | 21. The Downtown Business District of Los Angeles from the air. Postcard, 1940s. |
| 10. 528 S Broadway. April 2023. | 22. Caridad Garcia, TABU (1943). 16mm scanned in 2023. |
| 11. Bok Jewelers. 528 S Broadway. January 2024. | 23. Downtown from Lincoln Heights' Hill Top View. August 2024. |
| 12. John. Shoe Wiz Instant Shoe Repair, 617 S Grand Ave. July 2024 | |

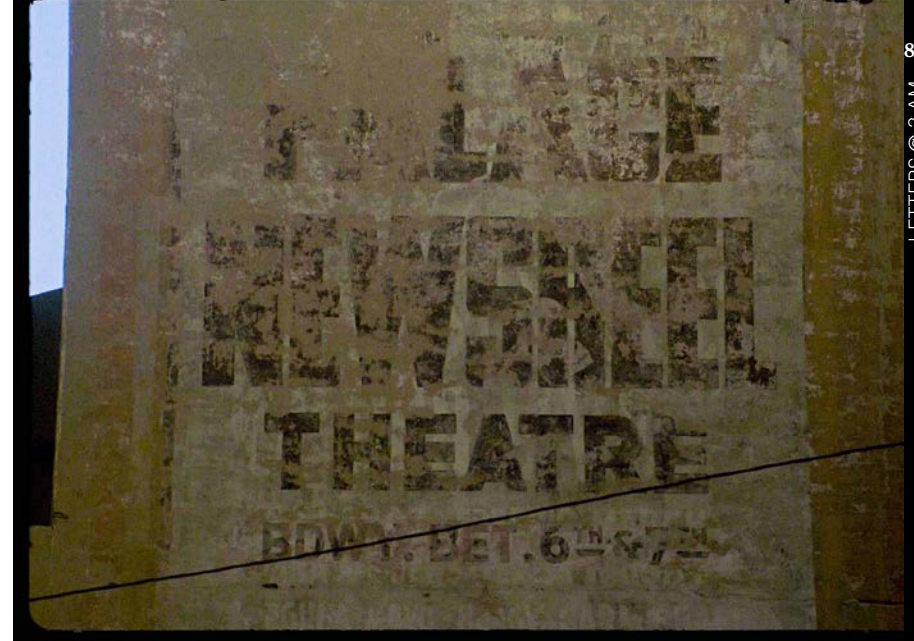


It is said that on September 4th, 1781, Spaniards named a small settlement El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles del Rio Porciuncula. Established near Yaanga, the largest and most influential Tongva native village in the region, the new town's government oversaw land distribution and administration for the initial eleven settler families.

The settlement grew. Soldiers came. A church and a jail were built. More

settlers arrived and were given title to their land. The remaining Yaanga Tongva community that wasn't enslaved or forced into labor was required to move to new locations until they were evicted from their last village when this land was purchased by a French immigrant.

The lands that once hold the native villages and the settler town comprise what is now Downtown Los Angeles.



Bill is a historian, cinephile, and retired film projectionist living in Downtown's west side. He wears a ragged blue shirt that reads *Bring Back Broadway*, the name of a 10-year strategic and economic development plan launched in 2008 by Councilmember José Huizar for revitalizing the historic Broadway corridor in Downtown. I met Bill one morning, fifteen years after the development plan was launched and a few days after Huizar pleaded guilty to felony charges for using his powerful position at LA City Hall to enrich himself and his associates. Bill says that he wears the shirt for me, while he jokes about the meaning of Huizar's

revitalization initiative. At this time, the Councilmember faces thirteen years in prison for giving favorable treatment to real estate developers, demanding and accepting cash bribes, prostitution and escort services, casino gambling chips, political contributions, and other benefits according to federal prosecutors.

