Image Games

Earlier this year, I visited Ericka Beckman's New York studio to watch some of her films. We began with *You the Better* (1983), which premiered almost 30 years ago at the New York Film Festival, co-billed with Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion* (1982). Godardians were unimpressed with her 'punk post-structuralism' and hurled abuse at the screen.[1] Carrie Rickey reported in that December's Artforum: 'If the fate of all great art is to be at first misunderstood, then Beckman's film, hands down, was the greatest film at the festival […] [it] was the only truly vanguard achievement and the only analysis and indictment of the competition that keeps the wheel of fortune spinning.'[2] In a practice spanning 35 years, Beckman's films combine choreographed set pieces and 'designed camera movements' that expose the logic of group sports and computer gaming in what she calls, 'the performance of the image'.[3] And now, when technology-enabled image-exchange – think of 'sharing' your pictures on Facebook, Twitter or Flickr – is marketed as connective fun but sold as someone else's asset, her work is more relevant than ever.

In *You the Better*, a tower appears spot-lit and rotating at the centre of the film's darkened frame. The tower is made of stacked white boxes, crudely rendered with the basic graphic details of a house. A flat yellow circle is suspended in the background like a flimsy makeshift sun. A weird, punchy chorus begins. In high-pitched, evenly enunciated syllables, two female vocalists chant from the tower's perspective, 'I see land out there stretching far and wide, I think I'll blow up and subdivide; subdivide; subdivide …' At that moment the tower explodes into the rubble of single cells. In Beckman's stylized nether-city, suburbanization has begun. Roll on a faster animated sequence and an ever-more alien score; the tower becomes a rotating model of a suburban town. Suburban lay lines become the boundaries of a newly devised sports court on which a team of performers – led by artist Ashley Bickerton – plays against 'House'. White boxes become yellow balls (the yellow circle a recurrent icon of frail optimism). In a series of newly devised games, Beckman's 'players' are kitted out in quasi-Constructivist-style softball uniform, all primary colours and juvenile motifs. Pitching targets appear intermittently like holograms, geometric shapes animated between action sequences. The players' smooth early moves turn into stressful gambles and their confident communication deteriorates into paranoid anger; the omnipotent 'House' is fearsome and oppressive. In this culture of competition, sport turns into gambling, speculation becomes an oppressive control mechanism. 'House' wins.

Since the mid-1970s, Beckman has been based in New York where she moved to after studying at CalArts, Los Angeles. On the West Coast, she shared an interest in performance and early developmental activity with her peers, Allen Ruppersberg and Guy de Cointet. In New York, she took this further. Her reading of Jean Piaget's 'genetic epistemology' and his practical tests measuring how repetitive children's activities generate or activate collective meaning, are manifested in the 'logical systems' she devises to structure her works.[4] In her early films, characterization, action, costumes, sets and scores all emphasize a sublime connection between childhood and adulthood, achieving a scrambled effect of pantomime euphoria and Lynchian phantasmagoria. Around this time, she attended Julia Heyward's early performances of scripted monologue and a cappella singing, which inspired a distinct choral component in her works.

1 'Punk post-structuralism' was a phrase used by J. Hoberman to describe Ericka Beckman's work in the Village Voice, 1 January 1979
2 'Popcorn and Canvas', Carrie Rickey, Artforum, December 1983
3 Ericka Beckman in correspondence with the author, Spring/Summer 2012
4 – 7 Ibid

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Her chorus lines introduce persistent dark forces to the films' narratives; the voice of societal pressures ('House', the government, the employer, the capitalist) creates a creeping sense of panic and claustrophobia among 'players'. In 1975, Beckman herself performed in Vito Acconci's groundbreaking *Red Tapes,* a video exposition of the relationship between self and state, where she observed 'the construction of [his filmic] space as an expression of [his] identity'.[5]

