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Imagination and Play: The Films of Ericka Beckman

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Ericka Beckman was trained as a visual artist. While an MFA student at California Institute of the Arts in 1974-76, she moved from painting into filmmaking. The environment at Cal Arts was permissive and supportive of interdisciplinary art; Beckman's mentor, John Baldessari, headed a program called Post-Studio Art. Beckman's projects at Cal Arts began with black-and-white Super-8 films shot from the monitor image of videotapes that she had produced. Her technique used the Super-8 camera as a kind of optical printer that altered the timing and framing of the video image. Her subject for these films was the production of personal and visual "icons," single images on a black ground composed of multiple exposures of matted black-and-white video images. It was at Cal Arts that she met Brooke Halpin, a music student, with whom she has collaborated on the sound tracks of her films.

Beckman produced ten short films as a student and gave her first New York City show at the Fine Arts Building in 1975. Her films were shown with the work of such artists as Richard Serra, Yvonne Rainer, Vito Acconci, Judy Pfaff, Robert Mangold, and others. Of her early film influences, Beckman has said that the work of Warhol and Snow perturbed her and prompted her own investigations, although her strong influences at the time came from visual/performing artists: John Cage, Rainer, Acconci, Joseph Beuys, and Phillip Glass. Following Cage, she set up systems (including chance) that would manufacture the work. She was also attracted to Cage's sense of playfulness and his willingness both to take risks and to use mistakes in his work. Beckman's work started with establishing actions based on game structures, often involving the manipulation of objects, her own construction of props and materials, and songs and texts that she performs herself or with a few assistants.¹

Since moving to New York in 1977, Beckman has made five Super-8 color films with sound. All but one of the films is about one-half hour long (*Hit and Run* is only 17 minutes long). In these films, Beckman has developed a distinctive style in terms of the visual appearance, the sound, and the content. In 1983 she completed her first 16-millimeter film, *You the Better*, also thirty minutes long, which expands on these themes and effects. Beckman's films make use of dark backgrounds, giving the impression either of nighttime skies or a featureless, hermetic space devoid of landmarks for spatial orientation. The result is a mythic quality of a timeless, spaceless domain, a region of the imagination.

But the dark background also has a practical origin. The superimpositions and double exposures that are a central feature of Beckman's style are created by shooting actors and objects against a dark field. On this dark ground, certain actions take place, often involving special props and constructions, enacted in a vivid, graphic manner. Objects and clothing are either brightly colored or brilliant white. Shapes are simple and instantly recognizable: a circle, a square, a door, a house. Very often the objects and symbols are like toys—bright red, orange, blue, and green blocks; white and yellow hoops; a red toolbench; bright yellow briefcases. Actions predominate over such elements as plot, narrative, or character, and these actions are both basic and recurrent: falling, running, gesturing, and—notably—all sorts of actions that come from games and play.

The child-like, often homemade appearance and the buoyant, cheerful tone of Beckman's films are related to a tendency in performance art that delights in the infantile. Stuart Sherman's play with small objects and verbal images, David Van Tieghem's musical adventures with various toys, and the polymorphous perverse physicality of Pooh Kaye's dances are only a few examples. The recent movement of performance art toward music—especially toward the rhythmic, high-energy percussion of punk and new wave music—provides an important context for understanding Beckman's work, because her films are either structured like songs or use repetitive, child-like incantations (composed with Brooke Halpin) to carry narrative information as well as atmospheric qualities, such as the excitement of a repeating percussive line. Another aspect of the films that is child-like is the rich counterpoint of a light, whimsical, innocent tone to content that is often violent, even morbid. As in many fairy tales, the world of mundane reality is contrasted with the realm of the fantastic in expressions that range from the sublime and delightful to the harsh and cruel. Categories such as work and play, male and female are set into stark contrast. The bifurcation of experience caused by the processes of representation, symbol-making, and language are poetically explored. Especially important to the work are the many levels of meaning present in both children's lore and folklore, in which seemingly simple meanings also embrace layers of social, psychological, political, and philosophical significance. In this regard, as Beckman herself has pointed out, the double exposure becomes both method and meaning in her films.² The films are much more complicated than they might seem at first glance, because below their bright, light, charming surfaces and the apparently disconnected streams of imaginative icons one finds the most profound issues: questions of ethics, identity, gender, sexuality, acculturation, destiny, power, knowledge. Subtle ambiguities arising from plays on words, from verbal images,³ from elusive metaphors, or from arbitrary systems of rules and abstractions generate both the quality of fanciful play and the possibility of serious, double meanings. For instance, many of Beckman's titles can be read in at least two ways. *Hit and Run* is partly a description of two separate activities that occur in the film; it also refers to the most reprehensible, violent sort of automobile accident. Similarly, *We Imitate; We Break-Up* refers literally to actions in the film (mimicking activities and breaking up arrangements of objects) and more idiomatically to a friendship or love affair. Yet it also refers to the development of the mental process of abstraction.

