

REVIEW - 21 OCT 2015

# Ericka Beckman

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VeneKlasen/Werner, Berlin, Germany



Ericka Beckman, *Cinderella*, 1986,  
installation view

As video games have increasingly become paradigmatic of our lives being split between screens and bodies, the films of Ericka Beckman have accrued a particular topicality since their production in the late 1970s. Associated with the Pictures Generation and the activities of CalArts in the 1970s, Beckman's manic, real-virtual, highly symbolic films – which take video games, learning games, sports and even roulette as thematic motors – seem to have presaged the life-games we now waddle within.

Beckman's films take as a starting point the moment when everyday life becomes indistinguishable from the interface of a game – are we the dice, the ball or the agent? And how can we, always both player and played, maintain our own contours when we are the subjects and objects of projections? Beckman's first solo show in Berlin, at VeneKlasen/Werner, showcased a handful of the artist's key, though still under-exhibited, works – from her landmark 'Super-8 Trilogy' (1978–80) through more recent films like *Tension Building* (2012–14), as well as – for the first time ever – a number of fantastical oil, charcoal and graphite studies on paper. These latter works revealed the visual cues behind Beckman's films (she generally does not work from scripts or storyboards). Their scurried–though–elegant playfulness complements her punk and DIY milieu. Yet to say her works are 'playful' – with early digital primary colours, surface whimsy, ludic special effects, musical rhapsodies and bumbling typological characters – would risk short selling their fraught interplay between narrative entry and game-like closure. Beckman's filmic compositions – with self-made props and amateurish acting by friends such as Mike Kelley – proceed from a near-Brechtian principle of alienation, combined with a Disney-esque sense of typological flatness. In her films, flares of formal release and mimetic connection are quickly snuffed and undercut; or, in Beckman's words, *We Imitate: We Break Up* (1978). In that film, a lady in a skirt mimics and continuously fails to replicate, the motions of a dancing puppet.

Dancing, puppets, gardens, sports, games, tests – Beckman's films are rife with such paradigms in which the human body is asked to reconcile itself with its own limits, doubles and avatars, as when the wire of a hoop skirt becomes a grid for a digital form. *You the Better* (1983) – with its pun on betterment and betting – takes place in a gambling scenario (or is it the actual slot machine?), in which a team of uniformed athletes (led by Ashley Bickerton) bets against the 'house' in a game they cannot win. *Cinderella* (1986), meanwhile, is a tragicomic restaging of the classic story, turned into a game in which Cinderella can seemingly opt in and out of her own game piece/character. The female body, with the symbolic lushness of dress and corset (container and contained), is an avatar par excellence, in that – as a site for (in this case) male projection – the character enacts a split between perceived object and lived subject.

To research her remarkable film *Hiatus* (1999/2014), the real highlight here, Beckman spent time in 1991 in NASA's Ames Research Center, studying and experiencing the then-nascent technologies of virtual reality. In the film, a female protagonist in her apartment plays an interactive, early virtual online game (akin to today's MMORPGs) called 'Hiatus'. Her avatar in the game, WANDA, encounters other players in a phantasmagoric universe; she begins to store her memories in a virtual 'garden' by means of a corset-cum-memory device. WANDA begins to struggle to maintain her identity when the cowboyish proprietor of a pharmacological start-up tries to woo her to his enterprise. 'Plant a field of narcissus, or something', suggests the villain. 'I've decided the two of us should be partners.' What, today, could be a better allegory for the struggle for individuation amid the interfaces that seek to claim free profits from the corseted self? Beckman's films, less from the past than from a deep, if ruptured, sense of 'now', suggest that time, its own form of game, has its own winners and losers, and that every structure of virtual control is also a real, risky gamble.