afterimage

THE JOURNAL OF MEDIA ARTS AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

A HARSH GAME: ERICKA BECKMAN'S (VIRTUAL) REALITY

In a 1983 issue of the *Village Voice*, J. Hoberman outlined the mayhem that occurred during the New York Film Festival's screening of Ericka Beckman's now-seminal short film *You The Better* (1983). The film was billed as a double feature with Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion* (1982), and impatient audience members caused a clamor when forced to view Beckman's film first. "The film was attacked by a sustained volley of hisses, whistles, and derisive clapping," Hoberman recounts. "At the end [of the screening], Beckman was not only booed but actually pelted with programs."[1]

You The Better follows a group of players involved in a sport that is a mixture of dodgeball, basketball, and roulette. Focus lands on the protagonist as he single-handedly wins round after round against "the house," an invisible betting arm consistently kept off-camera and out-of-reach. The protagonists' constant victories and unbelievable luck arouse hostile confusion in his teammates, even though these constant wins do not entail any sort of reward. As long as the house controls the betting, Beckman describes, "the

chance of winning is nil."[2] Like many of Beckman's films, *You The Better* is notable for its loose narrative and surreal imagery, wherein the cast changes indiscriminately and settings shift without warning or clear transition. These directorial choices produce a distinct cinematic effect, as if the viewer were diving into another's eerie imagination or darkest dreams.

The reaction from the festival audience shocked critics because Beckman was well known and well received within the avant-garde film community. After earning a Master of Fine Arts from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in 1976, her films had been screened at many esteemed New York City spaces, including Franklin Furnace, the Kitchen, and the Anthology Film Archives. Her series of films that preceded *You The Better*, later dubbed *The Super-8 Trilogy* (1978–81), enthralled viewers with its expressive characters, sing-along soundtrack, and charming special effects. Those who praised Beckman found her to possess a singular vision, one that flirted with postmodernism's cynicism without losing a sense of wonder.

Still from *Hiatus* (1999/2015) by Ericka Beckman; courtesy Mary Boone Gallery

Beckman's star continued to rise throughout the 1980s and beyond. She was included in four separate Whitney Biennials (1983, 1985, 1987, and 1991), a rare feat for any artist. Her films graduated from their scrappy beginnings and were soon being screened inside grand institutions like the Wadsworth Atheneum, the Hirshhorn Museum, and the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Belgium. All the while, venerable institutions like the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Walker Arts Center, and Centre Pompidou were adding her works to their permanent collections.

And yet, as if the uproar at the festival still shadows her, many paint Beckman's work as underappreciated or pushed into the margins. As Olga Stefan wrote in *Art in America*, "despite a 30-plus-year filmmaking career that has earned her numerous awards as well as inclusion in various art biennials and film festivals . . . Beckman has not received the international art world recognition one would expect."[3] In Richard Hertz's book *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia* (2003), Nancy Chunn, one of the admissions directors at CalArts, remarked that while Beckman was rewarded with grants and funding "before the grant system crashed . . . she was never strongly embraced by the art world. I am surprised that more of the Mafia boys didn't help her out."[4]

In the past few years, however, Beckman's work has been pulled closer to the chests of the art world's gatekeepers, gaining significant traction while finding a new audience and a renewed historical significance. In 2009, she was featured in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's encyclopedic exhibition *The Pictures Generation 1974–1984*. While this may seem like a given, it is not: Philip Smith, who was in Douglas Crimp's original *Pictures* show (1977), was not included in the Met's manifestation. In 2013, Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland staged a highly renowned midcareer retrospective for the artist, titled *Ericka Beckman: Works 1978–2012*. Thanks to curator Piper Marshall, Mary Boone Gallery has hosted multiple solo exhibitions stateside, often featuring new iterations of Beckman's older films.