White Man Has Clean Hands (1977) juxtaposes language to images in ways that only partially correspond. It pokes fun at American consumer society by using the format of the consumer survey with a subversive twist. At the same time, it is a devastating indictment of the power of advertising. And further, it takes infantile delight in wholesale chaos. Images from advertisements are intercut with images of both clumsiness and violence, so that one aspect of the film is its moral commentary, constructed through montage. But another aspect of the film is its formal play with words, colors, and representations, using such devices as repetition, variation, and statement-answer. Because the formal play is more immediately apparent than the commentary, the film appears playful, rather than solemn or cautionary. But it is playful in the way that many children's games, songs, and stories are—under its lilting surface one finds all sorts of brutal imaginings.

The film begins with running titles rhythmically intercut with footage of a few activities. The titles exhort one to "Make a cross on the first thing you see." The image is a set of concentric circles, then a pair of clasped hands. "Make a cross before it leaves you." The hands open in a gesture of offering. A blindfolded man moves tentatively against a grid of horizontal stripes. "Make a cross on the mistake." A man runs in circles, in place. "Make a cross off the record." The man is now seen running on a superimposed image of concentric circles, like a huge record album, which revolves under his feet. "Make a cross on the correction." A woman in white pants paces in a circle; a label dangles from her waist and, when the camera zooms in, we see that the label shows the man we saw running in circles earlier. Drum rolls introduce each entry in this list, creating an atmosphere of circus-like spectacle, and building suspense. The format is part survey, part game. As the list continues, one finds oneself prompted to puzzle out the connections between the instruction and the image; because of the powerful format—the rhythmic statement-response that is further divided into word-image—there is a palpable sense of necessary correspondences, even in the most obscure, seemingly arbitrary cases.

The list goes on. The activities recur or vary. The blindfolded man walks along, arms outstretched, in a game of blindman's bluff. Sometimes he falls or knocks things over. The other man repeatedly takes a pack of Tareytons out of his breast pocket. Eventually, when he puts a cigarette to his mouth, the black-and-white picture turns into color, as red flames blaze. A woman's voice cries "NO!" In a later sequence, the man puts a gun to the roof of his mouth, a woman throws laundry out a window, and a woman falls down a flight of red-lit stairs in another flash of color. A notebook falls open, echoing the movement of the hands in the second shot. The blindman stumbles onto two tall stools and falls when he tries to sit between them. One finds oneself responding to the images with words, labels, figures of speech (such as "falling between two stools"); the urge is to complete the word-image statement-response with another response, in words.

After about twenty-five shots, the drumming stops and the rhythm of the film changes. Now the shots are longer; they show more of the actions, and they show them in recognizable, sensible sequences. But as the film becomes more orderly and comprehensible, the actions it depicts become progressively chaotic and violent. The blindman climbs a ladder that falls apart and knocks

over a table set with flowers and glasses of water. The man shoots himself over and over. The woman falls again and again.

White Man Has Clean Hands is structured more like a song or dream than like a narrative. Its meaning is constructed by juxtaposition and association, rather than by causal relations. But if it is a song, it is like a child's made-up ditty that courses from theme to theme, returns obsessively to favorite verses, makes use of arbitrary time divisions, rhymes only intermittently, and, as I have suggested above, revels in gory fantasies as well as in abstract word play.⁴ A feeling of play is engendered by the associations that skip from one level of meaning or appearance to another, by the actions that are rhythmically answered by succeeding but disparate actions, and by the tensions between the literal and figurative meanings of words as well as images. Sometimes this playfulness takes the form of a series of abstractions, codes, and representations. For instance, the circles traced by the running man and the pacing woman are echoed in the concentric circles, which we can understand as a record, and then the circles later appear in a drawing tacked to a wall. Color shots are reserved for danger: fire and falling down stairs. When in one color shot we see two red buckets, we read them as fire buckets because of the code. A person standing in the buckets raises one foot, which is coated with a black liquid. This odd image is answered a few shots later when, in a black-and-white image, the blindman plunges his hands into two glasses of water (recalling the film's title). At the end of the film, the camera comes to rest on the two glasses of water standing on the floor in their original position, despite the fact that the blindman has just knocked them off the table. Their symmetry echoes that of the two red buckets and also that of the two stools. Another movement-rhyme is that of the opening of the clasped hands and of the spiral notebook, an association rich with implications, especially in light of the "clean hands" of the title.

Thus on the one hand, the film creates a feeling of pleasurable nonsense as it manipulates basic elements and categories such as fire and water, stripes and circles, walking and falling, in a vertiginous game that nevertheless displays a rigorous sense of order—a feeling that every image has its place in the developing pattern, every statement has its answer—and the unassailable logic of an insistent rhythm. One is reminded of such children's chants as "Little Sally Saucer/Sitting in the water. . . Ashes, ashes, we all fall down!" On the other hand, there is much in *White Man* . . . that comments on the adult world, beginning with the irony of its title. The glamor of the advertising media is shown as both endlessly repetitive and destructive, a distorting abstraction of reality. More specifically, the film suggests that to smoke is to commit suicide. As in several of Beckman's films, men are associated with both games and violence, while women are shown in several roles: worker, victim, sexual commodity.

