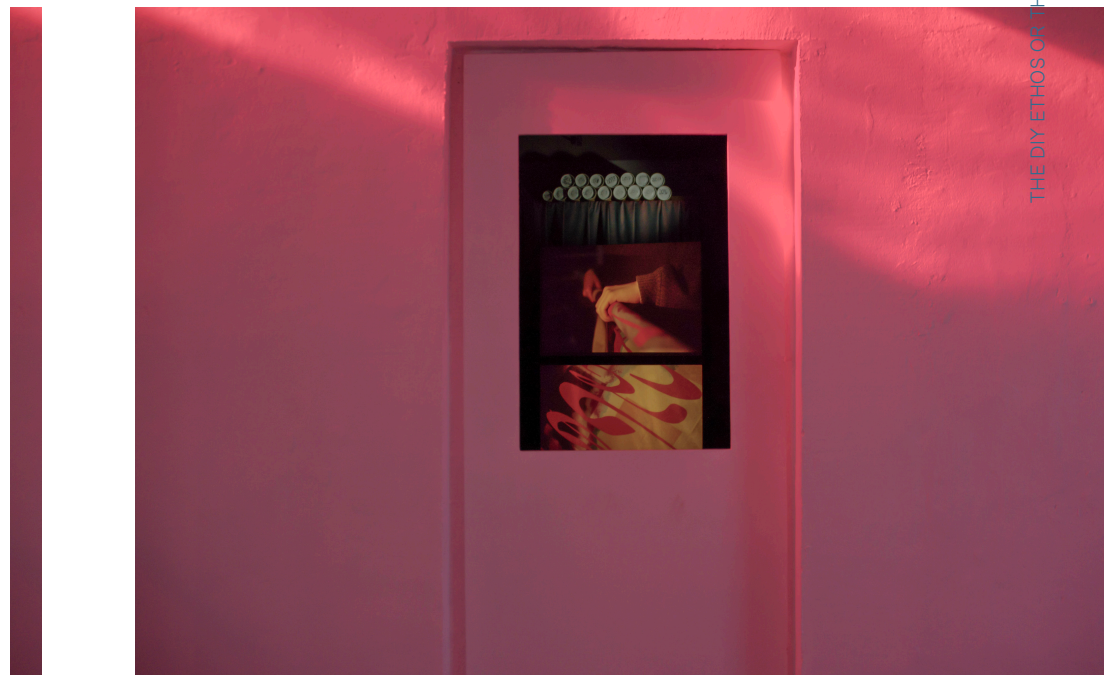


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the DIY ethos or thesis is: stay permanent

Ben Caro & Kat Cutler-MacKenzie in trialogue with
Laura De Jaeger



Installation view of *the DIY ethos or thesis is: stay permanent*, (dual-channel 35mm slide projection, 162 colour and black and white slides), 2025. Installed in the exhibition *Rooms in Rhymes* at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM), Tallinn, 2025. Photo courtesy: EKKM.

The DIY ethos or thesis is: stay permanent (2025) is a dual-channel 35mm slide projection by British artist duo Ben Caro & Kat Cutler-MacKenzie. The work was commissioned by Belgian artist and curator Laura De Jaeger for the first instalment of the experimental exhibition-cycle Rooms in Rhymes at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM), Tallinn. EKKM is an artist-initiated institution positioned at the centre of the Estonian contemporary art field, testing out alternative forms of museality through its consciously suspended state as a “becoming institution”.

Laura De Jaeger: I invited you to dialogue with old posters, catalogues, tech-equipment, and remnants of works and systems that we house in our archive-cum-technical store—as bodies. As they spend most of their time waiting, on hold, I like to believe they have opportunities to dwell and re-imagine. To connect knots and change their minds. They grow and decompose, bleach and gather dust, balance and take ownership over a space. Reaching out to you had to do with your sensitive way of working with slide-carousels, critical museology and archival research. I imagined the changing of the slides as the sound of a clock, its reverb in the corridor emphasising a slowing down of time. The space between changing slides could function as leeway. The dual-projection format allows for weaving narratives together. Dreaming about this project, I was reminded of your work at Copper Leg residency in 2022. You constructed a delicate installation with remnants found in the attic of the old school-house. It had a flavour of archival practice, yet the focus was on balancing. This allowed the material to breathe, interact and accumulate new knowledge.