Beckman's work begins with considerable research, informing set coordinates around which narrative, choreography and filming are ordered. Bold motifs and colours are drawn from the research too, which connect temporal and spatial sequences, reappearing in detailed props, sets and costumes – a loose unifying method borrowed from early surrealist painting and experimental film. Her casts have included her peers, from Bickerton in *You the Better*, to Matt Mullican and Paul McMahon in *Out of Hand* (1981) and Mike Kelley in *Cinderella* (1986). Her scores are collaboratively composed; Beckman has previously worked with David Linton and Sonic Youth. Her early works were all shot in her darkened studio where her props and sets were hand-painted and additionally spot-lit through coloured gels creating a vivid luminescence, a quality quite different to that achieved by digital treatment. (In this respect, Beckman says she is 'waiting for digital to work more like film'.)[6] When filming, Beckman shot live-action sequences first and then rewound the same film stock to shoot and integrate layered animation sequences in between. According to the artist: 'I keep a notebook where I draw each live-action frame and use that as a visual reference for the animation. I never see how any of this turns out until I get the film back from the lab […] In my film *Hiatus* (1999) I shot up to 16 layers.'[7]

In 1980, Beckman contended, 'film is creating narrative through the makeshift. My films move backwards, using narrative structures, as does the mind of anyone trying to grasp the meaning of images in his memory.'[8] And perhaps herein lies the distinction between her work and those of the 'Pictures' generation among whom it has been contextualized, most recently in *Pictures Generation: 1974–1984*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2009. Many artists associated with 'Pictures' took images from the media and edited, cropped or subtly morphed their subject so as to reflect back on their origins and the purpose of their visibility.

Beckman's approach is different, perhaps prefiguring those of a young generation working today: cross-disciplinary appropriationists repurposing the media-sourced image to expose our proximity and complicity with it. Back then images that appeared in the media had identifiable producers. Photographers, filmmakers and designers were commissioned for individual campaigns and often established reputations for themselves in the process. Now we are all photographers, filmmakers, designers: image producers and consumers – or 'prosumers' according to Don Tapscott's infamous coinage – and the Internet is the enormous repository facilitating this exchange. We upload our photographs onto 'sharing' websites, 'like' and 'tag' one another; these images are then speculatively browsed and bought by stock agencies, altered and sold to media agencies, only to be re-imitated and re-captured by us and uploaded once more. Our role in this economy is a new one.

Similarly, viewers are, in Beckman's work, characterized as 'players'. From conversations with Tony Conrad, Beckman says: 'I saw how I could manipulate this distance [between the image, the viewer and the viewer's memory] by taking the easily assimilated images from my childhood and my culture, and perform them differently.'[9] Unlike many 'Pictures' works, which reveal the mechanisms and politics behind persuasive images, her work looks at the role of the viewer in assuming and reproducing these images and in doing so perpetuating the cycle. In this arena, players are rarely winners. Her very particular

5 Ibid
6 Ibid
7 Ibid
8 Horror Pleni: Pictures in New York Today, Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan, 1980, n.p.
9 Ericka Beckman in conversation with Lionel Bovier and Fabrice Stroun, October 2011, published in JPR Journal, issue 3, Spring 2012

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game-construction and player-choreography has taken different forms over the years, but chimes with many more contemporary practices. Beckman's works have rarely been shown en masse in the US nor significantly in any European institution to date, so I do not claim that her work has had direct influence on younger artists. However, aspects of it resonate so boldly with a broad range of recent works that it seems worth drawing some connections.

In Beckman's *Super-8 trilogy* of films (1978–80), how the human body copies its image is performed in a variety of ways. In *We Imitate; We Break Up* (1978), she assumes the role of 'Imitator', initially dressed in a minimal school uniform attempting to copy the movements of a wooden model of human legs. Reproducing these actions, her character 'learns that she can recall a sensory "image" of the jump if she forgets how to do it.'[10] Ultimately she succeeds, but ultimately her own body 'breaks up' into an animated cluster of small objects. Here the image, as object, is physically imitated, repeated and learned, until it has become an oddly self-perpetuating thing.