Hit and Run (1977) shows how appearances and actions that seem simple or innocent can take on more sinister meanings in new contexts. This is first stated in the title, as I have pointed out above. The opening shots of the film show first a running woman, dressed in turquoise, red, and yellow, then a man, dressed all in white, who swings a white stick. The gaudy colors of her costume and the stylized abstraction of his make them seem toy-like or like cartoon characters; their activities are as innocuous as child's play. However, when the two images are superimposed, we see their synthesis as an ominous event: a woman run-

ning from an attacker. The music changes from an *cappella* high-pitched song to a batting noise and then to percussive, harsh sounds like shots and slaps, underscoring the darkening tone. Later in the film, Beckman, dressed in a red leotard, tights, and red gloves, does a series of sexy poses against a wall. The jazzy guitar music slows down, and the dance seems to change from provocation to surprise. Next we see a man with a long-barreled shotgun. Again, the juxtaposition makes us interpret the woman's action in a new light.

In between these two significant juxtapositions, we see a number of different images and aural rhyming patterns. First, in black-and-white, a man walks down a city street. He walks in an ordinary way, except that his hand forms an O. A child-like voice sings, "Oh oh oh oh/We say." The picture is replaced by a white hollow circle that, following the tempo of the song, grows rhythmically several times. It changes color, then magically is filled with an image of a domestic scene, again gayly colored, like a cartoon version of reality or an illustration from a children's book. A man and a woman play a game at a dinner table. He sits at the table and repeatedly drops a white plate. Every time he drops it, she, standing behind him, spins in place. When the plate breaks, a new sequence begins. Four images—white animated circles; a pair of jumping, sneakered feet; stripes of light; a gloved hand—alternate in rhythmic patterns, accompanied by snatches of song, drumbeats, and brittle, syncopated clatters. The ten shots in this sequence play out ten different permutations of sound and image, building and breaking suspenseful motifs. It is as if the forward motion of the film's theme were interrupted by a central section of pure play with key elements from its iconography, in much the same way that a melodic line in jazz may be suspended for a section of pure improvisation. But this nearly abstract section of pure play also harks back to the title of the film, since the action of the white circles is to hit the ground, while the feet enact an ornamented version of a run. In the final sequences of the film, a pair of feet treads steadily across the floor of a barren loft, leaving small black-and-white drawings of houses instead of footprints in its wake. The image is a pun: the feet leave "tract" homes instead of tracks, Beckman's first use of the idea of subdivision. The feet then step into three pairs of white circles and, as a foot leaves each circle, it flies upward out of the frame, not only reversing the downward flight of the circles in the central section of the film, but also echoing in its rhythm the hesitations and disappearances of the musical accompaniment.

As in *White Man Has Clean Hands*, the images in *Hit and Run* evoke many ambiguous meanings. In one view, the film is a series of game-like maneuvers, as shapes, colors, sounds, and motions are set into sprightly relations of opposition, imitation, contrast, and statement-response. The combination of recognizable objects into abstract formal patterns, in which one image or act calls another into being with all the appearances of causality but without narrative meaning imbues the chain of images with an odd combination of inevitability and arbitrariness, giving the film the look, even the structure, of a game. The bright colors add to the antic, homespun tone. And the domestic images—the man and woman at the table as well as the house-footprints—lodge the rest of the disparate, at times dangerous elements in safe and comfortable frame. As in many folktales, the dangers and darkness of the world beyond hearth and home are hedged about with memories or symbols of cozy domesticity. The result is

not a sugarcoated version of a tale of hardship and suffering, but rather, an account of the world made conceivable by its mix of horror and pleasure, the unimaginable and the mundane, the serious and the frivolous, and made wieldy by schematic abstractions of cultural categories. Another view of the film would suggest a serious analysis of sex roles in which women are seen as playful, innocent, and domesticized, while men are seen as violent, even in their sports and games. Yet, as I have suggested, these two views are not necessarily irreconcilable, for very often even the most abstract, nonsensical-seeming children's games and tales in fact, on close examination, clearly reflect and even effect various stages of socialization of gender roles. It might be argued that *Hit and Run* takes a feminist position in this regard. But to do so would be to attribute a stronger political critique to the work and a more ironic tone than is actually there. Rather than staking out a doctrinaire feminist position, Beckman seems here to be commenting on the ways in which cultural expressions such as games carve out stereotypical roles because they abstract and exaggerate social relations.

We Imitate; We Break-Up (1978) is about two different kinds of imitation: the simple process of copying actions (mimicry) and the more complex, analytic processes of abstraction and representation. The film grows directly out of Beckman's interest in the writings of the psychologist Jean Piaget and his views on the acquisition of language, on the importance of sensory-motor activities in developing pre-language symbolic functions, and on imitation as a key element in the development of human intelligence. Piaget isolates six stages in the development of imitation in children prior to the acquisition of language; this developmental process is linked to the process of representation, so that by the sixth stage imitation takes place at two levels of representation: that of concepts or abstract schemata, and that of images or symbols, both of which appear in the child's development simultaneously with speech and the change of sensory-motor intelligence into representation and conceptualization.⁵ Beckman has subsumed these six stages under two larger stages: in the first, imitation consists of simple mimicry, and in the second, it takes place through symbolic representation.

