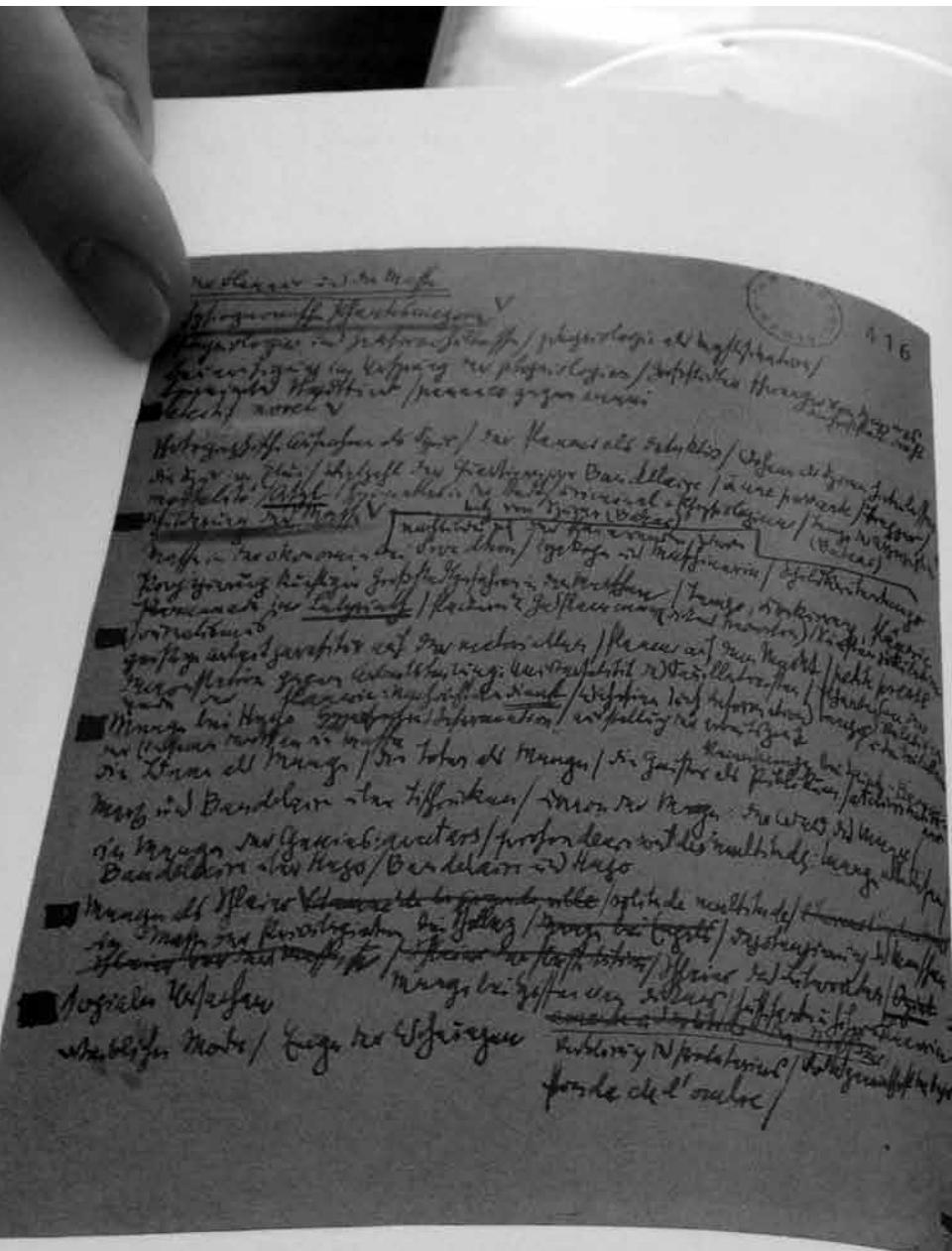


LIBERTY VIEW

(a day with Jem Cohen)

*"He who has once begun
never comes to the end of its segments; no image
and only in the folds .*

prologue: morning



9
Constellations
Graphic Forms

One day he invited Valéry to be the first to see the manuscript of "Coup de dés." "Take a look at it and tell me whether I have gone mad!" (This book is known from the posthumous edition of 1914. A quarto volume of a few pages. Words are distributed across the pages in changing typefaces, separated by quite considerable and irregular distances.) Mallarmé, whose rigorous immersion in the midst of the crystalline construction of his manifestly traditional writing beheld the true image of the future, has here processed the graphic tension of the advertisement, for the first time (as a pure poet), in the actual image that the writing forms.

