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An artist whose enchanting work might be characterized as serious play, Ericka Beckman emerged amid the category-effacing excitement of the late '70s Lower Manhattan art scene. Although she chose the impossible, labor-intensive medium of super 8 film, her peers were less filmmakers than performance artists and avant-garde musicians. Beckman has long since graduated to 16mm and installation work but over the course of her career she has maintained a remarkably consistent set of concerns. Taking their structure, rhythm and imagery from games, her films are familiar yet enigmatic. They are puzzles filled with ingenious special effects and incantatory songs, characterized by their dreamlike condensation and private drama.

J. Hoberman: Ericka, you arrived as a filmmaker with a distinctive style and strong interests. Your films seemed to interrogate the nature of "play," as well as games, contests, and competition.

Ericka Beckman: My work has consistently centered on games, sports and play, as symbols for the private versus public self, and how this play impulse is challenged by narrative storytelling, with its sense of duty and need for closure.

JH: But don't games imply a structure with winners and losers? The title of *You the Better* is a kind of a pun, isn't it?

EB: My own concerns with the subject of play vary from work to work. There is room for many ideas and modes of address to interpenetrate and bounce off each other, much in the same way a group of people with divergent opinions can converse on a mutual topic.

JH: Your most recent piece shows a football game, not as a contest but as part of the stadium space.

EB: *Tension Building* is an ongoing project that is a composite of linked architectural spaces, some real and some models. It combines stop motion and live action filmmaking shot at the Harvard University Coliseum. It will be followed by two stadium locations in Italy built in the 1930s by Pier Luigi Nervi: the Palazzo dello Sport in Rome and the Municipal Stadium in Florence.

JH: What interests you about these locations?

EB: I am fascinated by stadium architecture because it is designed to provide two opposite viewing experiences, the visceral direct experience of watching a physical action close up and the passive experience mediated through filters of distance and delay. The *Tension Building* model features telescoping seating that expands and contracts like a folding cup, corresponding to the audience's reactions to the wins and losses in the game being played below.

JH: The action literally bounces off the walls.

EB: I dragged my tripod and Bolex over the stadium seating. My camera became like a surveyor's transit, following the repetitive lines of the design and transforming something still into a motion machine.



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JH: This use of location is relatively new.

EB: Up until 2000 all my work was produced in my black box studio. I controlled the frame by building everything in the frame. I worked with props, animations, and miniature sets, as well as lyrics, graphics and visual text. For *You the Better*, I made game board drawings as a planning tool. With *Switch Center* I took the opportunity to shoot in a location. I was invited by the Béla Balázs Studio in Budapest in 2001 to produce a short film. Our collaboration culminated this experimental documentary, shot in the defunct Danube Water Works—an intact, yet nonfunctioning water purification plant.

JH: Did the location dictate a new sort of filmmaking?

EB: I did not arrive with a script or storyboard. The film evolved over a two-week stay, through my shooting and my drawing. I got permission take my Bolex for a regular workday at the plant. They provided me with one steady assistant, a janitor, who helped me move my camera around the perimeters of the concrete drums. I fell in love with the color that reflected off the grey drums as the sunlight passed through skylights.

JH: The water works struck me as a sort of 20th Century ruin.

EB: Yes, *Switch Center* is a tribute to the end of the romance with industrialization, and at the same time a reaction to seeing the Soviet architecture of the future transformed into a shopping mall or global corporate office.

JH: I love the way those Japanese videogame creatures materialize—it's as though they're beaming in from the universe of your earlier movies, specifically *Hiatus*, which is based on videogames.

EB: The Pokémon toys came into my storyboards on the day that I could not get back to work on my film because a Pokémon commercial was being shot there.

JH: That's making good use of chance! Your work is truly idiosyncratic. Can you tell me which artists were important to your development? With whom did you study?

EB: I went to Cal Art for the contact with conceptual art and to mingle with the music school students. I wanted to study at a college that had a strong percussion department, and I was a fan of the percussionist John Bergamo, who taught while I was there. I also saw a lot of performance, notably the work of Guy de Cointet.

JH: Were you interested in films?

EB: I started making short abstract films based on action/image repetitive relationships. John Baldessari was making films with his students, but my favorite teacher was Vito Acconci. I liked the way he created screen space, as defined by the camera, for his body. The monitor was an extension of the space of the viewer, with Acconci somehow contained therein. He was a performance artist who used only spoken text, his body and a minimal architecture. His work is really about the space between himself and the audience. I liked the improvisational aspect. He had a set of concepts and he knew what concept he wanted to end on and the piece was his way of getting there.

JH: You appeared in his epic video piece *The Red Tapes*.

EB: I worked with him for a bit on *The Red Tapes*. He seldom did a second take.



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JH: That's interesting. Were there any filmmakers who impressed you?