In the first section of the film, Beckman, dressed in a school-girl's outfit, imitates the movements of Mario, a pair of white constructed legs suspended by strings. The opening title tells us: "Mario and I are equal. At first we imitate each other." The legs walk into the camera frame, then Beckman walks into the frame and turns to face the camera with a triumphant smile. Mario taps a foot and lifts a leg, then Beckman turns a sequence into a little dance, to the accompaniment of a tinkly piano tune. Presently it is Beckman who turns a cartwheel; when Mario imitates her, the camera takes on his point of view and the entire room revolves. After Beckman and Mario play a ballgame that combines kickball, dodge, and basketball, their friendship sours. She bounces the ball against the puppet-legs and runs away, while on the soundtrack a girl's voice sings, "Mario's against me. He chases me." Drum rolls underscore the ominous, suspenseful sequence that follows, as Beckman carries an orange duffle bag, while a voice-over song says, "He's acting like I've got the loot." Later she repeatedly runs toward the camera, falls and runs, falls and runs.

The second section of the film shows a stream of rapidly changing, symbolic

imagery. A white door appears, opens, closes, and revolves. A figure in white plays a bowling game with a white ball and white chairs (instead of pins), then carries a pile of shiny, gaudy boxes or blocks of different shapes and colors. We understand these as verbal images for the mental processes of breaking down and building concepts. We see a boxer, a stage, Beckman perkily aiming her rear end at the camera, a spoon, a clown holding the spoon, a title that states "This is your share of trouble," women, and a cake. The images prompt all sorts of verbal associations and rhymes, such as moon/spoon. Beckman runs toward a goal, but suddenly we see the boxer, who is now a runner, bursting through a curtain of crepe-paper streamers. Again, one understands this physical action as mental action, as if the mind were rushing toward the formation of an idea; the burst through the goal is equivalent to the proverbial lightbulb over a comic-book character's head, and signals a "breakthrough." Next we see objects that stand for other objects, a correspondence shown through magical transformations, such as white eyeglasses that become steering wheels as a helmeted figure sits down to guide them, while footage of a rushing train flashes on a screen above them. It is the context that gives the objects meaning, just as words are only sounds until they are combined with other words in appropriate patterns to form meaningful utterances. White drawings of boxes turn into the colorful, three-dimensional boxes seen earlier. Other actions and objects appear in a number of variations, as if the camera were making visible the operations of a mind endlessly assimilating reality and repackaging it as a series of abstractions.

Now we see a headless figure on the stage against a backdrop that is a glowing circle—part mask, part Halloween pumpkin, part moon. It is a typical Beckman image, a recombination of several elements into a single, hard-to-define synthesis that juxtaposes childish innocence to subterranean malevolence. The reference to Halloween, with its mythic, demonic substratum barely masked by its surface of sweet childish pranks, intensifies the cosmic ambiguities that Beckman calls into play on many levels in all her films; so does the chilling image of a headless body that on a gut level disturbs us, but on an intellectual level symbolizes the split between sensory-motor and conceptual activities that is the subject of the film. The circle sways, and the figure throws the mask's teeth out of the circle. We see that they are the colored blocks. The blocks migrate across the frame and rearrange themselves to form the windows and doors of a play house. Finally an invisible figure, of which we see only the bowtie and the drumsticks it wields, drums a tattoo, while the colored blocks again migrate, this time to form a face. The interchangeability of house and face is another aspect of the fantastical, child's-eye view quality of Beckman's work, in which conceptual correspondences—in this case, the connotation of domesticity, intimacy, comfort, and identity—have the magical power to change physical appearances.

We Imitate; We Break-Up seems to be not only about mental processes, but also about the social meanings play has for children. Here a relationship of cooperation and equality, expressed through mutual play, becomes competitive, antagonistic, and destructive. But these dynamics are negotiated through the symbolism of play, which provides a free realm in which various skills may be rehearsed and tested without fear of failure and where, further, violence may be indulged in without lasting repercussions. The ease with which the break-up occurs—the flight, which is transformed into a mere running race, and then the

abrupt shift of subject to the imagery that prompts verbal associations in the second part of the film—as well as the fact that Mario is, literally, a construction, suggest that the relationship depicted here is that of the imaginary playmate that appears suddenly in the lives of many children. The imaginary playmate occupies an important role in the child's fantasy life, provides material for stories, and fulfills the necessary role of co-actor in what would otherwise be solitary games. But then, having satisfied certain needs, the playmate disappears as suddenly as she/he appeared, without regret on the part of the child, who is ready to move on to new stages of play, usually involving real children as partners.⁶