The human body's reconfiguration into an object through image is evident in a number of contemporary works too. Typical of her treatment of the human form's consistent allure, Anthea Hamilton's *Manblind* series (2009–ongoing) reproduces black and white images of athletic male models on domestic blinds. Oddly, the men's physical prowess, shredded and stuck onto functional dividers, has little sway on the impression the images make. These 'real' men seem to exist almost indestructibly as affectation, image performed and seamlessly reproduced; an ideal is set in motion. Similarly, a recent performance by Eddie Peake at *The Tanks*, Tate Modern, London, *Amidst a Sea of Flailing High Heels and Cooking Utensils: Part 1* (the second part of which was performed at Chisenhale Gallery the following week), seemed to cannily expose the magnetism of the image's glossy surface. Eight lithe performers undressed to their underwear, or nude and painted gold, paraded around a darkened, smoky floor to the beat of a bass-heavy synthetic drum. Posing individually, then in pairs, then in threesomes, skin rubbed skin delicately, playfully, until five bodies writhed and fondled one another – dry, surface sex stuff – before breaking up and scattering, returning to a self-possessed co-ordinated sequence of poster-boy postures. The most disorientating thing about this very physical performance was its unconvincing 'liveness'. It felt like we were watching images of bodies rather than real ones. The most visceral element of this performance was not the rubbery, fluid-free sex show but the beat of the synthetic drum, and presumably this weird new sterility was precisely the point.

In *Out of Hand* (1980), Beckman casts artist and critic Paul McMahon as a nameless protagonist trawling through his memory. Using the film to depict the architecture of his psychic space, McMahon is seen dressed in a red and white playsuit, retracing the front steps of his childhood home and trawling through his bedroom toy box. After an animated sequence, reminiscent of pioneering German filmmaker Oskar Fischinger, McMahon retrieves a small, yellow rocking horse. As he grabs it, it morphs into a steering wheel and his position changes. He becomes a driver pointed toward a screen inside our screen where another film is projected in front of him, dozens of graphic magnets animated in free fall. The magnetic pull of the image is represented like a vehicle here, speeding McMahon around his memory superhighway and taking all kinds of unpredictable turns as he goes. Shot on Super-8 (the first work of its format shown at the Whitney Biennial in 1983), it shows how the image is experienced through technology. McMahon's profile, captured from behind in close proximity to the screen, exemplifies what Beckman calls 'the blotter effect', each new image dissolving the next, while slowly seeping into our consciousness.[11]

In recent works by other artists, a similar formal device is employed. Screen-shot crops and browser outlines appear to frame or foreground traces of the artist within the scene. Berry Patten's **D* (2012) is a series of photographs of a white laptop, the browser of which displays images of a tropical coral reef. Balancing on its keyboard, a corresponding selection of sponges, shells and stones are pictured within

10 Ibid
11 Ibid

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the frame. They have been spruced up by the artist with acrylic paint and seem appropriately makeshift souvenirs of her experience in the synthetic sub-aquatic. There is a funny melancholy to the work. What is nature mediated by technology, anyway? Elsewhere, Trisha Baga's video *Madonna y El Niño* (2009) positions webcam shots of herself next to, or superimposed onto, a pop-out screen with footage of the singer's live performances. The work concludes as film of Madonna singing *Erotica* (1982), and the pulsing outline of Mac's solar screensaver are simultaneously projected over Baga's body as she moves to their rhythm. There is a degree of pleasure in watching how these icons coalesce in the artist's performance. Picturing themselves at the site of the digitally modified image, both Patten and Baga characterize the role of image-prosumer, the diversions and guilty pleasures it brings.

Imposing the logic of interactive gaming onto established social order appears early in *You the Better*, and again in Beckman's *Cinderella*. Filmed in her studio, the work takes key parts of the fairytale's original narrative and reworks them to appear like levels on a computer game: repeated sections through which action evolves. Beckman summarizes the work as 'an interactive narrative game for girls […] modelled so that the linear storyline would intersect vertical indices where the story could pivot and change.'[12] The film moves back and forward between the cottage of Cinderella's captivity, to the prince's ball, to her midnight escape and beyond. As she passes through stages, Cinderella scores points correlating not to productivity and social mobility, but to her capacity to see and advance beyond these self-perpetuating logics. Beckman's indexical structure is also reproduced as a graphic latticed motif visible in several sequences from Cinderella's netted skirt (beneath an extraordinary green plastic dress), to a scoreboard floorboard, to a knotted fabric web, the surface of a hideout and a star constellation. Ultimately, Cinderella manages to take control of – rather than marry – her own destiny. Beckman's later *Hiatus* (1999) portrays a similar female protagonist, MADI, entrapped in a virtual reality 'identity game'. In 'reality', she's at home wearing casual contemporary clothing; in the virtual life, she's in her imaginary garden, dressed head to toe in a red fantasy ensemble, the corset and curls of some 19th-century wench. She encounters other virtual characters also playing out their fantasies. 'Player 33', for example, has come along as a blue cowboy. But this virtual escape soon becomes a virtual prison, as her fellow characters vie for one another's cyber-land and power. MADI must identify temporal and spatial discrepancies between the real and the virtual, in order to regain control. Whereas the gaming logic is potentially liberating for Cinderella, almost two decades later it limits MADI, merely reproducing the unsympathetic capitalist logic of productivity and competition. Returning to Beckman's explorations of the physical action in the perception and perpetuation of the objectified image, these particular game frameworks seem to foresee the quite specific problematics of identity construction in a digitally malleable image-world, and the competitive capitalisation of cyberspace.

