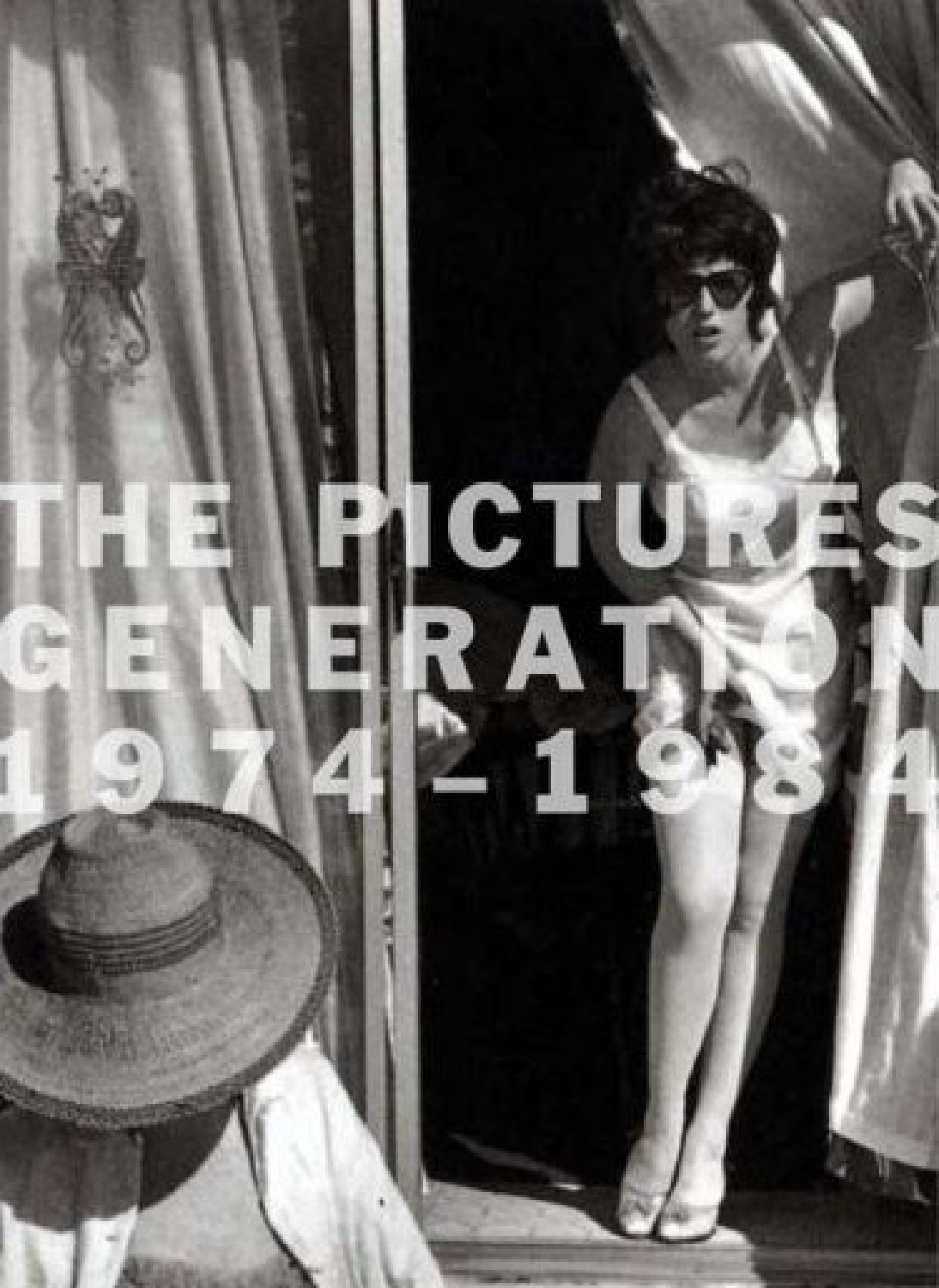
THE PICTURES
GENERATION
1974–1984

moves of the diver in *The Jump* are emblematic of one of his most memorable aphorisms, "The man committing suicide controls the moment of his death by executing a back flip."[14] In trying to wriggle free of gravity, death, or just plain old reification, the diver becomes a surrogate for Goldstein himself, and two previously unknown details about *The Jump* illuminate the artist's "professional situation." When Goldstein was going to London with some frequency in the early 1970s, *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, a new BBC television program showcasing live in-studio performances by rock bands, debuted. Its logo, the rotoscoped *Star Kicker* figure set in a night-sky field of twinkling stars, seen in the credits and on the wall behind the presenter, became a familiar feature of British television.[15] Whether Goldstein saw the TV program or not, his diver is unabashedly indebted to the visual language of Hollywood glitz (the spangles and sparkles having effaced the Nazi origins of the footage, of which the casual viewer was unaware). What Goldstein did was to hijack and repurpose this language of spectacle culture into a meditation on the relationship between the fear of arbitrariness and randomness that the artist seeks to control,[16] a meta-examination of how ever-advancing visual technologies are always, at bottom, about providing ever more pleasurable, yet narcotizing, scenarios for putting the knowledge of death at bay. That the artist can never escape the culture that ultimately consumes him—the professional situation that Nesbit discerned—was neatly proved for Goldstein before *The Jump* was even finished. Reporting on activities in New York in a November 1977 letter to James Welling, Paul McMahon announced that Optical House, the special-effects shop where the rotoscoping of the Riefenstahl footage was done, had "copied Jack's 'Diver' effect onto a pole vaulter for ABC Olympic coverage for big bucks."[17] Real life had made the point of Jack Goldstein's *The Jump*.

Performing the Image I: Ericka Beckman and Michael Smith

Although Ericka Beckman makes films and Michael Smith is a performer (who also makes drawings and videos), their works are similarly concerned with the relationship between individuals and images and how images structure our perception of ourselves and of reality rather than vice versa. Beckman (fig. 47) started out at CalArts the year after Goldstein, Mullican, Salle, and Welling did. From the beginning, her films were handmade and collaborative, in contradistinction to Goldstein's, which were made with a hands-off professionalism. With the help of others, but primarily on her own, she created an idiosyncratic style notable for the seamless integration of choreography, music, and singing; for the inclusion of sculptural objects that seem to match or exceed her elemental characters in life force; and most of all for a repertoire of homegrown cinematic effects that astonished her colleagues. Those effects harkened back to the modernist cinematic experiments of Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique* (1921) or Hans Richter's *Ghosts before Breakfast* (1928) and prefigured the