We walk and talk for a few hours, and he tells me stories about Broadway theaters and life anecdotes from working as a projectionist. Before leaving, Bill says, *"Downtown is not going to change—it's always been like this. People in this city hate Downtown."*



In *Building Downtown Los Angeles*, professor Leland T. Saito (2022) comments on how in the '70s and '80s, Downtown's Broadway street had retail sales equal to the luxury shopping of other areas in the city, such as Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills¹ Downtown was popular and vibrant, especially among Latinx immigrants. However, city officials and Downtown boosters characterized Downtown as the 'hole in the doughnut' rather than celebrating Broadway's success; an empty space after workers in

the skyscrapers abandoned the area to return to their suburban homes. Saito suggests that because most Downtown shoppers were primarily low-income and working-class Latin American immigrants, they didn't fulfill the boosters' visions and imaginations of the "ideal" Downtown. Saito proposes the term 'racial spatial formation' to analyze the relationship between race, place, and public policies using the case of downtown Los Angeles.

¹ Saito, Leland T. *Building Downtown Los Angeles*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.



A man yells out loud while walking:

Of all Gods of Dead,.. it's time to kill.

Of all Gods of Dead,.. it's time to kill.

Of all Gods of Dead,.. it's time to kill.

Of all Gods of Dead,.. it's time to kill.

Of all Gods of Dead,.. it's time to kill.

Of all Gods of Dead,.. it's time to kill.

Of all Gods of Dead,.. it's time to kill.

Of all Gods of Dead,.. it's time to kill.

Of all Gods of Dead,.. it's time to kill.

Of all Gods of Dead,.. it's time to kill.

Of all Gods of Dead,.. it's time to kill.

Their voice gets closer and further away as he wanders through Hill Street on a cloudy Sunday morning.



Opening in 1910 as Clune's Broadway Theatre, The Cameo was the first cinema built in Downtown Los Angeles, and one of the first theaters to show movies in the US. It closed in 1991 and was purchased by a developer who announced plans to demolish The Cameo, The Roxy, and The Arcade theaters and convert the three conjoined buildings into upscale shops. The plan crumbled after preservationists protested fiercely.

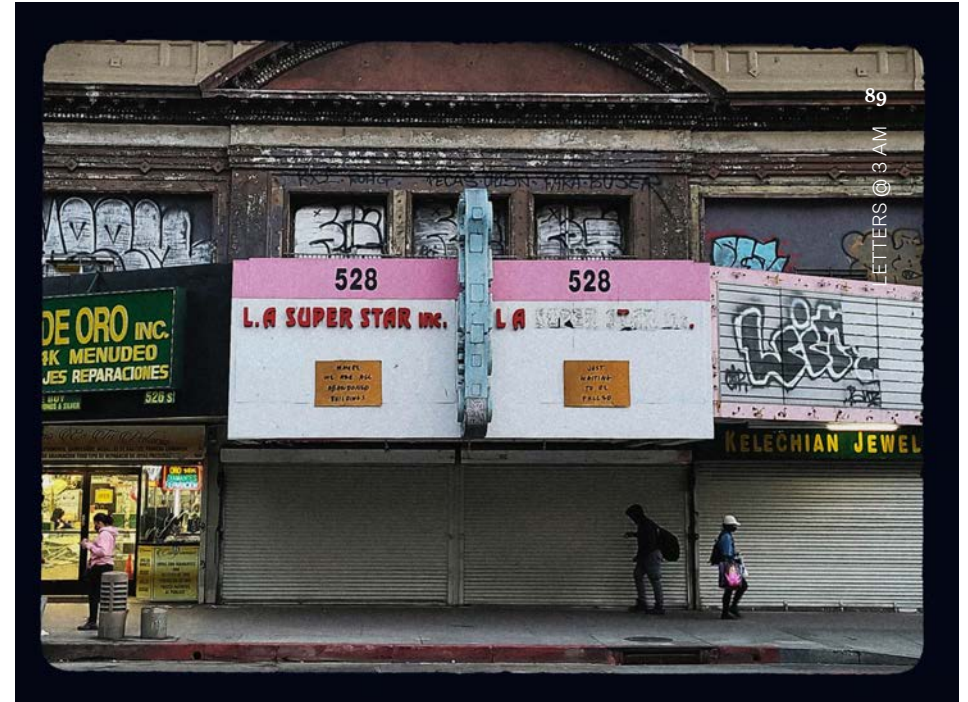
After the redevelopment plan failed, the theater was leased by an electronics retail store in the early 1990s. Bijan has been the tenant of LA Super Star, a shop located in The Cameo, since then Bijan's business takes up the theatre's former foyer and lobby, and the shop storage occupies the former auditorium. Bijan is