So what has caused this closer embrace, this new wave of critical and commercial interest in Beckman's work? Due to their visual style and subject matter, the artist's older films and their reworked versions feel emphatically contemporary. Beckman symbolically examines capitalism's impact on interpersonal relations through the lens of games, technology, and identity representations in the virtual world. Notably, she explored these themes years before a paradigm-shifting interest in digital economies and environments solidified in the late 2000s.

These career-spanning concepts coalesce in the magnificent short film *Hiatus* (1999/2015), recently exhibited in a modified version at Boone's 745 Fifth Avenue space. The new presentation of *Hiatus* reconstructs the film as a dual-screen installation. On the right is the original short, produced in 1999 and clocking in around fifteen minutes. On the left is never-before-seen footage from the same era, offering a montage of live-action shots mixed with complex and stunning animations.

Hiatus opens with the protagonist Madi marching away from the camera into a sparsely decorated room, equipped with an intense (but now dated) techie setup. The setup provides a dual purpose; Madi is a programmer who spends her free time engaging in a virtual reality-based lifestyle game. After donning a pair of black glasses, red gloves, and a tight, black jumpsuit covered with sensors and tubing, she turns on her multiple computers, inserts a floppy disk, and plunges into the virtual world.

Initially, a green geisha character appears on screen. She recounts the progress made in Level One of the game wherein Madi was "asked to create a habitat that she feels most comfortable in, that she has complete control over and which empowers her."[5] In turn, Madi chose to create a virtual garden and constructed the character Wanda to be her horticulturist avatar. Wanda takes the form of a spunky cyberpunk cowgirl, with a crimson complexion and bodice to match. After the geisha's synopsis, a man's voice is heard, deep and booming. Madi fast-forwards as he explains that the garden is Wanda's power source, and that she can return to the garden at any point and be "regenerated by it many times over." Wanda then enters Level Two, where she forms an alliance with a Native American tribe in order to cultivate a more complex garden, one that blossoms in harmony with their existing habitat.

While *Hiatus* employs a tech-savvy aesthetic, most of the effects seem, to contemporary eyes, craft-like and clunky. For example, the birds that ravage Wanda's Level Two garden are made from paper, animated with simple stop-motion techniques. Also, on occasion, the actors' bodies do not align perfectly with the portals that they travel through, or their bodies become translucent and reflect parts of the landscape around them. In an interview with writer Nicholas Forrest, Ericka explains that she often exposes the film multiple times during production instead of incorporating the animations, effects, and scenery into the film afterward. "Since the alignment of live action and animation is not controlled as it would be in post production," she explains, "I willingly leave myself open to the chance juxtapositions of these elements, and therefore incorporate more 'play' in my direction on set."[6] Her technique results in a visual language that's delightfully jaunty, at once futuristic and mechanical while also "showing its work"—in this case, the work of the human hand.

Back in the virtual world, a lightning storm erupts and the garden's scarecrow is struck by a stray discharge; the scarecrow suddenly becomes an animated blue cowboy, introducing himself in thick Southern drawl as "Player 33 from Houston, but I prefer if you call me Wang." With a flair for drama and a patronizing attitude, he tells Wanda he's been watching her, admiring her, and insinuates that they should become partners in the virtual world. Wang then grabs Wanda by the hair and drags her to a window that overlooks the motherboard-like landscape, hoping that she marvels at the swaths of undeveloped land located just beyond their current locale.

Wang's inexplicable appearance is alarming, and a hallmark of Beckman's penchant for ambiguous plot. Is Wanda's world replicating the sensation of a dream, wherein most phenomena and transformations make little sense, but are swiftly accepted as fact? "Because the scarecrow is a digital device," Beckman elaborates in an early press release for the film, "it becomes an open channel, a code that someone can hack into, a

telephone pole to the outer world. Wang, an intruder, logs on, interrupts the game, and inserts his world blindly into her coordinates."[7]