EB: Jack Goldstein's work reinforced my use of performance, the use of black space, saturated color and very formal compositions. Prior to seeing Jack's films, I was only working with processes, formal structures to create an abstract image on film in time. I was not interested in Pop Art or painters like Warhol who used images from culture to make their work dialogue with culture. I was interested in meaning and I was drawn to conceptual art. Jack's iconic images made me see that an artist can work with an image as a sign and can empty that image of its meaning and ascribe it with a new meaning.

JH: You are included in the upcoming Whitney Museum show *Rituals of Rented Island* along with performance artists like Julia Heyward and Michael Smith. Do you feel any affinity with their work?

EB: My thirst for performance work lead me to New York City, where I discovered experimental theater and many artists who I credit as influences—Julia Heyward, Laurie Anderson, Mabou Mines's Shaggy Dog Animations, Robert Wilson, Steve Reich, Mike Smith, Jack Smith, and so many dancers. I liked the way Julia Heyward used her voice, not to sing or sound dreamy, but to speak out and yell, to speak like many different females, from young to old. She spoke her text in a monotone, like a percussive punk vocal track.

JH: I can see the affinities between her performances and your use of singsong chanting your Super 8 films.

EB: I liked her phrasing and her use of repetition. She would morph her words, or a phrase into another phrase. So the meaning of what she said just morphed into something else. I was impressed by the inner strength it took to use herself as subject and object of a social or sexual conflict. She spoke and made pieces about how her experience was in conflict with accepted social norms. However politicized, it always started with and returned to her own body.

JH: A lot of '70s performance artists made use of video. Why did you decide to work with Super 8 sound?

EB: Because you could project a film life-size in a room, and I wanted to stress the presence of the performance in my image. Video was attached to a box on a pedestal and I found that apparatus distracting. Plus you had to wear headphones. Only Julia and Laurie figured out how to use video. They built both performance and video segments that used their bodies, spoken word and sound. I wanted to make films that were documents of a type of performance that could only exist on film. I was invested in making an active art form, an art that moved, and that movement was the telling. Plus, I like the color of film.

What I took away from all the performance work I saw in the late '70s early '80s was that repetition is a good thing and long works are a good thing. I discovered a new form of speech that only works in media, where speech, image and repetition over time replace old habits with new thoughts and behaviors. It's a formula I found to be at work in all the artists (and advertising) that I saw from this period.

JH: Your early films were first shown at Artists Space and the Kitchen rather than at avant-garde film venues or the clubs that were favored by the punk Super 8 filmmakers. Was that context by choice?

EB: I hung out with artists who hung out at Artists Space. Paul McMahon (who appears in *Out of Hand*) was its co-director, with Helene Weiner. Paul was an artist and an organizer of art events in Boston before he came to New York. He created the Nancy Party Club at his loft, where many artists gathered to play music in a Sunday night "battle of the bands" atmosphere.



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I worked closely with Brooke Halpin, a composer from Cal Arts, who helped untangle my conceptual lyrics. He would help set them to music. He understood my need for simple, repetitive phrases, and that the lyrics were part of the rhythm of the image. Sound was not there to enhance the image but to integrate with it, to make a new meaning. I used voice as a narration track, a song that came from either inside the head of the main performer or from the game. It was a bit like the instruction narration in Owen Land's films. He used voiceover from a person who instructs, and the film tries to follow the instructions.

JH: Can you say something about the difficulties in working with the Super 8 format and the specific techniques you had to master?

EB: I developed a technique where I would rewind my Super 8 camera and make super-impositions on top of the performance elements. The black space allowed me to superimpose images in the unexposed area of the frame and move anywhere in the world I constructed. I could move laterally or enter the image; constructing a fluid space that was logical became very important for my work.

JH: In virtually every one of your films through *Cinderella* and *Hiatus* and maybe even *Switch Center*, some usually young, usually female individual learns, through trial and error, how to act in (or upon) the world. It's as though the films were about their own coming into existence. Did you feel that your early work in particular had an allegorical or even autobiographical content?

EB: Looking back, I see your point. The themes I explore can be slippery to depict in film. They concern memory and the preservation of identity. My *Cinderella* plays the "Cinderella game" up to the point of recognition that she has a choice to either accept or reject the commodification of her image. In the digital game world of *Hiatus*, my heroine is firmly planted. Her memories are the power she stores in her garden. Her struggle is to retain her identity when she finds herself the midst of a takeover by a start-up pharmacological venture. There have been a lot of "damsels in distress" in my work. I use this hook because a woman is constantly comparing herself to, or is being compared against, an idealized image of womanhood. When I go out on a limb I want my audience to know where the ground is.

JH: One last question. I understand you have a distinguished artistic lineage. Could you elaborate?

EB: My great-uncle, twice removed, is Max Beckmann. One of two brothers dropped the second N when he settled in the New York area in the 1840s. I never met Max Beckmann, though he taught in the early 1960s at my first college, and the local museum has a fine collection of his paintings.

JH: Thanks Ericka. Didn't he say "we are all tightrope walkers"? I imagine he would be very impressed with his great-niece's balance and skill.

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