Ben Caro / Kat Cutler-MacKenzie: What we hoped to bring to the archival objects at EKKM was a form of art making that made ‘palpable’

and ‘perceivable’ (Vervoordt and Ferretti 2017) the energy held in the documents of EKKM’s history, from entrance tickets to disco balls to hand-written notations marked onto the technical workshop walls. This invitation extended a branch of research undertaken in our previous

dual-channel 35mm slide projection works Staging a Gaze (2022) and feeling looking (2023), in which we use performative interactions from experimental archaeology, historic reconstruction and reenactment to explore how we might ‘enter the subjectivity of artworks’ (Hervé and Maillet 2021) in archives and museum collections to (re)surface emotional spaces and histories they conjure¹.

In EKKM, we worked mainly on the second floor, where the office, technical workshop, archive and one large gallery space are located.

LDJ: That floor is my personal sweet spot because it is essentially a corridor leading in three directions, of which two are interrupted by a door. To me, this space is characterised by quick, unexpected encounters with those rarely opening doors, fostering curiosity and suspense. It does not reveal itself at first encounter. A corridor like that reminds me of a waiting room. In that type of space, it often feels like time is not spent, but suspended. What at first might feel constraining, also heightens our senses. This liberated time can open us up to reading into things. It has a hint of resistance in it, as time is also a currency, and we often cannot afford to stand still. But overall, in each museum, there is an element of waiting inherently present: visitors are waiting to be moved by something. Suspense is anyway in the air.

This institution should be read through its materiality. Could you describe the house to me?

BC/KCM: We were especially struck by the cut-and-paste architecture and layers of objects and images left over the years by former artists and artworkers who had passed through. We entered the office each day up the back staircase, which was hand-built and fixed onto the building, almost like Lego. Inside, there were two objects that reflected what we came to know as the simultaneous cheekiness and seriousness of EKKM: 1) a piece of chewing gum squished over the eye of a CCTV camera, and 2) a small whiteboard hanging on the wall opposite the entrance, reading: ‘THESIS: “STAY PERMANENT”’.

Laura, could you remind us how that phrase appeared?

¹ Louise Hervé and Clovis Maillet (The International Institute for Important Items). Telepathic Voyage. (Art by Translation, 2021). <https://www.artbytranslation.org/exhibitions/202105-time-capsule-2045/creations-sonores-et-performances/louise-herve-et-clovis-maillet>.

LDJ: Brigit Arop, our project manager, tells me that Johannes Säre, our former technical director, remembers it was written by our intern Joonas Pulkkinen. It must have been 2 years ago? This whiteboard hangs in our office space and is meant to carry temporary anecdotes or notes. The joke goes that Joonas did not realise, while writing about permanence, that he was accidentally using a permanent marker...

Usually, the whole building is opened at one go. In the exhibition cycle *Rooms in Rhymes*, each curator took on a floor of the museum, where they developed one micro-narrative of the wider exhibition. The exhibition unfolded with a new floor opening weekly. Actually, our section can be read as employing this sentence, 'THESIS: *STAY PERMANENT*,' by giving this morphing body of content a break. The focus is on standing still, staying in it, and what happens when materials appear to be still. The permanence could be ironic (I mean, what is ever permanent?), but to me it tastes like remaining present. And allowing that presence to contaminate you.

BC/KCM: In the idea of 'staying permanent', we felt a sense of waiting, of being ready for a moment to act. For us, this phrase was about preparedness. However, from the start, it was clear that we approached waiting in a different way than you. We first came to the idea as a form of anticipation, potential energy and readying, then, as conversations developed, more as a standing, pausing, and lingering.

The tactics and strategies devised by EKKM to 'stay permanent' that we began to encounter proposed themselves as a sort of model for how museums and, more broadly, artist-led arts institutions, might operate within an increasingly underfunded European arts sector as money is reallocated towards defence spending. These tactics included:

» Interdependent networks: borrowing and sharing equipment with other institutions; having friends in helpful places (carpenters, civic leaders, goods providers) and being a friend in a helpful place; protecting the well-being of fellow team members by distributing workloads.