GS IV.1, p. 480

Benjamin often applied much care to the graphic form, the physical arrangement, of his manuscripts. While he worked extremely carefully on the structure and layout of his essays and books, equally important to him were the proportions and the architecture of the page. Part of the writing's sense of form involved the need to create something for the eye to do. Topographical relationships, spatial organization, optical alignments and divisions are not only apparent on the drafts and the pages that include calligraphic elements. Countless scraps and sheets in the bequest are evidence of a sensibility attuned to graphic elements, spatial dimensions, and design. Such deployment of graphic figurativeness is one of the characteristic features of Benjamin's writing.

He referred repeatedly to Stéphane Mallarmé, whose *Coup de dés* dispersed the conventional line-based print image with its undifferentiated presentation. Black on a white background, distributed sparingly across the book's pages, the words of the poem appear in constellations of tenuissime extensions. Mallarmé's idea was that of a negative image of the stars. "Auditor of Books" in One-Way Street (SW 1, p. 456) points out the convergences between Mallarmé's procedures and emergent forms of visual verification.



I. the detention center













NO PARKING
24 HOURS
VIOLATORS WILL BE TOWED







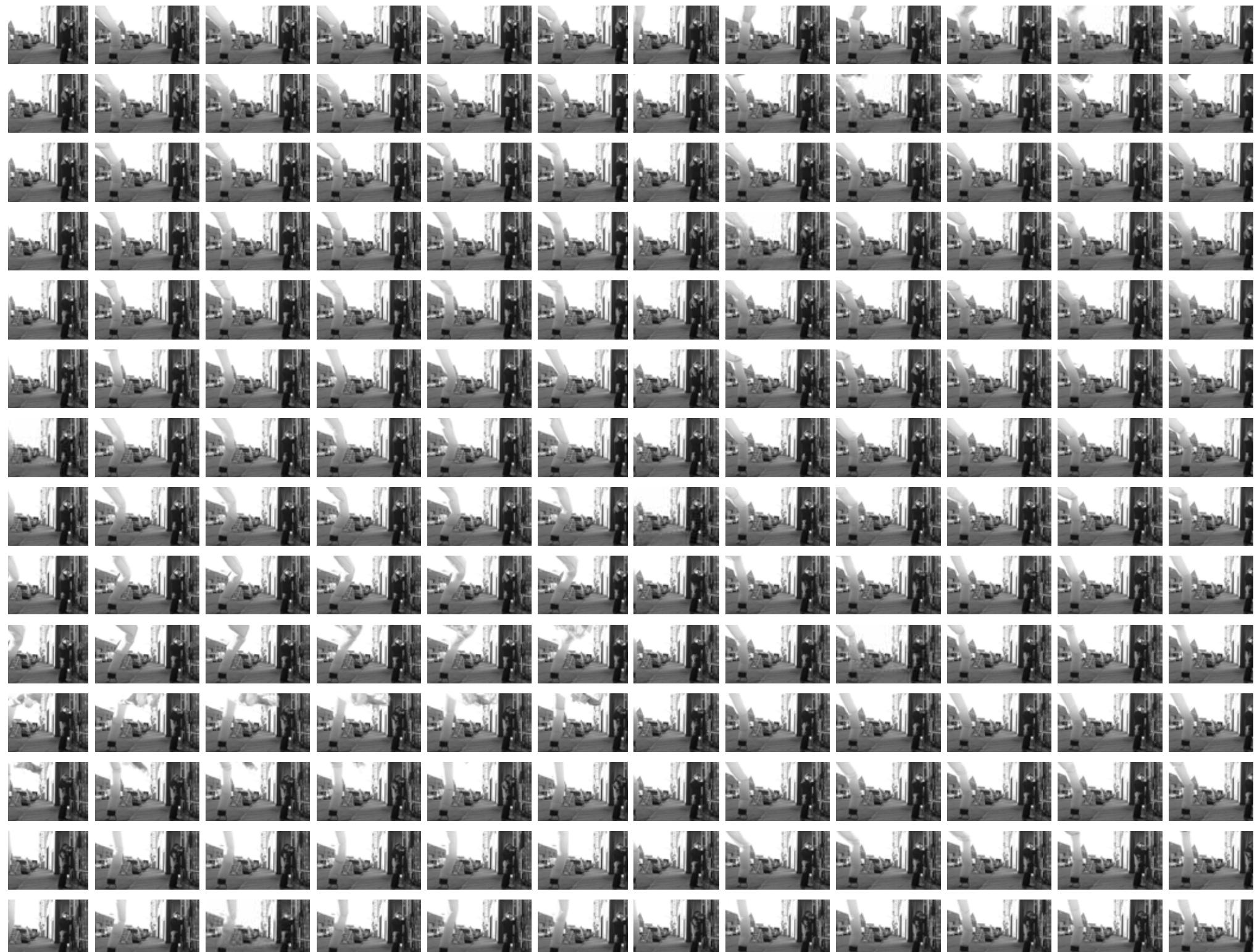






II. the drive









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DACT







THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE





II. the pier









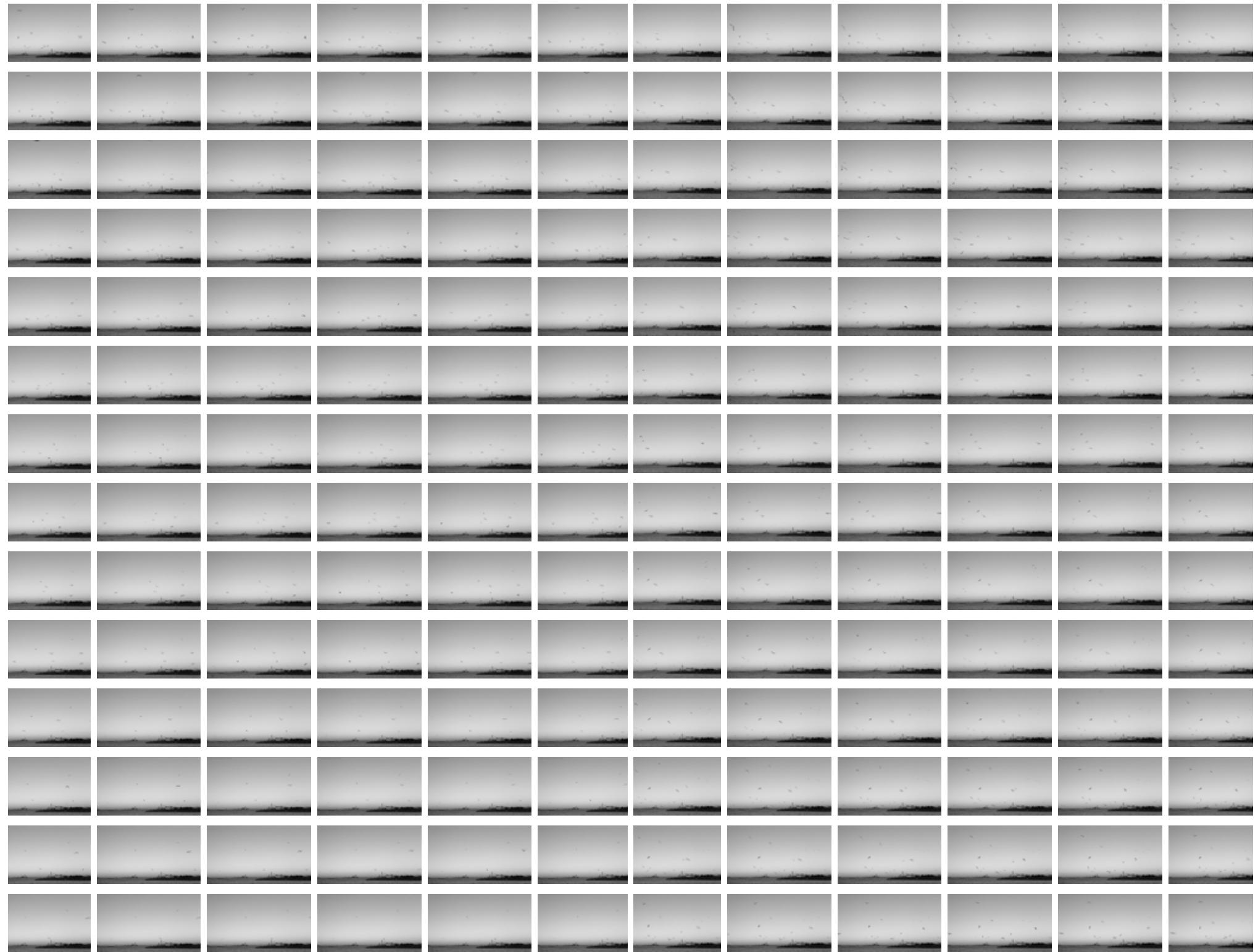














epilogue: evening





NEGATIVE

END TIME CITY

Photographs by Michael Ackerman