After embedding himself into Wanda's realm, Wang throws a handful of glitter across her garden, causing a large complex of buildings to slowly emerge from the ground. This complex represents another branch of Wang's pharmaceutical company, as he looks to expand operations into undiscovered areas of the digital landscape. By aggressively building over Wanda's garden, Wang sabotages her game play and, in turn, depletes and diminishes her spunk, stamina, and agency. In this moment of weakness, he steals Wanda's backup supply of plants and knocks her to the ground with a watering pot. Approaching her reclined body with an aggressive and ugly snarl, he says, "You know, a woman shouldn't waste her talent on such *a harsh game.*"

Wang represents a hacker in all the often-negative connotations that come with the word. He is careless, shallow, and unabashedly sexist, presenting a nasty threat to Wanda and to her established digital world. According to Beckman, Wang is also meant to resemble Ronald Reagan.[8] During his presidential term, Reagan was a champion of corporate interests and economic liberalization, an ideology today recognized as neoliberalism. The comparison is apt; Wang is a brash capitalist, enamored with expanding big business's footprint without regard to the Native Americans' ownership of the land or sympathy for the damage it could cause to the digital realm's wider economy.

The rest of *Hiatus* involves Wanda trying to locate Wang before the construction of his complex is complete, to punish him for taking advantage of her, and to reclaim the garden's land. Wang's complex is so large, requiring so much bandwidth to render, that Wanda believes she has enough time to find Wang before the annihilation of her garden causes her digital life to be completely erased.

Visually, Hiatus is remarkable. A mixture of computer animation, DIY set design, and intricate costume make it a tour de force. Beckman's approach to the film renders each moment cinematic and sculptural, each prop and still holding its own. The iconic forget-me-not plants are made entirely of neon green light, and spin furiously like Mattel Battling Tops. Wanda's stylized scarecrow looks like she would be right at home in one of Jared Madere's sculptural installations, particularly when looking at his recent exhibition *Islands in the Stream* (2016) at the David Lewis Gallery in New York City. Like Madere's work, the scarecrow conflates the digital with the analog and the homely with the technologically advanced. The geometric decoration, bright graphics, and bitmap imaging of the virtual landscape is reminiscent of charming early experiments with computer-generated imagery (CGI), like Ed Catmull's *A Computer Animated Hand* (1972) or Peter Foldes's *Metadata* (1971).

Although the aesthetic of *Hiatus* appears dated, the central conflict between Wanda and Wang is still pertinent. The film is, essentially, a tale of personal versus commercial, of subversion versus compliance with ever-evolving digital imperatives. When we think of the virtual landscape currently, and its more personal realms, the most prevalent development is the proliferation and

popularity of social networking sites. Starting off by appealing to specific micro-communities, these sites have grown at an astonishing rate. For instance, Facebook began in 2004 as a networking site for elite college students, but opened to the wider public in 2006. In order to finance their brisk rise, while keeping the service free for consumers, Facebook discreetly converted our virtual habits and interactions into capital. Like many social media companies, Facebook entices large corporations to pay a high premium for personal and analytical data mined from the network's user base. Facebook justifies this practice under the guise of striving to create a better experience for their members. In their eyes, if people are going to be exposed to advertisements on their network, shouldn't the advertisements be just as relevant and interesting as the content they share with their community?

This agreement, however, forges a new sordid relationship wherein the social media service must play by the corporation's rules, upholding the advertiser's standards in order to maintain a steady revenue stream. Oftentimes this entails cleaning up the network, making it more sophisticated to better attract a large number of diverse users. Talking to *Wired* in 2009, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg painted this deliberate alteration as natural evolution, growing alongside new cultural developments in "personal branding":

> Think about what people are doing on Facebook today. They're keeping up with their friends and family, but they're also building an image and identity for themselves, which in a sense is their brand. . . . If you carry that thinking over from people to things like stores and brands you realize that everyone's trying to do the same thing, which is communicate, build a reputation, build relationships with people, and just have more information out there.[9]

Zuckerberg sees the personal digital profile as a form of promotion and social currency. One is expected to put one's best foot (and unblemished face) forward. Social networks that formerly prioritized disclosure—anonymous LiveJournals filled with secrets, traumas, and frustrations; deeply personal and confessional "vlogs" uploaded to YouTube; AOL chatrooms where identities were formed and sexualities discovered—have been either sanitized or eradicated. Much in the same way Wang builds over Wanda's garden, ruining her private lifestyle game, developers have transformed personal virtual spaces for the sake of profit, leaving the millennial generation nostalgic for the uglier and more revealing lands of the digital ecosystem.