advances in visual technology achieved only a few years later in the mass media with the advent of MTV and special-effects blockbusters like *Tron* (although her goal, obviously, was completely different). Early on, Beckman described the overarching subject of her films: "Film is creating a reality 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."[18]

We Imitate; We Break Up (plate 80) is the first part of what is known as Beckman's "Super-8 trilogy," a landmark suite of experimental films created between 1978 and 1980 that is too little known today. Using herself and a rotating cast of artist-friends, such as James Casebere, Mike Kelley, and Paul McMahon, as performers, Beckman intertwined dream recollections of her own childhood with ideas about the cognitive development of children based on the Swiss child psychologist Jean Piaget's theories, in particular, about how we as individuals adapt ourselves to an agreed-upon reality through a process of trial and error. Beckman made and exhibited Super-8 films before 1978, using elemental prop-constructions and homespun special effects (one example, *White Man Has Clean Hands*, was particularly admired by her colleagues). But it was with her Super-8 trilogy, which also included *The Broken Rule* (plate 81) and *Out of Hand* (plate 82), that her abiding interest in how we become who we are was most fully communicated through her own visual language notable for its technical wizardry and poetic narrative.

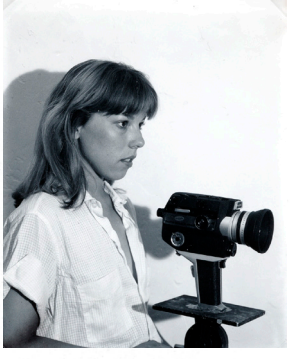

Fig. 47. Ericka Beckman, 1977. Gelatin silver print; 5 x 4 in. (12.7 x 10.2 cm). Photograph by James Welling. Collection of Ericka Beckman

Briefly, *We Imitate; We Break Up* charts the development of its protagonists' identity first through mimicry and then through symbolic representation. The child—played by Beckman dressed up as a little girl but wearing both a skirt and a shirt and tie, which suggests that we are back at that time in her life just before the rules of gender are instilled—struggles to keep up, playing ball with an imaginary friend named Mario (a pair of puppet legs dangling from strings), being chased and falling over repeatedly, and so on.[19] It is instructive to note that Beckman and Matt Mullican were close friends before and during the period when *We Imitate; We Break Up* was made and that Mullican's work from the same moment is similarly epic and intimate, viewing identity formation as the great neglected story that dictates the course of our lives. Their concerns at this moment seem to have locked together conceptually, as Beckman examined the child's arrival at symbol formation and integration into a communally shared reality while Mullican showed the viewer or audience member the internal machinery of his perceptual and cognitive engine.[20]

The split between motor-sensory and conceptual activities is, as the film critic Sally Banes first noted, indeed the subject of *We Imitate; We Break Up*, but Beckman also brings to her films a very affecting form of mnemonic recollection that is as complex in its emotional tenor as a dream, alternating between playful and sad, frenetic and contemplative. When they are seen alongside works made at exactly the same moment by colleagues such as

Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, it also becomes clear how important it was to artists of their generation who were raised on mass media to look for the ways in which the stereotype molds self-image. Through the constructed nature of her films—with their brightly colored, toylike props and their emphasis on rewinding and on going backward, for example—Beckman miraculously conveys the way in which we are always shaped by our experience. Within each work, the kinetically expressive movements of the actors are based on the "task-oriented" choreography of Lucinda Childs and Trisha Brown, for Beckman (as will be seen also to be true of Michael Smith) is primarily concerned with drawing an image in space that unlocks an underlying emotional experience of great poignancy. Another statement by Beckman included on her artist's page in the catalogue for the 1980 *Horror Pleni* exhibition in Milan reads:

> A photograph is the result and reason for such research; it arrests
> the image in the film that says,
> "this is the moment of surprise"
> "this is the precise moment when things went wrong" or
> "this is what I imagined the moment of greatest conflict to be."[21]

That Beckman wears signifiers of both male and female and of child and adult in her costume is another sign that these categories are not clear-cut, innate, and natural at the level of individual subjectivity; instead, the pentimenti of how we became ourselves are made visible by Beckman in all of the stuttering rhythms and repetitions, songs and chants, of her Super-8 films. In the context of their time, Beckman's films are not attempts to define some experience as essentially feminine, but rather to show how the machinery of representation structures all social acculturation and how gender relations are deeply encoded from our earliest days and reinforced with images. This broader concern does not signal disinterest on the part of younger women artists like Beckman in the recent achievements of feminists in the fields of art and criticism, but suggests that they accepted the older generation's findings as given and viewed their confidence in the possibility of liberation with tremendous skepticism. The integration of the self into the group and what may subsequently be left behind are things that, as she shows in her films, can be retrieved and ruminated upon—like the vividly felt dreams that often inspired her images—via the temporal plasticity of film expression, the ability to rewind and recut one's memories that is only available in art.

The idea of failure, of continually trying to keep up with a constantly shifting, internalized sense of "normalcy," unites the seemingly disparate projects of Beckman and Michael Smith. Whereas Beckman's Super-8 films are nearly manic in their pacing and exuberant in their coltish enthusiasm, Smith's performances offer presentations of a persona that combine the "somnambulist" gait and hieratic gestures of actors in contemporary plays

Plates 80–82. Ericka Beckman, *We Imitate; We Break Up*, 1978 (top row); *The Broken Rule*, 1979 (middle row); *Out of Hand*, 1980 (bottom row).

8mm film; color; sound

the dystopian actuality of the present. One of the artist's most haunting images dates near the end of his first decade of work—a hushed meditation on originals and copies, nature and culture, entitled *Arches* (plate 137). The idea that representations have usurped reality had special currency in 1980s America. In *Arches*, Casebere reveals that our dependence on illusion is as old as Plato's Cave.

The Battle of the Bands, the Party Club, and the Beginning of the End of the Fun

"What was really interesting about that moment [in the late 1970s], if anything," David Salle commented at the end of the 1990s, "was something so ephemeral it could hardly be presented in any form. It was best presented at a party in the form of jokes . . . you had to have been there."[64] Like most postcollegiate social circles, the Pictures group was united by a shared set of references and worldview—generational and cultural—that was an exercise in collective self-definition as a form of alienation from the mainstream. Jokes and music are often the way in which these ineffable feelings can momentarily take form, and it was as much camaraderie as art that bonded these artists together.

It is telling that a number of the artists in the present exhibition responded with a "that's not me" to the initial request to participate in a show about the Pictures milieu. Most artists after a while don't like being put into a group, or a group not to their liking, and this usually happens once their careers are in full swing. It may say something about the penetration of careerism into the earliest stages of starting out, when collectors and dealers descend on MFA studios, and about the overwhelming hegemony of the market that the sociability and common cause of the Pictures group seem bittersweet; the art world changed underneath them, and Sherrie Levine's comment that "after 1980, it stopped being fun" must not be taken simply as personal lament but rather as a comment on a phenomenon that still exists today.[65]

The sociability and playful competition of the Pictures group were exemplified by the Battle of the Bands evenings, which were held by Paul McMahon and Nancy Chunn in their shared loft at 135 Grand Street shortly after McMahon left Artists Space, in the summer of 1977, to pursue a career in music. The events grew out of the Pictures artists' get-togethers on Saturdays at Artists Space and encounters most every night at artists' bars downtown, such as Magoo's. Salle and Mullican would come there after a day spent assisting established artists such as Vito Acconci, and Ericka Beckman and Allan McCollum would drift in after their gigs in construction work. Also usually in attendance were Sherrie Levine, Michael Smith, Troy Brauntuch, and McMahon, among others.[66] The Battle of the Bands were raucous competitions in nonmusician musicianship that made the punk bands of the moment seem like virtuosi. The only remaining memento is a photograph of one of the teams—sides were chosen