I first saw Jem Cohen at a screening of his film, *Benjamin Smoke*. I was studying film then, watching ten or more tapes a week, but that one floored me. In two hours, I felt like I had met and lost someone beautiful and important. When Jem came down the theater aisle, wearing his hat and his camera case, I wrote him to memory.

Ten years later, I met Jem in Brooklyn at a bookshop. We were a small group, eating tacos after a filmmaker friend Bill Daniel had done a screening. He mentioned a book his friend had made of photographs from India and suggested I come see it, sometime. Every few months, we'd see each other somewhere, or the email thread would resurface, but it was a few years before we finally made a plan. I'd moved three or four times, and was surprised—when we finally had a plan and he gave me the directions—to realize we were essentially neighbors now.

We finally met for tea, but instead of talking about that book of India, got on the subject of Walter Benjamin. Was it surprising that a man who shoots footage of what gets ignored, of trash made by humans, of the wind moving through cups and bags, of shopping malls and introspective entertainers, would already be a scholar of the *Arcades*? Only to me.

A few days ago, we go to a place that Jem has visited for more than a decade and see a man who's been working there for even longer. Did the same man chase Jem away time after time when the block was barricaded? This time he asks if we're writers. "Are

you here to clean up the trash? 'Cause there's a lot of it." He asks, "Do you write books?" And Jem points to the other two of us and says, "They do. They write books." And the joke is lost on everyone for a while.