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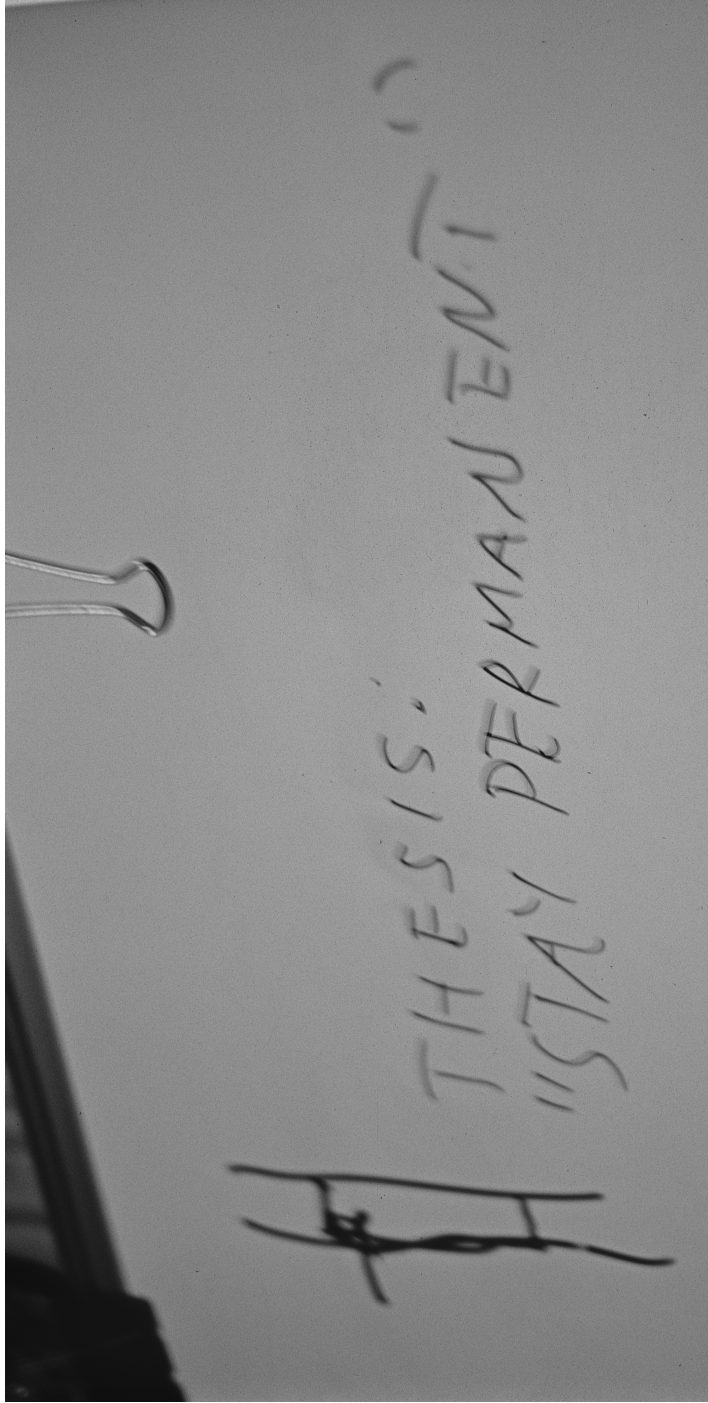
» Opportunism: being light of touch and flexible enough to incorporate unexpected gifts (roadside materials, unwanted tech, two hours of sun on a cloudy day).

» Radical pragmatism: doing what you can with what you've got to get where you need to be (i.e. things don't have to be done "properly" to be done well).

» Risk: EKKM is an experimental project; therefore, some level of risk is always necessary (i.e. testing the limits of audiences at *Rooms in Rhymes* by asking them to wait for up to two hours before entering the exhibition).²

We also loved the idea of EKKM having a 'thesis,' a reflective, research-led approach, which was enacted in the experimental nature of the exhibition *Rooms in Rhymes*. This phrase at once imparts the urgency of an arts institution trying to maintain itself, especially from an economic/capacity standpoint, but also demands some level of impossible thinking.