The Broken Rule (1979) is more concise in terms of its action. It draws a contrast between a woman who hangs laundry from an old-fashioned revolving clothesline and a group of men who play a relay race. At first, their race involves pulling laundry down from the clothesline, but then the action moves to a blacktop outdoors at night, where the men line up in two teams, form huddles, run to and from a lit screen, and pass yellow briefcases over their heads and under their legs. One man always makes a mistake and breaks the rules of this strange game. He fails in his attempt to break through the intertwined arms of the opposite team; he passes the briefcase over when it should have gone under; he drops the briefcase as he runs along the playing field. Like Harold Lloyd, he is an incorrigible schlemiel. Meanwhile, a group of women cheerleaders appears. Lights flash on and off as they shout "Compete! Compete!" into lighted megaphones. As the relay race progresses, a song underscored by rhythmic clapping and drumming eggs the runners on; the chant ascends to a climax as the men reach their goals. Finally, the men run around the clothesline of the earlier shots, which has migrated to the blacktop to appear in front of the lit screen. Now the rules of the game shift again. This time, the men take turns switching hats and briefcases. A woman waves a red kerchief in an image that fluctuates between approval and dismissal, symbolically indicating a winner and saying goodbye. Finally vertical panels with the image of a man in a suit running with a large briefcase alternate with red panels containing a black silhouette of a man—a target figure.

As with Beckman's other films, *The Broken Rule* sets up shifting meanings and correspondences. When men take over the activity that was a woman's (handling laundry), the activity changes social meaning—from work to play. When later the game switches between running toward a goal to switching hats and briefcases, it seems as though the men are no longer involved in playing a game, but have entered a work mode. Even so, their motions are as nonproductive as play; thus, their work is shown as lacking in seriousness or significance. By the final series of shots, we have come to equate the game with the stereotypical American ratrace, in which the women stand at the sidelines to cheer on their men, who from boyhood are preoccupied with competitive sports that merely serve as a training ground for the rushed, goal-oriented, competitive life of the American businessman. The slipperiness of the metaphor creates a sense of the marvelous, since one thing (play) stands for its opposite (work). This irony is possible because, depending on the context, games and sports can be considered either work or play. A sense of the marvelous also stems from the folklore imagery: the idyllic colors and sounds (including bird songs) of the opening scene, when the woman is hanging her wash; the man all in white, who

hangs up his wash, prompting the woman to gaze at him and stroke her laundry tenderly; the beginning of the men's game, in which each takes down laundry that matches the color of his clothing (orange, green, or white); the clapping, drumming, and chanting of the relay race section; the waving of the red kerchief. Beckman does not draw on any specific folklore tradition; rather, she creates new forms of songs, chants, games, costumes, and rules and symbols, all of which are arranged in patterns that recall the archetypal characters and functions of folk and children's lore.

Out of Hand (1980) is Beckman's most magical and mythic film, making use of her immediately recognizable stylistic elements—the superimpositions and animations, the juxtapositions of "real" objects with their abstractions, the bright colors and simple, toy-like shapes, the use of songs to supply information, the nighttime setting—in a structure that comes close to a narrative about a quest. A boy is dressed all in white; he lies on a grid of white stripes. The next image is that of a white, stately house, all its windows alight, against a black sky. As the camera moves in and we hear voices singing "Stea-dy. Stea-dy," the front door of the house buckles and bursts. The imagery recalls that of recent commercial horror films. Next we see a green door barred by red strips, an officer with a flashlight whose large warm hand beckons, and a circle studded with five brightly colored blocks that revolve under a white stick. All of this is accompanied by a steady, percussive, brittle beat.

Suddenly the noise changes to a loud clunking sound and the boy is surrounded by the boxes, now open, changing colors, and each containing the eagle previously seen over the door of the white house. The eagles are now alive. Two men break through the green door. The boy shudders and wakes up. A title reads: "Something is missing. Something still lingers in the house he left behind." We see the boy running toward the house, which floats in the dark, to the sound of loud, ominous footfalls—even though he runs past leafy trees, down a dirt path, in sneakered feet. A second title reads: "He does not know where he put it, and he does not know exactly what it is." We see the image of the clock-like object again, but this time the blocks are white and the disc black. To a repetitive incantation of the phrase, "Where is it?," a sequence of images unrolls. We see a paintbrush, a toolbench, a red shirt, a shovel, a blue toy house, the white house, and a yellow rocking horse. It is as if the boy is consulting a mental catalog in his search for the unknown object. He puts on the red shirt, as though it were a magic mantle. He takes the clock off the wall and arranges the colored blocks and the yellow suitcase so that at their center is a five-sided, coffin-shaped hole. The white stick moves from one block to another, while voices sing "This . . . this . . . this . . . this . . ." The next sequence shows us what these blocks stand for by virtue of their colors: a large yellow trunk, the blue house, and the red toolbench with its tools.