Beckman's work has often employed the familiar emblems of the clichéd, gendered or historical image, using them to play out newly liberating narratives. There are many contemporary artists who seem to do the same, extrapolating entertaining or abject narratives from diverse photographic or pictorial sources, and in them bringing together real and fictive characters and creating sets, props, costumes and scores that resonate or clash stylistically in order to emphasize their critical point. Albeit beginning with very different images and animating different periods and experiences, recent film or performance ensembles by Mary Reid Kelley, Mika Rottenberg and Jennet Thomas open up and parody particular kinds of images, the political and discriminatory rhetoric that they carry and the dangerous expectations they perpetuate. Reid Kelley's painted heroines perform a kind of North American black and white historical photography which typecast female protagonists in servile or caring roles, most recently in *The Syphilis of Sisyphus* (2011). Rottenberg's videos extrapolate their characters, sets and narrative frameworks from commercial stereotypes including the sweaty, sleazy, oozy women that make and promote *Tropical Breeze* (2009), a generic domestic cleaning product, and the blooming, busty, pastoral milkmaids whose fey rural gathering collectively produce *Cheese* (2009). An image of New Labour's Academy schools might have inspired Thomas's recent sci-fi musical and accompanying installation *SCHOOL OF*

12 Ericka Beckman in correspondence with the author, Spring/Summer 2012

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CHANGE (2012) depicting the memory-busting experiments carried out by the scientific 'sponsor' on a classroom of mind-numbed, singing girls in an east London secondary, a latent critique of the increasing corporatization of pedagogy disguised by the rhetoric of positive change.

Since 2000, Beckman has moved to a more physical approach, using architectural contours to direct the camera. In *Tension Building* (2006–12) her lens glides around the curved steps of a sports amphitheatre. Later the film stock is animated with colour, combined with rhythmic, undulating percussion and infused with snapshot footage of American footballers playing and American cheerleaders cheering so that the film itself becomes a physical game. As a viewer, the effect is more like that of riding on a pinball, mid-ricochet, hurtling off the contours of its casing, than sitting before a durational Structuralist film. Like pinball, it is an exercise in speed.

This might represent a wave of filmmaking freed up by the readily available digital camera, playing with its chicanery, where life's productive pulse is most astutely expressed by moving images. In a performance by Ed Atkins at Tate Britain last year, *A Tumour* (in English), the artist appeared on stage barefoot but dressed in a suit with his back to the audience. Images similar to those in his high-definition videos were projected onto a stage on screen, thrown onto his silhouette. This footage was of desolate landscapes with close-up shots of textured objects burning, running or dripping. Digital sound and visual effects were copious and emphatic. Live, the projections seemed to prompt Atkins's voice, filtered deeper, responding to the images that responded to him. Digital code became like a roaming, spectral presence imposing on the human form, captured in silhouette from behind. Standing there, he seemed to be ingesting its surfaces and then throwing them back out, in particles of sound. Here, Atkins was in character as prosumer and the image-game was a two-way chase. In recent correspondence, Beckman posed a question underpinning her earlier work: 'What makes a rule real?' If you switch her 'what?' to 'who?' I believe it's a question shared by many other artists who, in different ways, characterize the image-games we now play, and the ones we really shouldn't.