tall and thin, with white short hair and a mustache. We talk briefly. He seems discreet but agrees to show me inside the shop. We access the theatre auditorium through a curtain separating the shop from the storage.

Soft fluorescent lighting illuminates the area that day. None of the original 900 moviegoers' seats remain, just dozens of cardboard boxes piled on the floor and shelves. Two women pack items on one side while listening to the local radio. In the background, the white frame of the screening area remains.

Bijan (also Bizhan, Bejan, or نژی پ) is a Persian given name meaning "Hero."

I won't be able to meet him again after that day.



Bijan quietly closed his electronics shop during the COVID-19 pandemic after more than twenty years of operation in Downtown. The LA Super Star sign remains at The Cameo's marquee, but the brand logos he once advertised have been removed.

Two cardboard signs have been placed instead.

Written in black capital letters, one sign reads **MAYBE WE ARE ALL ABANDONED BUILDINGS** and the other **JUST WAITING TO BE PULLED**.





90

A few months later, the cardboard signs were removed together with the LA Super Star name. Nothing evokes the presence of Bijan's family business, just the 528 street number that once hosted his shop.



Some remodelling has been happening in the Cameo lobby. I heard a jewellery shop will open soon where Bijan's shop was located.

It will be named BK Jewellers.



LETTERS @ 3 AM 91



The NOTICE OF DEMOLITION sits side by side with two FOR SALE signs.

A few weeks later, both buildings burn to the ground at night. Later, from the sidewalk, I observe a crane tearing down the remaining two-story walls.

"So sad... I used to hang out there," someone says behind me.

As I turn, I encounter a security guard in his mid-30s.

"What was this building before? A restaurant?" I ask.

"Mmm," he thinks. "More like a crack house."



Luis is 94 and has no plans to retire. He wakes up every day at 4:30 a.m. He takes the 68 bus line, which drops him off at his work site by 5:30 a.m. He has followed this routine every single day since the mid-1990s.

Luis is the last newspaper seller with a kiosk located on 7th Street. When he began working at this location, he used to sell hundreds of copies of the Los Angeles Times daily, even more on weekends. Now, he sells four or five each day. The newspaper sales are so low that Luis makes most of his income by selling water, soda cans, nuts, paperback novels, and pornographic magazines—the latter especially at the beginning of the month, when people receive their income.

He knows that once he's gone, the last newspaper kiosk will disappear with him.

I love sitting and chatting with him. Through his blue eyes, he watches the steady stream of people passing by. Luis knows everyone—his regulars and even those who've never stopped: the robber, the recycler, the man caring for his mom, the banker, the addicts, the boy who just crossed the border, the tourist, the dealer.

At day's end, the kiosk folds into an unnoticed four-by-four foot green metal box. Across the street, a man holds a cardboard sign: I NEED A MIRACLE. Opposite him, the theater marquee—now converted into a church—reads, STOP SUFFERING.



A film production location assistant tells me, “This street is owned by Warner Brothers from today until Sunday. You can’t film here. If you don’t roll up your camera, I’ll call the police.” I ask her to be more specific, and what does she mean by ‘owned,’ since I’m standing on the sidewalk? She replies, asserting that all the blocks from 4th to 6th Street (half of the historic district) are under this ‘temporary’ rule.

