



Der Bund

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To understand the world through Sport and Games

Kunsthalle Bern is showing a retrospective of the American video artist Ericka Beckman. The show explores the boundaries of different eras and wittily straightens up the misconception that playing would be fun.

So much work to do: When the Kunsthalle was built, no one thought about art that could move and create noise. But walls have to be reconstructed now and insulated against noise, making the old building creak. Even the skylight ceiling hall was transformed into a cinema.

It's Fabrice Stroun's contribution to a historical transatlantic pact. The director of the Kunsthalle presents Ericka Beckman, an almost forgotten artist of the American video avant-garde of the 1970s- and 1980s in the artist's first major solo show in Europe. *Ericka Beckman Works 1978-2013* is a show of international importance: born in 1951, the artist is currently about to step onto the big stage for the first time since the Warhol-Foundation became interested in Beckman's work in 2009 and since her work was represented in a group show about her generation in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

JRP Ringier, in cooperation with the Kunsthalle, published a dvd featuring restored early works on Super 8, which was recently presented at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. A major monograph will be published soon.

Beckman's oeuvre is all about labour. What makes her films and photography so epochal? Just as the artists of the pre-industrial era were the best in their craft, because they knew how to awaken dead matter, so was Duchamp one of the first consumers in a society that was shaped by collective production. He took fabricates and turned them into art. Later, after the spread of mass media, Warhol discovered that it was enough to use images that already existed and turn them into new images that had not existed before. He saw himself as one of the first observers.

If you continue to draw this line of development coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, one will find artists like Ericka Beckman in the 1970s. She takes moving images and decodes with those images the "construction of a symbolic order", as Stroun says, in one word: culture. She is a "spectator of the spectacle", which fits well into the time, considering that Guy Debord's *Society of the spectacle* was published in 1967.

The architecture of movement

Beckman's films are playful enactments of media that was new at the time, related to the aesthetics of video games and which "pay homage to the close of the Industrial Age", as she explains herself.

Exemplified in *Switch Center*, which was shot in 2003 in an old Hungarian factory, which was also used to shoot an advertising film for Pokémon figures a day earlier.

Beckman works until today almost exclusively in analogue, her favourite medium is double exposure and the exploration of "architecture in movement". Beckman considers movement as universally comprehensible; she uses it as a dramaturgic replacement for language.

The developmental psychology of the Genovese Jean Piaget influenced her approach. Parallel to reading his books in the 1970s, Beckman developed her artistic leitmotif: the moving game. Using this as a means, she is able to describe the symbolic order of "Capitalism", as for example in *You the Better*. The film was already on view in the Kunsthalle in 1983, which shows that Stroun was able for the fourth time in his short curatorship, to present works already presented by previous curators. It seems he plays it as a sport.



Martin Bieri on Ericka Beckman continued...

Ericka Beckman also wants to understand the world through sport and games. She sends Cinderella on a search with an underlying superb soundtrack, a "Quest" as medievalist and gamers would say, for the exit out of her own symbolic order called *Cinderella*. At the end, after she has overcome oppression caused by gender – and production issues, Cinderella finds her own voice through the medium of a record. Even five years after MTV started in 1981, artists of her generation believed in the freedom of independent film, says Beckman today.

She is the living proof that a counter world existed at the time. Beckman has worked briefly for MTV, but the broadcaster deemed her stage designs and clips too far off – an experience she has also made in the art world, in as much as her films were not screened in museums, but in cinemas. A screening as a supporting film for Godard's *Passion* almost caused turmoil at the time.

It might be difficult to understand today, because cultural studies survey the symbolic dimension of culture since decades. "We are culture and culture is our mind", says Fabrice Stroun. He seems to be worlds apart from Louis Althusser, who deceased a quarter of a century ago and who had defined the "vivid imagination, which people use to create of their real living conditions", as plain "ideology".

Distance is crucial

The word implies that something is hidden behind it, darkened by the images – only recognizable, if we had enough distance from ideology. Beckman's films are always shot in front of the darkened background in her studio, and "distance", as she says, is "crucial", because what she is showing, are "models". Therein lies the historical and at the same time the prophetic in Beckman's works. In the 70s- and 80s it became clear which role games would play.

Debord anticipated it first and we lost every distance to it in the meantime. Creativity has become productivity. This form of exploitation is called "Play Ethic", half threatening, half triumphant writes the Scottish publicist Pat Kane: "The game becomes for the 21st century, what was labour during the Industrial Age: The way we think, act and create values." Ericka Beckman's films are early monuments – for a future, long outstanding and liberating "Game over".