² This way of framing EKKM's tactics is informed by our own practice-based research within the museum as well as Kuba Szreder's *The ABC of the projectariat: Living and working in a precarious art world*. (Manchester University Press, 2021).

Detail of a still from *the DIY ethos or thesis is: stay*

LDJ: The notion of permanence is also inevitably connected to our building. This lean museum, surrounded by strong Baltic sea winds, is a constant reminder of care and calls for action through maintenance. A technical director at EKKM not only co-produces works and co-designs exhibition layouts, but also repairs the terrace and crumbling walls. Our administrative director focuses on the holes weathering through perishing concrete in our backyard, and curators re-plaster walls and nurture the garden.

BC/KCM: You are a transversal team, which is one of the things that we admire.

LDJ: As many artists are! With this serious (material) call to stay put, we learn and adapt to new roles as and when required. A few autumns ago, we received funding to repair extensive roof damage. It blew off about two weeks later. As Tallinn's former energy plant, the building functions as a current: it promises to be steady only through continuous action and presence. For almost twenty years now, material for exhibitions and maintenance of the building have been very much intertwined. There are plans on the horizon to renovate, but we listen to the build-

ing's resistance to a classical approach. Instead of adapting it to our needs (which in this case is to work through the winter), we will extend it with a new part. This rough space is, anyway, an ideal testing ground. Its soil is flexible and regenerative. It only works in our best interest to keep space like that available.

Working with a thesis, as you say, is naturally related to the practice of testing out. This comes with paradoxes. We toy around with the characteristics of a museum, which gives us legitimacy, but also poses intriguing questions. I mean, does it make sense at all to have an archive in a crumbling museum? And how could that function? I believe in inviting practitioners to speculate on these questions. I wonder whether these practices might even become our most valuable archive.

BC/KCM: Perhaps. The question as the project progressed was how to remain at a critical distance from the practices employed at EKKM: to avoid idealising projects that may have been strenuous; to recognise the cultural and temporal distance between us, the people, events and collection that we were meeting in archival echoes; as well as to capture the joyful chaos of an artist-led project described by the team as a "performance" of the institution of the museum.



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LDJ: An example of that is our garden, which was essentially a method of claiming space from developers after our garages were obliged to be taken down, yet it is presented as a sculpture garden. Humour is another important tool, often employed as an alternative currency (e.g. life-long free entry to our free museum) to acquire works in our collection from artist-friends.³ In the case of your work, this 'performance' includes approaching remnants, archived or unarchived, as active agents and vessels that collect stories and form networks with the potential to exchange.

BC/KCM: We think of archival objects waiting in a genealogical way, as resurfacing past energies, in a time in which that energy is needed or felt. This waiting, for us, is about connections and affinities, finding new ideas or ways to be within objects. Our interaction with EKKM's archive and team did this for us; it opened new doors of thought within our own approaches to the arts institutions in which we work alongside our practice.

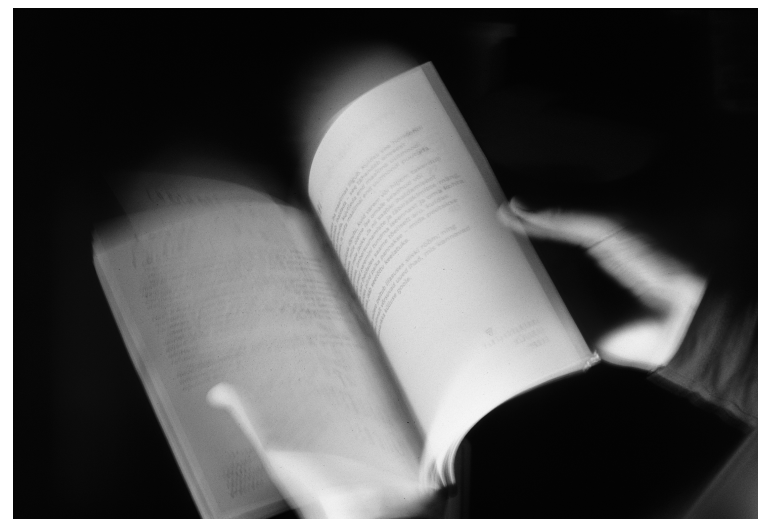
Some things we learnt were through physical-

ly lingering around EKKM's building and team, including being present in periods between meetings, or whilst waiting for technicians to return