The boy bends over the yellow trunk, takes out various objects, and throws them away over his shoulder. We see them hurtling forever through infinite space. When he finally takes out the yellow rocking horse and throws it away, it returns like a boomerang and hovers near him. He is attracted to it, a state made literal by the next image, in which a large blue magnet pulls the boy. The child-like quality of Beckman's style is evident here in the pleurably crude, homemade look of the objects. As in children's pretend play, what is important is the concept behind the construction and the graphic, diagrammatic shape of

the symbolic, rather than complex details of realistic representation. When a child makes a pencil stand for, or "become" a soldier, it is enough that certain qualities (e.g., uprightness, rigidity) are shared by both; the child has no need to supply the pencil with a face or a uniform. Like the flimsy white puppet legs that stand for Mario in *We Imitate; We Break-Up*, the magnet, the blue house, and various other objects in *Out of Hand* are magical and meaningful exactly because they are so obviously figments. The boy picks up the horse and, mesmerized, rocks it. This action is intercut with a series of images involving a white steering wheel and the white stick (now functioning as a windshield wiper). With each succeeding image, the blurred shapes on the windshield come into focus—until we perceive that they are tiny replicas of the blue house. Like a video game, the screen above the steering wheel scans a landscape populated with graphic symbols. Next the screen simulates an accident in which the "car" runs into a white fence. The boy throws away the horse. The windshield/screen shows the blue magnet, and the boy turns to the blue house. Once again, the imagery depicts a mental process: the boy reaches deep into the fog of his consciousness and gradually focuses on the object of his quest.

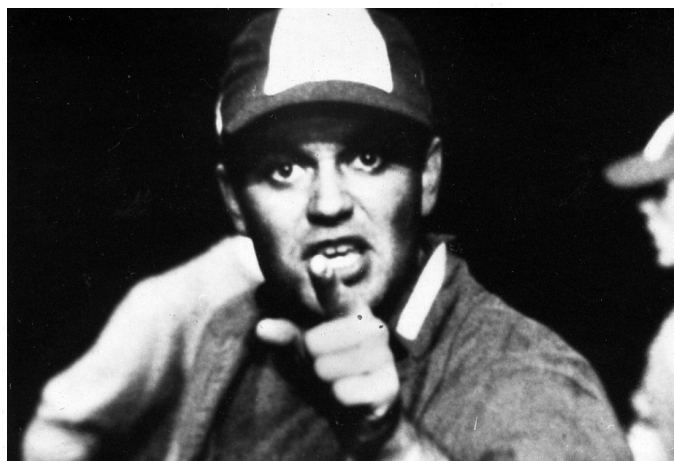
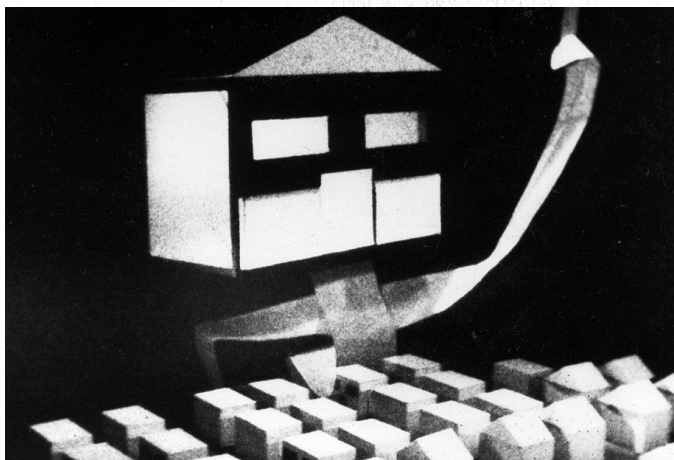
But before he enters the house, he must explore the red toolbench. It is here that he meets what we can only interpret as his second set of archetypal obstacles or trials, required of a folktale hero, before his third attempt to reach his goal. Over the toolbench a red fan revolves, suspended from the ceiling. Each of its blades is shaped like a coffin. A battle ensues, in which the boy, after performing a dance over the trunk, seems to let loose the tools and the blocks and suitcases in a fusillade against another officer, who blows a whistle and wields a red shield. The boy takes the door of the blue house for his shield. The officer directs the flow of objects like traffic, nodding to the blocks but putting a halt to the tools. A song that begins with the dance over the trunk slowly builds its message, from "Gotta get a . . ." to "Got to get home." Now objects are divided into two piles: a blue one and a yellow one. The image seems to stand for a mental process of classification. The whistle blows as the boy reaches for the yellow pile. The officer's hand beckons him to the blue house. "Con-concentrate!" singing voices admonish. The boy's action seems to stand for the making of a decision. "Take a note of it!" the voices advise. Now the boy again dances over the trunk, alternating hands as he reaches into it, while a song describes his action: "Dip, dive, go deep into it. I go deep into it." He takes a shovel and looks at the blue house, which is now filled with light that casts a reflection on the floor and refracts again, as if through water, in pale veins on the house's facade. "Look! Look! Look!" the voices urge.

Now the boy begins the final stage of his quest. He looks through the arch of the house, which is now a furnace. His hand, held up to the bright light from within, alternates with the image of the shield that had been the door covering the arch. A heartbeat sounds. Then, as if the point of view had shifted to looking out from inside the blue house, we see the silhouette of the shield with the white house at night superimposed on it. The boy reaches into the arch, but looks blinded by the light. As he reaches into the arch, a woman's head grasps his arm, which instantly turns into a red baton. There is a bifurcation of function of the two arms and hands: the right hand, extending, explores and the left hand, retracting, protects. Drums and cymbals play marching-band music, and as voices sing "Let it slip, pass over," we see, inside the house, three enchanted

majorettes, with hips, legs, and booted feet in a row, but with only red revolving fans for upper bodies. We hear the sound of a motor and see the white house, with three red fans revolving in front of it on the lawn. The house backs up until it is miniscule. The final image shows the boy's hand grasping the handle of his shield: a small version of the blue house/furnace. Beckman explains, "He thought he would find it with the exploring arm—but it was always close at hand."⁷