And yet, this anecdote of the internet as a free-for-all network ruined by corporate interests persisted long before the boom of social media. The rise and fall of the music sharing service Napster, developed in 1999, immediately comes to mind. The countless lawsuits brought forth by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) against Napster's user base were controversial and marked a similar rivalry, situating a large corporation against the general public. Users saw Napster as a way to take the power back from monolithic record companies whose distribution
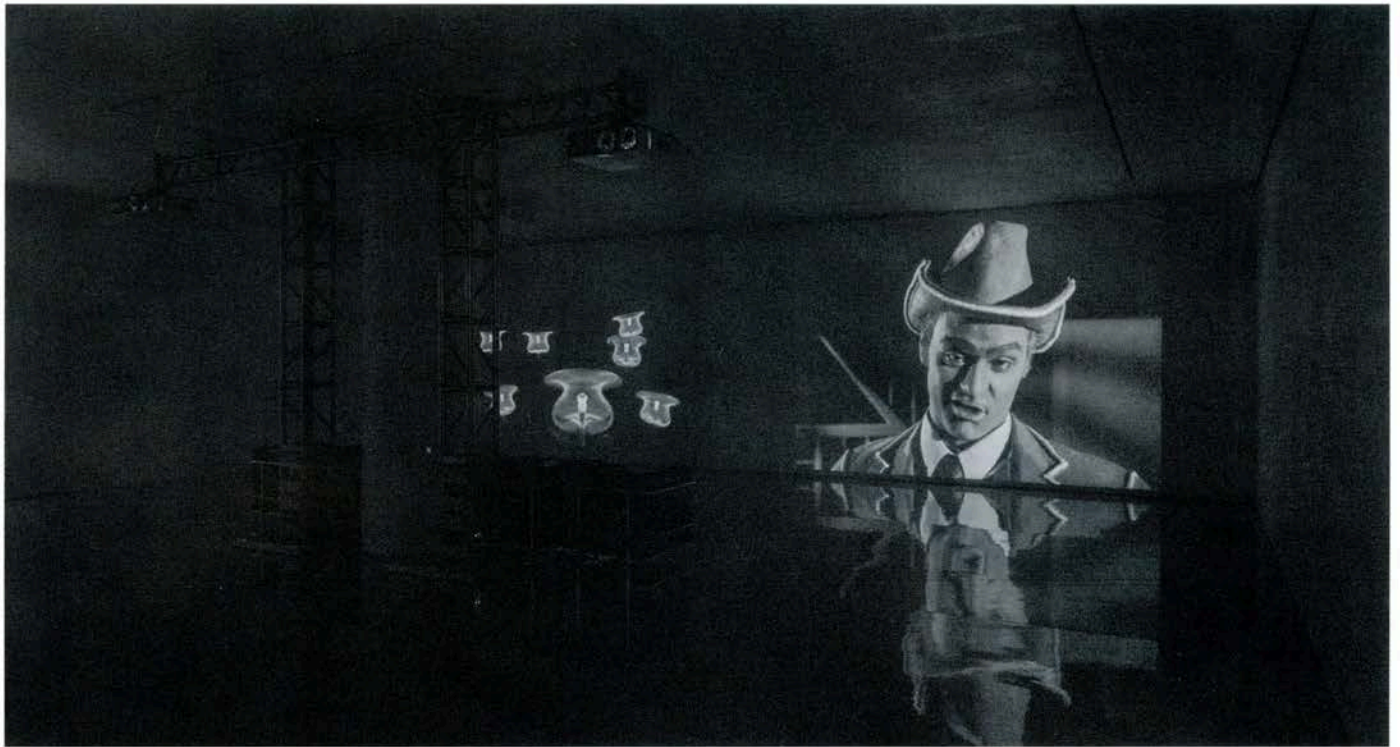
Installation view of *Hiatus* (1999/2015) by Ericka Beckman; courtesy Mary Boone Gallery