³ See Maarin Mürk and Henri Hütts. *Rescripted visit to EKKM's collections*. (EKKM, 2021).

from a hardware store visit. It's funny what you notice when you dwell in in-between spaces (i.e. messages on pots of paint, graffiti, etc.). Whilst other learnings came from being with objects in the archive, like the disco ball, which led us to research the role of party at EKKM as an anchor of community. Or the importance of cheekiness amidst serious work, such as several failed attempts to outline a hammer onto the workshop wall, retraced multiple times as technicians juggled the physical test of balancing it straight!

Perhaps it is also important to note that EKKM's building can be seen as part of the collection too (Mürk and Hütts 2021, 7). Photographic encounters with the building drew us to spend time with



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textures and details within the fabric of the architecture, through which we learnt that the DIY aesthetic of self-repair acts as a visible form of mediation between the politics of the institution and visiting publics. In your earlier example, Laura, it is clear that the team cares for the building in an ecologically and economically sustainable way. This can also be seen in repurposed exhibition banners used as outdoor seat covers.

LDJ: The team members' personal practice might also peek through those fix-ups. Are there other artists working on this topic who inspired you? And do any of those artists' principles linger on in your approach?

BC/KCM: Our initial artistic touch-points included Rosa Barba's 35mm film *The Hidden Conference* (2010-2015), Jessica Sarah Rinland's 16mm film *Those That, at a Distance, Resemble Another* (2019), and Grace Ndiritu's performance project *Healing the Museum* (2012-2021). These artworks offered us a different way into the idea of waiting within archives: for Barba, how relations form between

objects (in storage) when not expected to perform for viewing or display; for Rinland, how interactions of touch engender exchange between object and handler; whilst for Ndiritu, the life forces within objects, those energies that de-centre the human (though to what extent is up for debate).

We were guided by these ideas and our resistances to them, enriched and tested by the intuitive object and photographic interactions we staged in EKKM's archive. Over the five days we spent in the archive, we noticed how much of the museum's history is still present in its spaces through remnant objects and artworks. Through



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documentation of past parties, for example, we directly saw and felt the presence of other living people who would be implicated in our project outcome. Unlike our previous museological projects, involving artworks by long-deceased makers, this project revolved around a museum that was founded in 2006, only nineteen years ago.

We learnt that the living, organic, DIY and punk energy of the museum was integral to its identity, and as such began to explore aesthetic ways we could convey this through images. This included integrating archive photos into our final work, to cite work done by former team members and EKKM communities, as well as using impromptu set-ups, hand-held, unplanned shots, humorous interventions and more, to convey the energetic atmosphere that increasingly surrounded us as we spent more time in the museum, in its archive, with its team.

This echoes some of the techniques used by Ndiritu in *Healing the Museum*, which involve being in rather than passing through such spaces. Whilst Ndiritu uses the term mindfulness, we instead think in terms of slow looking, and of the creation of tactile interfaces between objects we encounter, ourselves and viewing publics who visit our work. We are interested in conveying a sense of touch through images we make so that viewers might also garner a sense of tactile connectivity with

objects encountered. Sometimes through the grain of celluloid film, at others through the symbol of hands, or closeness of proximity between the lens and the object photographed. The aim here is to establish connectivity and collectivity, contact zones (those political object-subject interfaces that arise in museums), meeting points that form cognisance of and empathy with other people and objects.⁴

LDJ: I can strongly relate to the approaches of Ndiritu, maybe with a hint of object-oriented ontology in there?⁵

LDJ: It was important to me to acknowledge exactly that. Visitors are not the only ones waiting in a museum. Consequently, I switched my focus to the archive and made it the primary exhibiting space of this floor. With this, I aimed to reshuffle hierarchies between living and non-living bodies. The door with a hole to peek through that we made part of your intervention generated focus, whilst your performative interventions and use of photographic “movement,” so to speak, brought out of objects other forms of activity.

