



HIGH LINE ART

March 2015

Ericka Beckman: Augmented Reality and Cinema Games

We sat down with the artist to discuss her series of videos for High Line Channel 14

High Line Art (HLA): What is the first moving image work you made? How did you start working in the medium?

Ericka Beckman (EB): I started when I was at Cal Arts as a graduate student in the Art Program, under John Baldessari. My early works were simple black and white videotapes, made with ½ inch port-a-pack equipment, of myself performing in a black box theater that I would use late at night. I did these simple physical actions and then filmed them with my Super 8 camera. I would shoot off the video monitor and collage them with a S-8 camera that could rewind the film for multiple exposures. I called these films 'icons' because I was clearly building a body in space. They were a kind of exquisite corpse exercise with the intent of creating a new figure in space.

I went to Cal Arts because of Jack Goldstein. I met him on a visit to Los Angeles in fall of 1973; at the time he was working in L.A. on his 16mm loops, and I identified with his work.

HLA: Film and video are very much collaborative mediums; can you talk about some of your past collaborations and collaborators you've worked with? Can you talk about the difference for you between these collaborative efforts and your more individual work, for example your photographs or installations?

EB: My collaborations include working with Mike Kelley on five projects, Tony Oursler on the exhibition *Kontaktmaschine*, in Leipzig, Germany in 1992, and on a proposal for an unrealized VTR game in 1991. I worked with Dan Graham in the early stages of an animation project that he later produced later with Tony Oursler.

But my real collaborators are composers. Music is key and integral to all my work, and without the ears and talents of a musical person I could not have achieved the right balance between visual and aural rhythms.

HLA: Games are a recurring theme in your work. Can you tell us a bit about where this interest came from? Another influence of yours is the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, who is best known for his theories of cognitive development and genetic epistemology. What is important for you about cognitive development, and how do you explore these ideas in your work?

EB: Coming from a training in the arts, I did not want to make films that shared conventions with any traditional genre, whether dramatic narrative or documentary. Instead I charted my own course through game research, fairy tales, and Jean Piaget's theories about early childhood cognitive development, to create a form of experimental film that uses gameplay as the mode of identification for the audience. I read Piaget's books very loosely, almost with a poetic freedom to just enjoy his tests and his children's responses to his tests. But I also tried to deeply absorb his definition of the successive levels of intelligence leading up to the acquisition of language. It established in me a love of logic. This reading of Piaget's scientific process gave me confidence to build my own logical systems.

What I gained from three years of research into Piaget was the confirmation that language proceeded from a physical act and from understanding of the physics governing the world, and not from objects or representations found in the world. The research confirmed that I could make a cinema of action-based images that could build a vocabulary that the audience would understand, not have to rely on the representation of the real world to ground an experience.



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HLA: Can you talk about the film 'Ballet Mécanique' (1923 - 1924) by Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, and how it came to inspire your film 'Frame UP'?

EB: I went into the project with the plan to make a fake pinball game and, in place of real planning, I embraced chance and experimentation in the gathering of materials and in the editing. The construction site became the pinball back glass this film. I looked at the workers as dancers, I followed with my camera the movement of materials through his space and specifically how they were transported and handled by workers. I looked for various pinball references on the construction site. That meant looking for shafts, for paddles, inclines and sockets.

Editing is where the chance or 'play' aspect was featured. First, I edited the sounds to the images. I put all these synced shots into folders labeled according to the timeline, from the delivery of construction materials to the site to actual steel frame going up. I then turned 'off' the video monitor and cut a sound track from the found sounds. I gave myself the one rule that I would start in unison and then build a separate soundscape for each screen. This allowed me to let go of building a competitive relationship between the two screens. Then I opened the video monitor and took a look at my action cuts.

This first edit governed everything that came after— the graphics, the length of the shots. My second rule was to not rework the first edit.

HLA: The selection of works you made for your High Line Channel 14 program all revolve around architecture, and you have discussed in the past what Vito Acconci calls "the architecture of the self" as one of your influences in your work? What is the relationship for you between the architecture of our built surroundings, the design of virtual reality, and that of the cognitive architectures that we apply to the world?

EB: I did research at NASA Ames [a major research center in Silicon Valley] in 1993 for the film *Hiatus*. I also experienced the early version of VR [virtual reality] at VPL [an early, an arguably seminal, virtual reality equipment company], that company responsible for the headsets and gloves. I had numerous conversations with Jaron Lanier, the founder of VPL, while in production on this film. There was a lot of promise and optimism surrounding the labs in Mountain View at that time. They were building a free simulator for experience: an open simulator for an interactive experience between two people. Flight simulators control the experience by putting the viewer into a strict set of functions, integrating with the machine to control the reality.

My focus was to experience the absolute instability of VR that this technology was capable of representing. In the VR experiments I was involved in, we were brought into a very minimal place (a space that contained just a wireframe table), and through clear real-time conversation we were able to negotiate that space and one another. I was truly felt like a child learning how to move in the world. It sparked a return to my interest in Piaget, as well as reinforcing the idea that we need very little 'reality enforcement' in the visual field to create a satisfactory experience for the viewer.

HLA: Do you think that there is a special relationship between moving image work and architecture?

EB: Cinematic space is a special space, but one that has enough real time visual cues to make an experience that feels real. In the cinema you are captured, even if you sense movement through the space on the screen. However, in my work, with the mixture of reality with animation and visual rhythms, I try to build a representation of space, an idealized space that may refer to actual spaces in the world but are metaphoric carriers of meaning in the film. The audience is looking at a model of reality, with visual cues that direct ties to a lived perceptual experience, but are altered and hopefully feel 'new.'



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I design spaces according to the needs of my films. Architecture has been key to every film I have made, whether it is in the black box of my studio or in a location. In my past work, the films contained everything I needed to say about space. I have used architecture as a metaphor for a mental space—as in *Out of Hand* and *We imitate; we break up* or a game space or a provisional reality where the interactions of the players change the space, as in *You The Better* and *Hiatus*. *Cinderella* uses multiple representations of historic spaces to add dimension to the narrative. *Switch Center* uses an actual location but in its re-animation it quickly turns into a representation a past era and does not come alive at all. So I am quite at ease working with all kinds of space as a referent for the ideas in my films.

<http://art.thehighline.org/project/erickabeckman/>