From there we drive around in a German car on Bay Ridge streets past the terminal Jem says figures in Hubert Selby's book, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. It's a neighborhood he thinks of as very traditionally Italian, which to me is that of my Lebanese ex-bosses. We pass a high school and a hundred little houses with yards. We see what looks like a castle and wonder if a certain block was in *Saturday Night Fever*. At sunset we come to a pier with Jem. He says this is where he goes when he needs to shoot water. There are birds like the birds in his films. People point cameras at each other, us more than anyone else. Becoming a spectacle of outsiders with too much interest in the sunset's orange glow on the Freedom Tower, and in the name of this place that is neither East River, Hudson, nor Ocean.

We head back for tacos, and Jem lets us into his house. He has somewhere to be but says there's still a few minutes if we have anything we want to ask. "Do you remember that book of India? The one you mentioned maybe the first time we met?" He smiles and looks to the shelves. "Wouldn't it be funny if finally you're here to see it and I can't find it." But he does and dusts it off with a lens cloth and puts it on flat files where there is room. *End Time City*. In Benares, carrion and mystics. A dog licking at a body facedown in the river. A face of contempt among a flock of shorn men. And a quote by Walter Benjamin.



“... to open the fan of memory
satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded,
does the truth reside ...”

Walter Benjamin
A Berlin Chronicle

unnamed.pdf, Issue 2
December 2013

Thank you, Jem.

(Max & Sherri)
unnamedpdfzine.com

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