How did analogue photography come into play?

BC/KCM: We both often feel that objects exist, act and live beyond the realm of human experience because they reflect a human presence imbued by other people that makes their agency as mediators felt.

BC/KCM: We worked with Adox Scala 50 black and white slide film, into which we wove a selection of colour slides taken on Kodak E100.

When taking initial photographs, we investigated how to enmesh EKKM’s DIY aesthetic of cut-and-paste, reuse and, working-with-what-you’ve-got-to-achieve-what-you-want etc., with more formal photographic techniques, echoing the ethos of the museum at the intersection of the official/institutional and artist-run and do-it-yourself. We were interested in how we could use stark contrast, high grain, occlusion, blurring, harsh angles and movement to intimate the live (active, present) rather than (?) archival (held, at a distance) energy of these objects. These are not inherent qualities of analogue photography, and were created through lighting and non-standard shooting practices, i.e. not using tripods, changing chemical

⁴ For a wider discussion of the term contact zone see Mary Louise Pratt. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. (Routledge, 1992).

⁵ One reading of philosopher Graham Harman’s seminal book in this field *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (Pelican 2018) is that objects might be having a “conversation” when no one is watching.



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development times. For example, to gain a higher grain on certain images, we agitated the film for less time in the bleach bath. In previous works, such as feeling looking, we over-bleached it, so the emulsion began to slide off, giving alchemical effects.

LDJ: The hand-processing, which you are obliged to do due to your peculiar choice of film, aligns well with your reading and finds in the archive and institution. This material is inherently DIY.

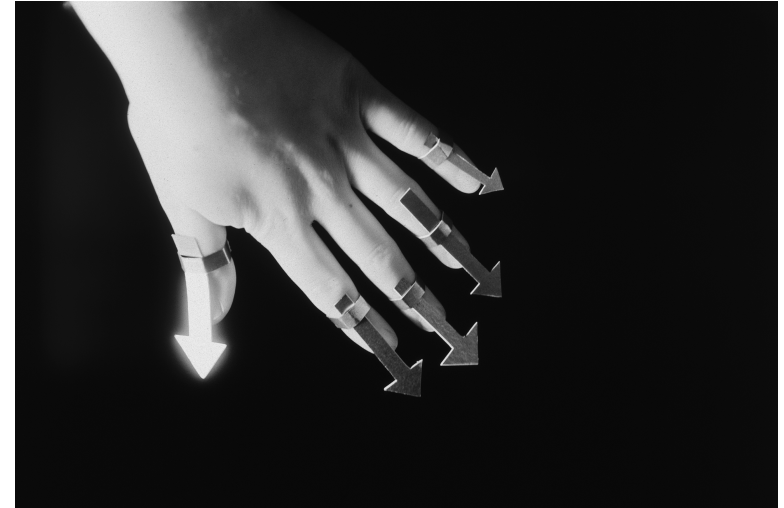
BC/KCM: For us, the notion of ‘do-it-yourself’, or DIY, has strong resonances. In the UK, DIY aesthetics are often associated with left-leaning counter cultures such as the punk movement of the 1970s, or community-initiated social projects and their associated printed zines and ephemera, especially within the context of contemporary art. *the DIY ethos or thesis*

is: stay permanent, is a document of EKKM’s practice from 2006 to the present, in the etymological sense of the word, stemming from the Latin docere, meaning to chronicle, report, set down, put down, archive. In this way, our intuition was to try to capture, or ‘set down’ some of the movement, activity, politics and energy that we felt within the archive.

LDJ: And then there is this intriguing relationship between more formal and informal approaches to your documentation of our archive.



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BC/KCM: Following an embodied practice approach, we let ourselves be guided by hard facts as well as intuition – gut feelings and lurches towards things. Part of our documentary archival process was being sensitive to tacit ways of capturing this “document,” involving letting go of conscious explanation.