Out of Hand is magical for a number of reasons. It combines and condenses formats and images from both myths and children's fantasies. Its rhetoric is sophisticated, creating metaphors for consciousness, memory, and symbol-making processes, but at the same time it is basic and child-like. The yellow trunk is, on the one hand, a metaphor for the mind, like David Hume's idea that the mind is "a heap or collection of different perceptions."⁸ On the other hand, the shifting viewpoint of the camera turns the trunk into a gateway for another universe, peopled by toys, tools, and other objects, in which the guardian is another incarnation of the child himself (Paul McMahon plays both the boy and the second officer in the film). Both the trunk and the blue house are thresholds from the ordinary world to the imaginary world, which figure in many children's stories, from C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* (especially *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*) to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*. As in such stories, objects here have animistic powers; for instance, they move by themselves. The double imagery of the house suggests a psychoanalytic interpretation, as does the fact that the boy-hero is played by a grown man. That is, the object of the hero's quest is self-knowledge—the blinding light—which he can only reach by returning to the "house" that stands for his childhood and by confronting the various powers, forces, and desires that lurk in that otherwise distant, closed realm. And this theme, of course, is essential to great epics and the most banal of children's tales both. There is, further, the imagery of the haunted house, again susceptible to psychoanalytic interpretation: the boy's task is ultimately to battle the satanic majorettes, half-human (half-woman) and half-machine, who simultaneously seduce him and turn him into an object. Finally, the underlying magical effect is that the boy creates not only the fantastic worlds within these mundane objects, but even "reality" itself, out of a few colored blocks; but although he has brought them into being, they assume lives of their own, beyond his control.

You the Better (1983) uses a 16mm format to expand on the themes and effects of Beckman's earlier work. Not only are the special effects more complex, including insets, superimpositions, and animation, but also Beckman uses dialogue for the first time. The use of the technologically slicker gauge fits the content of the film, for although Beckman's preferred structure remains that of the game (rather than the narrative), the film is about game strategies in realms that are far removed from the homemade tone of the 8mm films: gambling and capitalist expansion. Yet, in keeping with the style of her oeuvre so far, Beckman uses play in every sense to shape her message—using one thing to stand for its opposite; using one meaning of a word to stand for another meaning; constructing verbal images that function like puns to reverberate with meanings that are simultaneously linguistic and visual, literal and figurative; and mixing types of games to create hybrids with new rules. The result is a satisfying, even



You the Better by Ericka Beckman

delightful slipperiness of meaning, a mental vertigo induced by the changefulness of contexts and rules in regard to a given word or object. For instance, the film opens with a song and animation sequence about subdivisions. As in certain TV ads, a matter with serious implications is made to look like fun in its mock-childish way: we see houses spreading—finally, marching—to cover every inch of space, until there is no space left, to the tune of a perky song with youthful voices urging “Subdivide!” At one point, as the houses revolve in what looks like an intoxicating dance, the subdivision’s crossroads become a body, topped by a large house that becomes a face, and given hands that gesticulate to illustrate the song, which we now perceive as emanating from the house-man-construction. “The house” as commodity, as community, as home base, as a body or face, as the management of a casino, as the audience in a theater, and as a disco⁹ is central to the gyrating meaning of the film. So is the act of spinning, as if the film itself, making use of various images of turntables, roulettes, and other circular motions, were a giant wheel.

Another instance where meaning pivots takes place at the end of the subdivision song. The voices ask how it is possible to go on subdividing when it seems there is no place else to expand, then suggest an answer. “Points! in the distance. Points! on the land. Points! make it possible/To expand.” We see an endless rows of yellow dots stretching out from the little houses that form a grid over the black ground. But then the song shifts to another meaning of the word “points,” observing that playing games creates these points. The rest of the film shows two different games played by two teams in blue uniforms. They use a bright yellow ball, recalling the yellow points expanding the subdivision. The yellow circles are repeated on their backs, where three black circles on top of the yellow circle make the insignia look like a cross between a bowling ball and the ubiquitous smiling face from the logo “Have a nice day!” As the first team begins to play on a huge roulette wheel, coins tumble onto either a red or a green outline of a house, recalling the houses and hotels of the game Monopoly. The game is like a machine, manufacturing points, and shown in juxtaposed shots as equivalent to a man sitting at a turntable dealing cards and a blue spiral figure, like an incandescent Michelin ad, that spins and seems to generate more yellow balls for the thrower; a roller coaster delivers chips to a house, like a mining chute. Hortatory songs suggesting teams of cheerleaders urge the players to “Get to the top! Don’t stop!” One player breaks into the center of the wheel. As in the recent movie *Tron*, he is suddenly inside the game and the inanimate object that was the game is anthropomorphized. He plays a game that is part bowling, part football, part discus-throwing. At first his shots hit the red or green houses that revolve around him, but then they go beyond the circle to land in the lighted window of the house in the distance. The other members of the team try to catch the ball and complain that he should stick to the red and green houses as his targets. Finally, the game ends because the plays have run out. “Chance makes it so that/Things can’t just go back/To where they once came from,” the ghostly cheerleaders sing. The song, using “things” in both a specific and a general, idiomatic sense, shifts levels of meaning and also inaugurates a new section of the film. Now a new game begins on a new court, shaped like the familiar house diagram with a yellow hoop like a basketball goal at the peak of its “roof.” The players dribble, pass, and throw the ball through the

