

Art in America



Ericka Beckman

NEW YORK,
at Mary Boone

by Hannah Black

Ericka Beckman: *You the Better*, 1983, 16mm film, 30 minutes; at Mary Boone.



Ericka Beckman's 1983 film *You the Better*, the central work in her solo show at Mary Boone, is in part a playfully literal take on the modernist trope of the game of chance, using the structure of the game to look at the social codes that bind us to the world. In the modernist imagination, chance overwrote the intentions of the individual artist, rendering meaning provocatively unstable or connecting the artwork to natural laws. Rather than align chance with nature or indeterminacy, *You the Better* frames it as part of the capitalist system of labor and contingency that relies on happenstance and emergency, survival and necessity, as much as on general laws of accumulation.

The film opens with an image of an architectural structure that hovers in space before collapsing into rows of suburban housing units. "Build a house on this empty lot / Build a house that's new," instruct the choral voices in the composition, "Subdivision Song," that provides the film's soundtrack. The house recurs as a superimposed graphic throughout the work and as a series of illuminated sculptures in green, red and yellow that flanked the projection. It stands not only for the domestic space of ostensible retreat from the workplace, but also for the house that controls a casino, making sure the gambler never beats the institution. In the mysterious game shown in the film, there is apparently only one team; the opponent is the game itself. The players all wear the same blue attire, their clothing reminiscent of both factory workers' garments and sports uniforms. They huddle to confer on strategy, argue over the rules and address the camera directly to criticize each other or reflect on their own play. "You can't even aim, much less get a house," one accuses another, but of course the game is at fault: no one can win.

The space of play changes (at times it's a room resembling an artist's studio, other times a black box) and the rules change (occasionally none of the participants seem totally clear on what they are), but the game continues. "Sometimes you just don't know how you do it," observes the song. Work and play alike render bodies automatons, as expressed in the players' gestures: the high-masculine swagger of the athlete, the loose joints, the fixed jaw, the preparedness for action that appears as a faint aura around the figures at rest.

Like the house icon, yellow circles appear throughout the film, in the form of coins, balls, hoops and insignia. They are also depicted in a series of drawings that hung in the gallery's back office, where an employee sits at a desk, apparently getting on with work. In both location and content—looming giants in top hats, stacks of money, toiling stick figures—the drawings emphasize Beckman's use of the yellow circle as a coin symbol, and as a stand-in for the whole tragedy of labor.

The logic of film editing is self-structuring, like that of a game; each work must find its own rules and field of play. Beckman's approach in *You the Better*, mixing graphics, performance and a ludic demonstration of how the superstructures of the social shape individual lives, feels distinctly contemporary. Or perhaps it just shows how the moment we are in now—of bewilderment in the face of social forms that feel both dispiritingly rigid and constantly on the verge of collapse—has been going on longer than we might care to think.