A business owner approaches, complaining about the many production

trucks and film props blocking the street. He’s concerned about the difficulties his clients face trying to park and access his shop, and how it disrupts his ability to continue business as usual. The production assistant turns to him: “You got paid for this, right? What do you want? More money?”

I pass a graffiti-covered wall in a parking lot that reads: #WELCOME TO AMERICA.



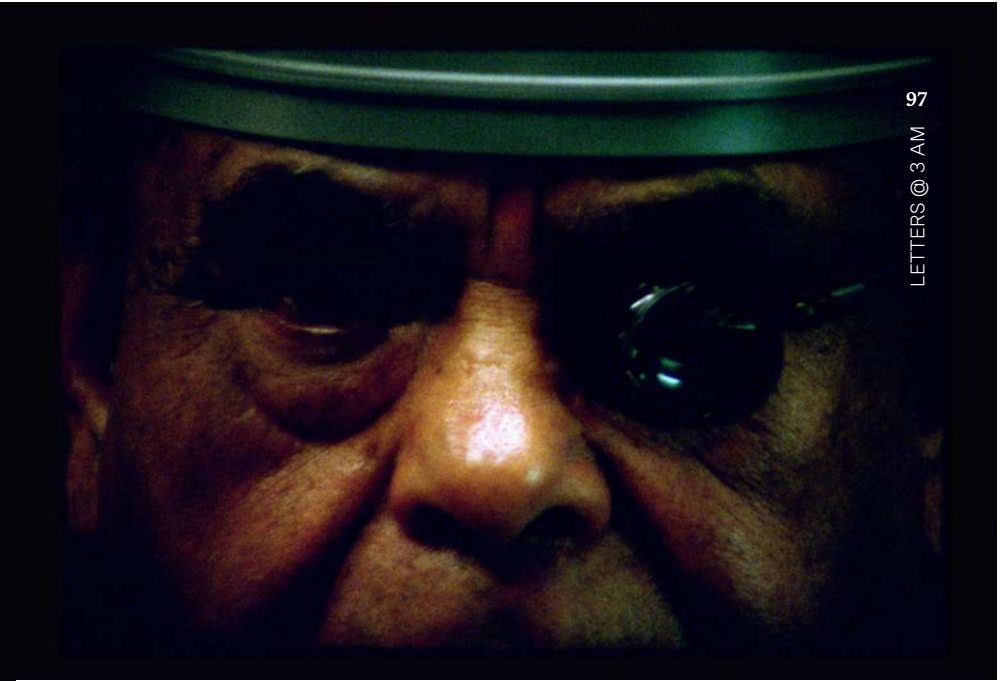
We get on a microbus tour to look at Downtown’s “most impressive residences and unique neighborhoods.” We are advised that, unfortunately, we won’t see the full breadth of the new buildings’ amenities today.

The tour takes us around Main, S. Broadway, Figueroa, and Hill St. We stop at several buildings, and a commercial representative always greets us at the entrance. We enter and tour fully furnished apartment prototypes. Prices are asked about and discussed, and we move on to the next building.

Between visits, the tour guide talks about the old Downtown—the ghost

town—and the new properties—a lot of properties. She speaks about the opportunity to be part of the many who say, ‘Downtown is home,’ how living in the district is hotter than ever, and how buildings once designed to separate residents from the street are now opening their doors to it.

The bus tour continues. We pass a 7-Eleven where several unhoused people are lying on the ground. The bus passengers lean toward the window, murmuring, surprised, and seemingly disgusted. The tour guide calms the group, saying what they just saw is temporary—that it won’t be there soon.



Nighttime.

The street is quiet and empty.

The wind catches and slowly turns the first pages of a book resting on the concrete sidewalk. First page, second, third, fourth; then back to the beginning.

The book is missing its cover.

