

SPIKE

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ERICKA BECKMAN - DIGITAL ANALOGUE PIONEER



Ericka Beckman, *Hiatus*, 1999/2015

The artist Ericka Beckman has been dealing with gender tropes in virtual worlds for over 20 years and pre-empting many contemporary discussions on the topic. With current debates about feminism raging online our writer finds that it's the perfect time to revisit the CalArts MFA's oeuvre who presented her characters as subjects in a form of techno-Bildungsroman.

Cyber cowboys meet Cinderellas in surrealistic cardboard sets of red and blue, with the occasional Mike Kelley cameo thrown in for good measure: Ericka Beckman's films marry a bricolage 16 mm analogue film aesthetic with tightly orchestrated chaos. Virtual worlds merge with their "real" counterparts, and game strategies collapse into themselves; the films can be read as investigations of the concerns regarding the virtual and its attendant image cycle *avant la lettre*. Beginning in the seventies, Beckman's interest has focused on exposing and undermining the rules surrounding gender and learned behaviour in popular culture. Given art's current preoccupations with gender and virtuality, it seems timely that VW (VeneKlasen/Werner) are currently staging a retrospective of the artist's oeuvre in Berlin.



Ericka Beckman, *Cinderella*, 1986, installation view

The three main works *Cinderella* (1986), *Switch Center* (2002) and *Hiatus* (1999/2015), along with preparatory sketches and paintings are arranged in the three main gallery rooms, while the cinema room houses Beckman's early *Super-8 Trilogy* as well as her newest video, *Tension Building* (2014).

Cinderella's narrative follows the classic children's tale, but each encounter (the carriage, meeting the prince, dancing with the prince, leaving at midnight, dropping the shoe) is staged as level where the character either fails her pre-determined mission, or succeeds and passes to the next level. After trial-and-error, she reaches the castle steps, where to capture the prince she has to leave behind her shoe. Yet, at this crucial moment, she decides to escape her pre-determined fate by refusing to do just this.



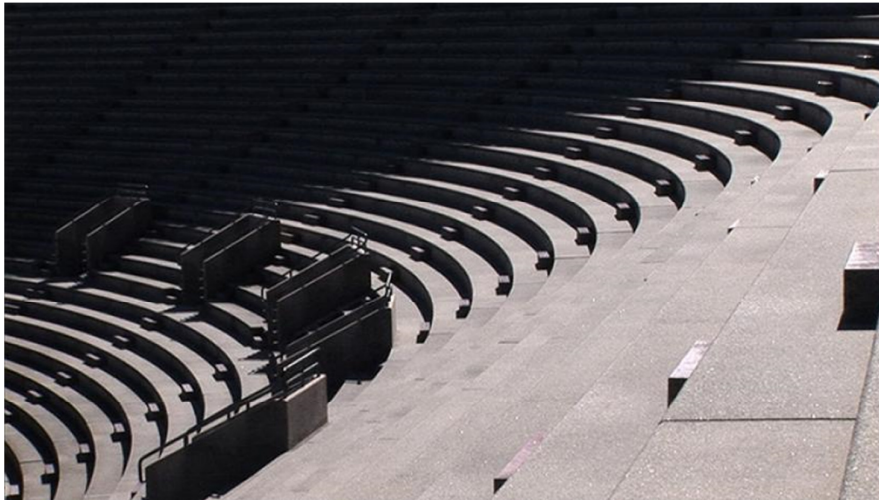
Ericka Beckman, *Cinderella*, 1986, installation view

In the two-channel video installation *Hiatus* (1999/2015), in which a character shifts between a virtual avatar in a game world and her real-life counterpart, the virtual world was created by hand in 16mm film, creating a hybrid format that indexically examines the structures of the internet and the game environment in an analogue setting. The film originated from Beckman's research in 1991/92 into virtual reality at NASA, and her involvement in early online debates on the purpose of the internet and VR and its applications. The work in its playfulness evinces the optimism of the early internet, a space of hybrid identities and niche communities.



Ericka Beckman, *Hiatus*, 1999/2015, installation view

Beckman's examination of the relationship between character and image in a mass cultural environment reflect her allegiance to the Pictures generation, the cohort of artists who emerged in the eighties and includes Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and fellow filmmaker Gretchen Bender. Exhibited at MoMA PS1 and Tate Modern, her oeuvre is nevertheless not widely known. Beckman took her MFA at CalArts in 1976, and worked with many of her fellow alumni, including Mike Kelley, yet she is rarely referred to as being part of the CalArts scene.



Ericka Beckman, *Tension Building*, 2014

Beckman's examination of gender tropes in virtual worlds foreshadows contemporary feminist debates on the roles and identities of computer game characters. Both *Hiatus* and *Cinderella* (1986), a "musical set in a game environment" are loosely based on damsel in distress scenarios, a common video game cliché, as Anita Sarkeesian demonstrated in her analysis of game characters last year. Beckman's motivations are feminist: as she has said previously, she uses damsels in distress because "a woman is constantly comparing herself to, or is being compared against, an idealized image of womanhood." Beckman pre-empted Sarkeesian's analysis and conclusion, but is more concerned with rules governing female behaviour in and of themselves, rather than the restrictions of tropes in a medium. By showing how her central characters employ strategy and learning to overcome their respective fates, she presents the characters as subjects in a form of techno-*Bildungsroman*.



Ericka Beckman, *Study for Hiatus*, 1990/2015

Beckman's works stand out precisely due to their ahistoricity: her blending of analogue techniques with digital and cybernetic concerns separates her from her peers while pre-empting many contemporary discussions. It is to be hoped that the current engagement with her work will result in the reassessment of her place in the canon of media art history.

Ericka Beckman runs until November 7th at VW (VeneKlasen/Werner),
Rudi-Dutschke-Str. 26, 10969 Berlin

<http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/ericka-beckman-digital-analogue-pioneer>