LDJ: Spending quite some time with the public, I noticed that this sense of letting go, exactly following that gut-feeling, is an ongoing challenge (though I secretly believe we all have a knack for it). What I have grown to admire, and relates to this, is the aspect of masking in your work, for example, in the photograph with the arrows over the text, where the shadow of your hand at once points to and occludes. I think this is where the imaginative potential of the visitor is invited in materially.

BC/KCM: And that masking happens in multiple ways: in cropping implied by the photo frame, in blurring and occlusion invited into our images, as well as in selecting which artworks and objects to involve. We did not look for objects in a logical way, so to speak, but rather sought to let objects find us. This approach was very much in keeping with the way EKKM’s archive is kept; it does not have a strict cataloguing system, nor do artworks have set locations within the archive shelves. Rather, they are stored and reordered periodically to be space efficient,

because storage is increasingly limited as the collection grows, and the room is also used as a technical storeroom.

We selected artworks and objects from this collection through what might be termed objective chance, which we felt was in the spirit of the spatial ordering of this collection. For us, this involved following a set of sometimes unconscious and sometimes completely logical and historical research-led associations. The connecting paths between artworks and objects, with which we engaged through performative interactions and photographic interventions, formed as we began to select and order our photographs into juxtapositions and sequences for the dual-channel slide projection.

LDJ: You also covered the archive shelves with RGB colored curtains and showed only the representations of your performative process, using the slide carousel as a mediator. This reminds me of the artwork *Blackouts* (1999-ongoing), a series by Willem Oorebeek, which I discovered in the midst of our process. Through covering material (i.e. magazines, election posters) with lithographic ink, Oorebeek renders the image almost invisible. Yet he calls it a practice of archiving or conserving. He reveals that hiding might be the best



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way of showing. The black ink catches light in a way that lures a visitor into sustained attention. I wonder whether the same happens with your viewers, whether the curtains that they encounter through the hole in the door of the archive initiate a practice of imagining what is behind them, intuitively fostering imagination.

We can find these occluding, but also illuminating qualities of hands in your oeuvre at large. How do they function in this work, particularly?

BC/KCM: We use hands for a variety of reasons, which we list below:

- » They make our (physical) position as researchers visible.
- » They show the actions and body of the researcher within the archive.
- » They can be points of activation.
- » They show handling. Object handling is something that museum archivists and demonstrators do because hands have an instructional lexicon that can bridge the distance between people and ideas.
- » They relate to the haptic image, which is an image that engenders a sense of touch on the inside and outside of one's body. Haptic images are often intercultural in



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some way because they draw upon non-verbal codes.⁶

- » They contaminate the archival object with a living presence.
- » They can teach you about how an object was made or handled, how it fitted into the physical world of another person.

LDJ: Your performative documentation of documentation works like paraphrasing in the best sense; it keeps the ball rolling. Was there anything sticky or awkward about this specific process? What might linger on for you in the future?

BC/KCM: This project put us in a wholly new situation; we found ourselves in a process of real-time archiving. We usually work in national museum settings with much longer histories (*The British Museum, London; Altes Museum, Berlin*) and in our projects with a greater detachment from their teams. At EKKM, the team gave us unprecedented access to the daily, behind-the-scenes operations of the museum. Initially, we found it challenging to produce the thesis for



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⁶ For an in-depth discussion on the role and use of haptic imagery in contemporary moving-image see Laura Marks. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, 2000.

our work because we were hesitant to pre-devise a critical stance on your archival processes or ways of running without sustained in-person research within your collection and activities. We usually come to museum collections with a rigorous foundation in the history of the site, its collection and the specific debates surrounding the artworks with which we will work through desk-based or more standard forms of academic research. At EKKM, the archive is dispersed, multi-format, held in oral history, and not all digitised, requiring more in-situ research time than usual to develop a context for our practice research and outcome. Going forward, we would like to undertake more projects that engage with contemporary artist-led organisations, as we see the opportunity to act as interlocutors, even in a small way, to bring new ways of working, organising and resisting into the UK context in which we both work in administrative roles.

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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?