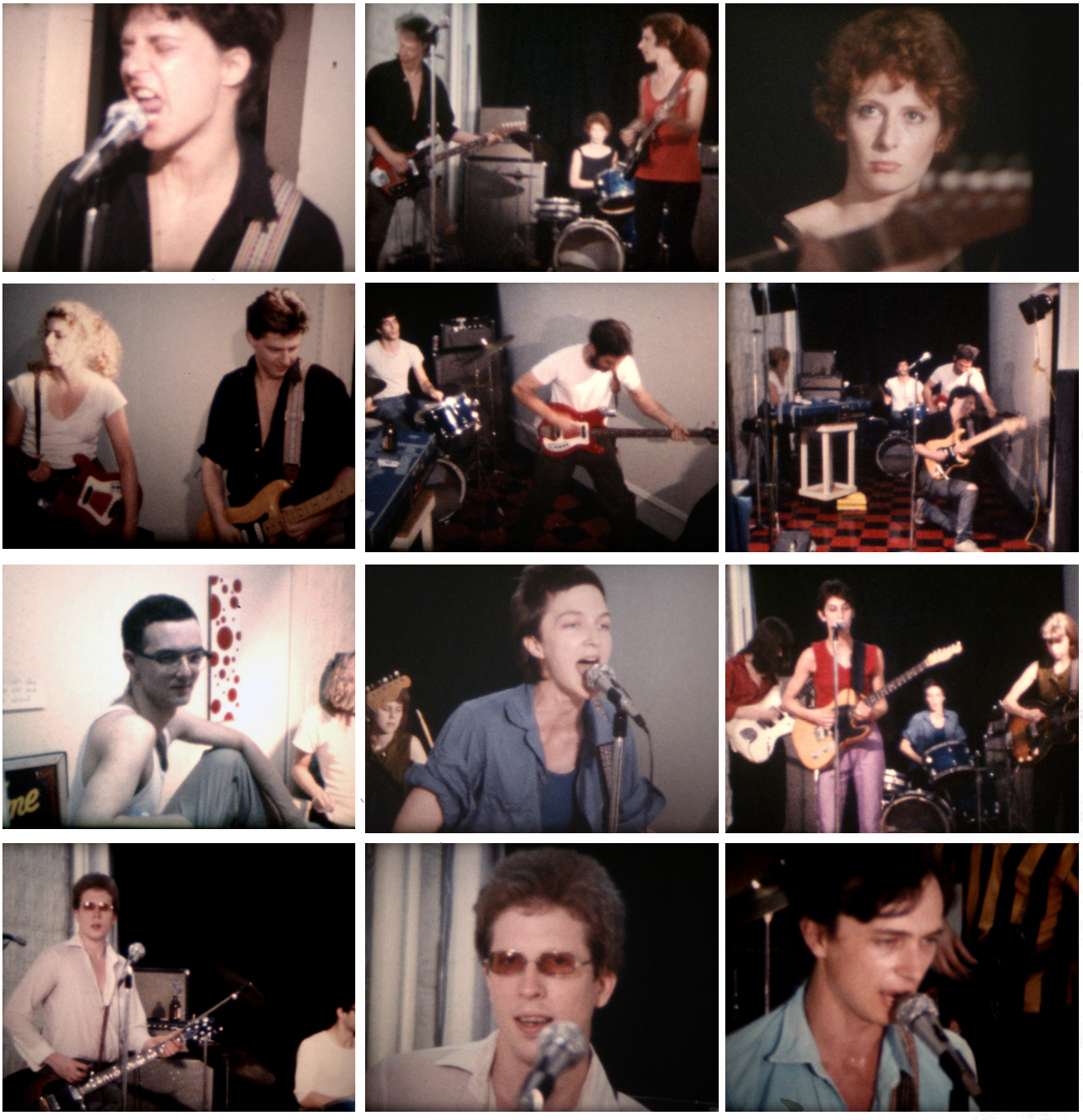

Plate 140. Ericka Beckman, *135 Grand Street, 1979* (excerpts), 1979–2008. Left to right, top row: The Static (Glenn Branca; Barbara Ess, at right; Christine Hahn); second row: Theoretical Girls (Margaret DeWys; Glenn Branca; Jeffrey Lohn, on guitar; Wharton Tiers, on guitar, standing); third row: the filmmaker Scott B.; Ut (Jacqui Ham, on drums; Sally Young); Ut (Karen Achenbach; Nina Canal, singing; Sally Young, on drums; Jacqui Ham); fourth row: Rhys Chatham, left and center; Paul McMahon. 16mm film; color; sound