



frieze

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Ericka Beckman - Kunsthalle Bern

On the list of the best-known unknown video artists, Ericka Beckman is surely at the very top. Since the 1970s, she's had group and solo shows at institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, she's participated in numerous film festivals and she's collaborated with artists such as Mike Kelley. In a career beginning in the mid 1970s, Beckman's technical and aesthetic experiments in film raised the bar for the medium eliciting laudatory reviews in the New York Times and Art Forum. Yet she doesn't have a Wikipedia entry; nor does she receive so much as a mention in *Videokunst*, Lydia Haustein's expansive survey of the genre published in 2003. One can only hope that Beckman's first institutional retrospective, *Works 1978-2012* at the Kunsthalle Bern, will be the first step in amending this state of partial neglect. That the New York-based artist counts among the greats of her genre is made clear in the exhibition, curated by Kunsthalle director Fabrice Stroun, which will later travel to Le Magasin Centre National d'Art Contemporain in Grenoble. Stroun's survey presents center works from the early stages of the artist's career such as *We Imitate: We Break Up* (1978/2009) and *The Broken Rule* (1979/2010) combined into new installations. These pieces directly and vividly reveal the subtle development in Beckman's aesthetic that transpired in the span of just a few years. For those who find Mike Kelley too morbid, Pipilotti Rist too shrill, John Baldessari too sunny, Bill Viola too pious, and Matthew Barney too sporty, Beckman might just be the missing link. On display in Bern are the artist's recent films (*Tension Building*, 2012, *Switch Center*, 2003), older works (*You the Better*, 1983), and a few drawings and photographs. In *Switch Center* the artist presents workers in a futuristic Hungarian water treatment plant from the Soviet era. In *Tension Building*, animated clips showing an architectural model of an American football stadium are superimposed onto time-lapse videos of an actual stadium. Then there's a 16mm version of the Cinderella fairy tale staged as a surrealistic coming-of-age musical with a feminist touch (*Cinderella*, 1986). Such works reveal a varied set of interests, including cognitive learning processes; the relations between work, free time, sport and architecture; identity development, particularly in women (*Cinderella*); and the simultaneity of chance and control (*You The Better*). In *You The Better*, the implosion of a model modular housing structure quickly gives way to a strictly ordered suburban development plan. Meanwhile, in *Cinderella*, the protagonist shares an insight: 'I'm just the product of all that I've been taught!' Each of Beckman's works has a haptic feel, which isn't only due to the bricolage aesthetic of DIY and punk that characterizes her work. Even today, the artist mostly continues to do without digital technology, working instead with Super-8 and 16mm film, physical models, and time lapse. A number of her significant works date from the 1980s, when technology was transitioning from analogue to the digital age. As such, a few of the animations in *Cinderella* recall the cult film *Tron* (1982), whose producers were able to create a digital scenario primarily with analogue techniques. Beckman, in turn, refers back to elements of the digital in her almost demonstratively analogue-looking imagery. *Cinderella*, for example, is structured into a number of different levels, and text symbols occasionally float through the scenes. The format reflects the artist's interest in the constructivist-structuralist theories of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who saw our relationship to the world as developing along different 'stages' — from sensory-motor intelligence through formal operational intelligence.



Jörg Scheller on Ericka Beckman continued...

The cryptic, dreamlike scenarios in Beckman's work usually frame figures that come across both as familiar and strange: workers turning something, neatly-dressed women playing with a ball, a scarecrow straight out of a horror movie (*Boundary Figures*, 1989). Songs and declamations ring out, offering commentaries on events transpiring as in Greek drama.

The media artist Bjorn Melhus once described his similar (if less musical) work as: 'Fragmentation, destruction, and reconstitution of the known figures, topics, and strategies of mass media.' The same could be said of Beckman's work. It's no surprise, then, that Beckman was also included in the 2009 group show *The Pictures Generation* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Canonical pictures artists like Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince also work in the ambivalent image worlds of media and everyday culture. Yet even they don't achieve the same fascinating tension between theoretical finesse and intuitive — almost naïve — aesthetics found in Beckman's work.