channels were seen as outdated, expensive, and unfavorable to the consumer. The RIAA designated Napster's form of sharing an act of theft and rounded up high-profile artists to speak out against the service. The RIAA's litigations sought to reclaim lost profits from the user's transactions and to regulate the digital marketplace, which was evolving at breakneck speed. While the cases were settled out of court over the next few years, the RIAA was the clear victor. Napster was shut down during one of the early trials, then converted into a pay-to-play subscription service, and later disappeared completely due to a series of corporate mergers.

In the conclusion of *Hiatus*, Wanda finds her stolen flowers and becomes reinvigorated. She enacts revenge by deceiving Wang through a duplicitous game of hide-and-seek, leading him to believe that she is trapped underneath the complex's floor. Wang falls for her trick and smashes the floorboards repeatedly with a large baton, bursting the pipes underneath and causing a flood that destroys his pharmaceutical complex and virtual body. Madi removes her headset, leans back in her chair, and cackles with a sense of relief and pure delight.

This storybook ending perfectly illustrates how Beckman's *Hiatus* is still applicable after a decade and a half of technological advancements, and why it will resonate with viewers for years to come. Corporate actors, like Wang, will always seek to expand operations, especially as the economy becomes more globalized and as digital networks and technologies continue to multiply and evolve. Brazen and covert sexism will probably continue to impede remarkably skillful women like Wanda, who seek to build safe alternative realms that subvert patriarchy. It's also apparent that discussions surrounding the promise of the internet and its community-driven networks have consistently followed a cast-out-of-Eden narrative, wherein the desire for profit stands in for the snake's delicious apple. As long as tech companies and corporate colonizers take a bite, destroying their users' utopia and violating their customers' trust, this narrative will persist. And in some form, *Hiatus* will be there, with Wanda's victory and Wang's self-sabotage acting as catharses for the dejected consumer—because, for once, the primordial user wins.

ROBERT GRAND is a writer and curator living in Queens, New York.

NOTES 1. J. Hoberman, "Kind of Close Encounters," *Village Voice*, December 13, 1983, 76. 2. Ericka Beckman, *You The Better* description, artist's website, www.erickabeckman.com/you-the-better. 3. Olga Stefan, "Ericka Beckman at Kunsthalle Bern," *Art in America*, September 10, 2013, www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/ericka-beckman. 4. Richard Hertz, *Jack Goldstein and the ColArts Mafia* (Ojai, CA: Minneola Press, 2003), 81. 5. Barbara London and Regina Cornwell, "Playing with Technology: Artist Ericka Beckman with David Rosen," Museum of Modern Art Department of Film press release, May 10, 1999, www.erickabeckman.com/portfolio/through-a-video-window-technology-in-the-1990s. 6. Nicholas Forrest, "Ericka Beckman on Filmmaking, Gameplay, and Her Berlin Show," *Blouin Art Info*, September 22, 2015, www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1241879/ericka-beckman-on-filmmaking-gameplay-and-her-berlin-show. 7. London and Cornwell, "Playing With Technology: Artist Ericka Beckman with David Rosen." 8. Sarah Baker, "On Hiatus," *Art and Music* 24 (Winter 2013): 16–17. 9. Fred Vogelstein, "The Wired Interview: Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg," *Wired*, June 29, 2009, www.wired.com/2009/06/mark-zuckerberg-speaks.