"I create the game, and I set the rules!”

Her art lives off cause and effect: a conversation with the underground-filmmaker Ericka Beckman about Cinderella, the structure of games and performance on 16mm

The American artist and filmmaker Ericka Beckman created virtual worlds years before the holodeck. She experimented with trick sequences in real film long before “Roger Rabbit” and combined film and computer games like in the later “Thron”. Beckman now presents her first retrospective in Germany at the gallery VeneKlasen/Werner, Berlin.

Die Welt:
You studied art in the Seventies and you are making films since the early Eighties. You are represented in the collections of major museums. In recent years your work was re-discovered in exhibitions in France, the US and in Switzerland. Why is it that your show in Berlin is only the second in a commercial art gallery?

Ericka Beckman:
When I began to make films, there were no galleries that would show film. Also museums hardly presented any film art. Moreover, I was re-discovered by a younger audience rather recently. I have a large oeuvre and it is of interest today that my films are hand-made and have a strong performative character. Its only recently that galleries are finding it possible to sell work to collectors and museums. I was not conditioned to offer my work for sale in the past, even though I always had to find funds for my productions.

Did you see yourself as a film-maker or a visual artist at the beginning of the Eighties?
All that I do has it´s source in performance. I was looking for a visual language that could describe performance. But I didn´t want to perform myself or only document a performance, but instead I wanted develop a form of performance art, which would include all possibilities offered by the film medium. I was especially keen on multiple exposure. No one had really done it before. I was interested in showing animation and live action in the same image on the screen. It didn’t matter whether it was an animated or real character. The body is a system of signs, which everyone understands immediately, even without text or dialogue. The movement was the requisite language and my drive was always the performative body.

Film-making is quite a hierarchic system. How do you keep the control?
I always do everything myself. Just like the surrealist filmmakers. I research and read a

lot first. Then I draw, prepare charts and storyboards, and build props. I hardly ever write scripts; all is happening on a visual level. Then, mostly six to eight months later, I begin to work with the 16-mm-camera. I perform with the camera. For the exhibitions, it´s about building a space for the films to be shown in. I extend the screen into the space. Sometimes the props from my films are exhibited with the installation.

The exhibition confronts with a very German topic. What is it that interests you about Cinderella?
Cinderella is common folktale carricature from early times, but it´s a completely disneyfied figure today. In my film, "Cinderella" is a girl who revolts against this fact. Everyone knows the story of Cinderella. A lot changed through the varying adaptions of the folktale, however the codes and symbols were often left intact. If you study these, you enter completely new territories. Folktales like Cinderella were mostly passed on through spoken word; a mother would tell it to her daughters. Many Cinderella stories are about the missing father, an aspect which is mirrored in the Disney version, or they are about children or young girls who have to work because they don´t have any family structure to secure them. The stories often deal with abandonment. If you to explore the many versions, this simple story suddenly becomes immensely rich in all its subject matter.

Your Cinderella seems to not play a role in a moralizing plot, but to play a game, of which she doesn´t know the rules.
A game is about cause and effect and a story is always driven by competing characters. I ´m interested in those game structures. I started to use games when I wanted to perform with objects, then I soon grew interested in the playful mechanics in sports. I was especially interested in computer games because the interactive element was with something not real, not imaginary, but virtual.
In 1983 I staged a fake game in the rather structural film "You the Better". In all games you will find that as soon as the rules change, the character and the intensity of the game will change. "Cinderella" is a visualized game with these reciprocal action- going from start to finish numerous times without winning.
I developed the storyboard as if I was inventing a game with a lot of cross-references. It´s narration develops chronologically, but at the same time it jumps from one historical period to another and it comments on a specific social pressure on a girl.
The film "Cinderella" tells a story of how a girl opposes the game and looks for possibilities to play the game differently and to change the rules.

You must also be interested in computer games as they facilitate real inter-activity to begin with.
That´s right. In 1999 I made the film "Hiatus". I went to the NASA Ames Research Center in California to do the research. This is where they developed, for example, the virtual reality for flight simulation. In Los Angeles, I spoke with games programmers who were investigating the structure of interactive computer games. "Hiatus" came out at a time when video games were becoming very popular.
 Because it was a handmade film about a digital medium in the late 90's, my audience was skeptical. They asked: why did I make a 16mm-single-screen movie about a game at the start of a digital era?

I create the game , I set the rules, I modify the rules .
A large game structure is composed in the process. I was interested in designing a complex system that is performative and has an open end.

Is the audience allowed to participate?
I want to create a direct relationship with the viewer. In a traditional plot you follow the story, you compare it to your own personal experience and that's how you relate to the story. It was my idea to speak to the viewer on a direct level. Similar to the Structural Film of the 60's, when artists created filmic puzzles and the audience had to figure out how to view them and how to think about what they were seeing.
At a certain point you begin to realize that your own interpretation might be completely different from your neighbor´s interpretation.

How do you create such a one-on-one relation between the screen and the viewer?
The trick is to constantly change something, just like in a good game. The participants or the viewer of the films have to constantly move, think and adapt. You can´t just lean back, simply watch and relax. You would either get lost or get stuck in the game.

On view through 7 November, Galerie VW (VeneKlasen/Werner), Berlin

http://www.welt.de/print/die_welt/kultur/article147436645/Ich-kreiere-das-Spiel-und-ich-setze-die-Regeln.html