The chapter title: *The End of Everything.*

It reads: *It seemed to Kate that the wheel of time was spinning faster, hurrying the days along, blending winter into spring and summer into autumn, until all the seasons and years blurred into one.*

I wonder what comes after that?

Everything has a beat, a pulse, even the end.



Downtown street names that no longer exist or have been renamed in English.

<i>Aceituna</i>	<i>Charity</i>	<i>Justicia</i>	<i>San Fernando St</i>
<i>Adobes</i>	<i>Cinnabar</i>	<i>Loma</i>	<i>Santa Fe</i>
<i>Alegro St</i>	<i>Clanton</i>	<i>Los Negros</i>	<i>Teed</i>
<i>Alta</i>	<i>Clay</i>	<i>Mary</i>	<i>Werdin Alley</i>
<i>Amelia</i>	<i>Concha St</i>	<i>Mercantile Pl</i>	<i>Wholesale</i>
<i>Apabalaza St</i>	<i>Court</i>	<i>Moore</i>	<i>Wine St</i>
<i>Avispas</i>	<i>Deltoro</i>	<i>Oliver</i>	...
<i>Benjamin</i>	<i>Eternidad</i>	<i>Ord St</i>	
<i>Broadway Pl</i>	<i>Faith</i>	<i>Primavera</i>	
<i>Buenavista</i>	<i>Fortin</i>	<i>Principal</i>	
<i>Calle</i>	<i>Hayes Alley</i>	<i>Produce</i>	
<i>Corta</i>	<i>Ink Alley</i>	<i>Prudent</i>	
<i>Caridad</i>	<i>Jail St</i>	<i>Republic St</i>	
<i>Castelar</i>	<i>Juan</i>	<i>Requena</i>	



How can we visually, sonically, and sensorially articulate the dissonances and memories of a place that is neither fully present nor totally absent?

How can the 'intense proximities' of friendship, love, community, and solidarity open other spaces to anarchize the archive's patriarchal authority through socially engaged and community-based collaborative methodologies?

If memories from the suppressed social and cultural past reappear like

ghosts, how might we conjure them in the emerging technologies, particularly in the hybrid forms where fiction and non-fiction overlap?

How might film and new media arts, which are themselves archival, test the boundaries and conventions of the archival paradigm by triggering new-creative events that rethink notions such as provenance, fakery, categories, structures, record, purpose, meaning, and institution?

A short, inconclusive, and sometimes dissembling excursion into creative musing in the car

Perdita Phillips

But without this in-between—this intense zone of movement, this specific rhythm of getting through—we are left only with the metastable, sedimented “things” we already have. We require the movement, rhythm and labour of the in-between to give us something new (Nemanis 2008, 144).

The situation

I had to drive 613 km along the Great Eastern Highway from Walyalup/Fremantle, Western Australia, to Kalgoorlie-Boulder/Karlkurla and return, to retrieve some item that had been buried for 171 days. With negotiating the city traffic and then stretch and rest breaks on the highway, the journey takes about eight or so hours through mostly cleared rural farmland and sandplain, mallee and open woodland. The entire trip is equivalent to 215 kg of CO₂ (Car Emissions.com, 2025). Driver fatigue is an issue in long-distance driving. Counter-intuitively, creative musing whilst driving is one of the strategies I use to maintain alertness. Having done this journey (and other long car journeys before), I was interested in exploring this free musing phenomenon as a creative method.

In my previous art practices, I have created “walking art” and used walking daily for creativity. Evidence of the positive effect of walking on creativity has anecdotal and scholarly support (e.g. Oppezzo and Schwartz, 2014). I use creative musings to visually and verbally juxtapose concepts, ideas and aesthetic possibilities. Even if it is sensed (intuited), rather than veristically visualised, musings (including abstract concepts) form spatial bodies (like shapes in clay) at the edges of recognition and ‘tumble’ in the back of my mind.