

# The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

## THE VIDEO PROGRAM, THE DEPARTMENT OF FILM THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

A "Video Viewpoints" Special Presentation  
"Through a Video Window: Technology in the 1990s"

This Monday evening lecture series looks at art and technology, and examines the beginnings of new art forms powered by the computer. Each evening an artist and a critic engage in focused conversation about the interaction between art and technology, humanizing complex issues, and providing insight into some of the new multi-media forms currently under development.

May 10

### Playing with Technology

Artist Ericka Beckman with David Rosen, communications media consultant.

As an introduction to her work, Ericka Beckman will begin with a short excerpt from Cinderella (1987), her 16mm film that uses 'game' as a narrative device. Cinderella presents several versions of the popular story and compresses them into game motifs. After a few trials, the female player discovers how to command and order these motifs in a narrative sequence that releases her from the confines of the Cinderella myth itself.

Hiatus, Beckman's current work-in-progress, features a woman playing a VR interactive game with logged-on game players and game identities, which confuse and trick her into consciousness. In this game, MADI, a female player, enters Level Two in an 'identity game'. (In Level One, the player has been asked to create a habitat that she feels most comfortable in, that she has complete control over and which empowers her. MADI creates a 'virtual garden' and a construct of herself (WANDA) to move around in this world.)

MADI leaves her garden to enter Level Two -- a place in the game called "The Frontier" inhabited by a community of Indians who challenge her to build her habitat there, but in balance with their existing culture. WANDA attempts to grow her garden in a barren field. Since she can only understand how to build something using code, and since she is only identified with her technological self, she makes a lot of mistakes, missing valuable clues provided by the Indians. They teach her how to use her technological power for the benefit of the community and not for her own gain. She is a good problem solver and creative, but has to learn how to listen, absorb, and react. And she has to learn about real time and what kinds of conflicts exist in nature. She brings a 'digital' scarecrow to her fields that succeeds in keeping the vermin away, and provides the valuable time her seeds need to grow to produce fields of food.

Because the scarecrow is a digital device, it becomes an open channel, a code that someone can hack into, a telephone pole to the outer world. WANG, an intruder, logs on, interrupts the game, and inserts his world blindly into her coordinates. Not only does he destroy her field, but his expanding architecture threatens to overtake her garden, the reservoir of all her power. Since WANG's world is huge and slow to render, she has time to turn this sad adventure around, but only if she can get more power from her garden. In her search to find a remnant of the garden, she finds something more valuable, how to creatively block WANG's expansion and preserve her freedom.

Hiatus is presented in visual samples of some of the characters and scenes. A "virtual reality" sketch of WANG's Palace, is incorporated into the work-in-progress. This 3d computer model was built in CAD, rendered and modelled on AVS software, and runs on VR software written for the DEC Alpha system 5,000 workstation.

Ericka Beckman

Ericka Beckman is a film and video maker, and photographer. In her work, she has combined video, film, sculpture, and painting in the exploration of games as social and political structures. Her experimental, feminist film, Cinderella, was heralded for its innovative form, based on a pinball game. Beckman's film Hiatus, presently in production, utilizes the newest game forms as social critique.

...A work of art has the same relationship to an artist as a dream to a dreamer. It is both of them, in an empirical sense, and about them -- as a means by which one can "see" the dreamer, and a means by which the dream is revealed beyond self-conscious control. The dream, the work of art -- both are means for self-reflection and mutual recognition. They provide symbolic means by which the artist and the dreamer exist simultaneously as subject and object -- and, thus, overcome the dualism endemic to reified rationality.

In Foucault's sense, a game, if played correctly, can do much the same thing. It can enable the players to consciously surrender to the unplanned for, the unanticipated. And the game, like the dream or a work of art, becomes magical. The term is derived from the Magi, priests of the Zoroastrians, who, according to Herodotus, "They have no images of gods, no temples, no alters and consider the use of them a sign of folly,"; and who believed that reality and unreality were the essential elements from which the world was created.

Ericka's work, I believe, is not located at the "boundary" of cinema and interactivity, but rather the boundary of reality and unreality -- a more important and ambiguous place to dwell. It uses the metaphor of the game to suggest a "magical" engagement with myths and media forms. But it seems to be trapped within this duality -- with mythic images that are drawn from the past and can't go beyond themselves to a world that they imagine; and with media that can't meet the challenges she is setting for it.

So is the Pied Piper a Magician or an Artist? Was the "game" he played that of a sorcerer or musician? As memory holds, the Pied Piper was enlisted in the service of a town to help rid it of a plague of rats. Playing his flute, he cast a spell over the rodents and led them to their blissful death. However, when the Piper returned to the town to collect his fee, the mayor refused to pay. Such a violation of the contract -- the most sacred document in all world civilization -- brought the most violent retribution: The Piper again played his magical notes and took as his fee the town's most cherished possession, its next generation.

Both magic and art have the power of transcendence -- to push beyond the boundary of reality and unreality. The Pied Piper was a "dark" magician, a sorcerer who used his powers of transcendence to obliterate the difference of realms, and to blind the rats -- and children! -- of the difference. An artist, having similar powers, would use the transcendence to foster reflection on the difference and thus empower the viewer (be it rat or child) to better navigate the two realms. For artists, the challenge is to employ both mythic images and media (be it linear or interactive) to foster a self-reflective dialogue, but not to obliterate the dialectic game between reality and unreality.

David Rosen

David Rosen is a writer and media consultant. He specializes in marketing and business development for the communications media. Rosen recently served as Director of International Marketing for Commodore International where he supervised the launch of the world's first consumer CD Rom player. Author of How Five First Feature Films Came to Market, Rosen is currently writing an article about the merging of computer worlds in the Bay area.

This series is co-organized by Barbara London, Assistant Curator, Video, Department of Film and Regina Cornwell, a critic specializing in the area of art and technology, with the assistance of Sally Berger, Assistant, Video, Department of Film.

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