



## Art in America

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### Ericka Beckman at Kunsthalle Bern

Despite a 30-plus-year filmmaking career that has earned her numerous awards as well as inclusion in various art biennials and film festivals—and the admiration of Jean-Luc Godard—Ericka Beckman has not received the international art world recognition one would expect. The retrospective *Works 1978-2012*, however, firmly established her as one of the most important artists from the Pictures Generation still working today.

The exhibition, which occupied all seven rooms of the Kunsthalle Bern, featured her best-known work, *Super 8 Trilogy* (1978-80), several recent films and two galleries dedicated to her stand-alone photographic installations. Her films have a surrealist character, recalling the early experiments of Fernand Léger, Man Ray, Georges Méliès and Luis Buñuel. Her sets and special effects are handcrafted, and this DIY approach intensifies the dreamlike scenarios she creates, while underscoring the artificiality of the medium. In all her fast-paced, action-oriented films, we see an intense preoccupation with labor, competition and technology as well as other aspects of modernity.

In *Cinderella* (1986), a 30-minute, nonlinear narrative, the title character is situated in what appears to be a medieval workshop making an iron bell inside a forging oven. Suddenly, as if to reward her labor, a package appears with a ball gown in it. As per the fairytale, she must be home by midnight. Beckman uses 1980s video game imagery (think *Tron*) to place her heroine in a battle against the clock. A cardboard clock tower appears repeatedly in the background, as if haunting her, and, along with the handcrafted video game settings, serves as a metaphor for society's restrictions and requirements, particularly in relation to women. Beckman's *Cinderella* ultimately circumvents this whole construct in a feminist twist when she realizes that she doesn't need to consider the clock at all and that she is free from the prince, the gown and the game. Much of the off-screen sound is provided by a chanting chorus that functions much like that of an ancient Greek play, narrating the story and questioning the characters.

Modernism and its discontents are at the heart of *Switch Center* (2002), which focuses on architecture in the former Soviet bloc. Shot in Hungary in an abandoned water purification plant, *Switch Center* features characters, mostly male, engaged in constant motion: turning levers, climbing up and down the stairs, and vigorously operating various buttons. The clearly choreographed action mocks the absurd, mindless, repetitive processes of industrial production. (A sole female character is the only one, in the end, who seems to be liberated from the confines imposed by Beckman, and by society.) The characters' movements, separated here from a discernible function, become theatrical and dancelike, and, in the context of the architecture, refer to the compromised history of Communism and Soviet-style collectivism. However, post-Soviet societies aim to erase that history through the demolition of this architecture and to replace it with malls, signs of the new world order of unmitigated capitalism. The title of the film is itself symbolic of the switch from one regime to another, embodied as it is in the building's fate.

[The show travels to Le Magasin Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble in February 2014.]

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