hoop. "Take a shot/Put a house on a lot," the voices chant. The players take turns facing the camera to make testimonials about their style of playing, as though the game were interlarded with interviews or deodorant ads. The game is not exactly a basketball game, however. As each shot is made, a cartoon cowboy and a clatter of golden coins appear on the screen, and drawling voices sing, "Hands up! Put your hands up! Give me your/Better give me more." We are drawn to interpret the game as partly a one-armed bandit. As each shot is made, the basket moves, pole and all, away from the court and then returns, making the players look as though they are being released from a box deeper into the game. The players take turns cutting capers under the basket. In the final shot of the film, we see a house that magically turns into a cartoon face, and the gameboard wheel spins out a face.

The ambiguity of the film begins with its title and with the opening lines of the first song heard in the film, "Things can only change for the better." The audience is both bettor—since the implication is that the audience is placing bets on the outcome of the game and taking sides with first one team, then the next—and better, in the sense that the audience sees the game from the outside, from various points on the revolving circle, from the vantage point with the most information, and also in the sense that "things will get better"—the false optimism gambling propagandizes. Beckman makes fun of this superior notion of the audience at the same time that she pokes fun at complacency in general, for at the same time that the lyrics of the song seem optimistic, they can be read equally as a bitter submission to fate: "Things can only change—for the bettor [and not for the team]."

I have already referred to the multiple, contradictory meanings of the house in *You the Better*, as well as to the ways in which Beckman makes metaphors by letting one thing stand for its opposite or for something close to, but not identical to it. In *The Broken Rule* work and play were poetically conflated. In *You the Better*, Beckman makes syntheses not only of game forms, but also of game functions, creating a delightfully nonsensical situation in which one class of games is explained in terms of another class. For example, Roger Callois has divided games into four categories: competition, chance, simulation, and vertigo. (Within these categories, the form range along a spectrum from joyful improvisation [paidia] to a "taste for gratuitous difficulty" [ludus].) Brian Sutton-Smith, however, has made a different classification system, according to social function and whether the outcome of the game depends on skill, strategy, or chance. Both of these systems, as well as other recent theories of play, are useful in thinking about Beckman's films.¹⁰ In *You the Better*, Beckman begins with a situation that has nothing to do with play—the construction of houses. In fact, this situation is normally considered a typical work situation. Beckman transforms work into a game, but a game that shifts between competition, chance, strategy, mimicry, and vertigo, as each type of game becomes yet another representation of the original situation, in an interlocking chain of metaphors. The result, in this film as well as in Beckman's earlier films—all of which are shaped by play and game structures—is an oxymoronic vision of the very workings of the mind, in which the most profound issues of thought and experience are made concrete and comprehensible once they are cast into the exuberant, antic terms of child's play.

Notes

1. Interview with Ericka Beckman, New York City, 22 June 1982, and subsequent conversations.
2. Interview with Beckman.
3. For an explication of verbal images, see Noël Carroll, "Language and Cinema: Preliminary Notes for a Theory of Verbal Images," *Millennium Film Journal* 7/8/9 (Fall/Winter 1980-81): 186-217.
4. On children's word play, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, ed., *Speech Play* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), and the many works cited in its extensive bibliography.
5. See Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, trans. C. Gattegno and F. M. Hodgson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962).
6. Ernestine H. Thompson and Tanya F. Johnson discuss the cultural functions of the "Imaginary Other" in "The Imaginary Playmate and Other Imaginary Figures of Childhood," *Studies in the Anthropology of Play: Papers in Memory of B. Allan Tindall*, ed. Phillips Stevens, Jr. (West Point, New York: Leisure Press, 1977), pp. 210-222.
7. Conversation with Beckman, 13 June 1983.
8. David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, I, 4, 2.
9. "The house" has been used recently in disco music and rapping music to refer both to discotheques and to the community dancing together at a party or disco. "Rock the house" is a favorite rap expression. This domesticization of the public dance space is a key element of urban teenage culture. See, for instance, Sally Banes, "A House Is Not a Home," *Village Voice*, 13 April 1983, p. 77. Beckman's music is related both rhythmically and imagistically to rap music and punk music and her visual style is also related (but not, I would argue, derived from or identical) to the two streams of youth culture associated with these two kinds of music—the world of wild style graffiti and the punk or new wave style—which have recently begun to fuse.
10. See Roger Callois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York: Schocken Books, 1979; reprint of 1961 Free Press edition); various works by Brian Sutton-Smith, especially *The Folkgames of Children* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press; American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series, vol. 24, 1972); and the essays in Stevens, ed., *Studies in the Anthropology of Play*.