

by Beate Scheder



With forty years of groundbreaking and captivating filmmaking to her name, it is only recently that Ericka Beckman has begun to emerge from the shadow of her better-known and mostly male contemporaries. Beckman has been a stand-out from the art world's mainstream, ever since her early work of the 1980s and 1990s. It feels about time that the wider public should discover her idiosyncratic Super-8 and 16mm performative films, focusing on the broad topic of 'game and play'.

PLAYING BY HER OWN RULES

"Sometimes you just don't know how to do it, sometimes you just don't know how to do it, sometimes you just don't know how to do it" – a cheerleader-like song accompanies a sports team dressed in boyish uniforms, competing in a surreal game. The words are lines from a song that features in *You the better*, a film by Ericka Beckman, and can be read as a bottom line of sorts to the film. The game the team is playing is a strange mixture of various ball games and casino gambling. The players strategise, fight and, together, do everything they can to beat "the House". Even the audience plays a role in the game, acting as the bettor. All is colourful, ludic, futile and cruel; winning is impossible. The action of the film builds gradually to the question: If this is an allegory for life in today's corporate world—are we the players or have we been played?

Cinderella from 1986, a quirky, feminist musical version of the cheesy fairy tale in which Cinderella is trapped in the interface of a game and learns to escape—means to dive into an artificial world that is both futuristic and retro. The former, because Beckman integrated concepts like interactivity and virtual reality long before they became mainstream, and the latter due to the DIY look and feel of her handmade props and stop-motion animations. Beckman's films are highly allegorical, alluding to sociocultural and political questions, commenting on sexism and capitalism and at the same time retaining their playfulness with loud colours and strong rhythms.

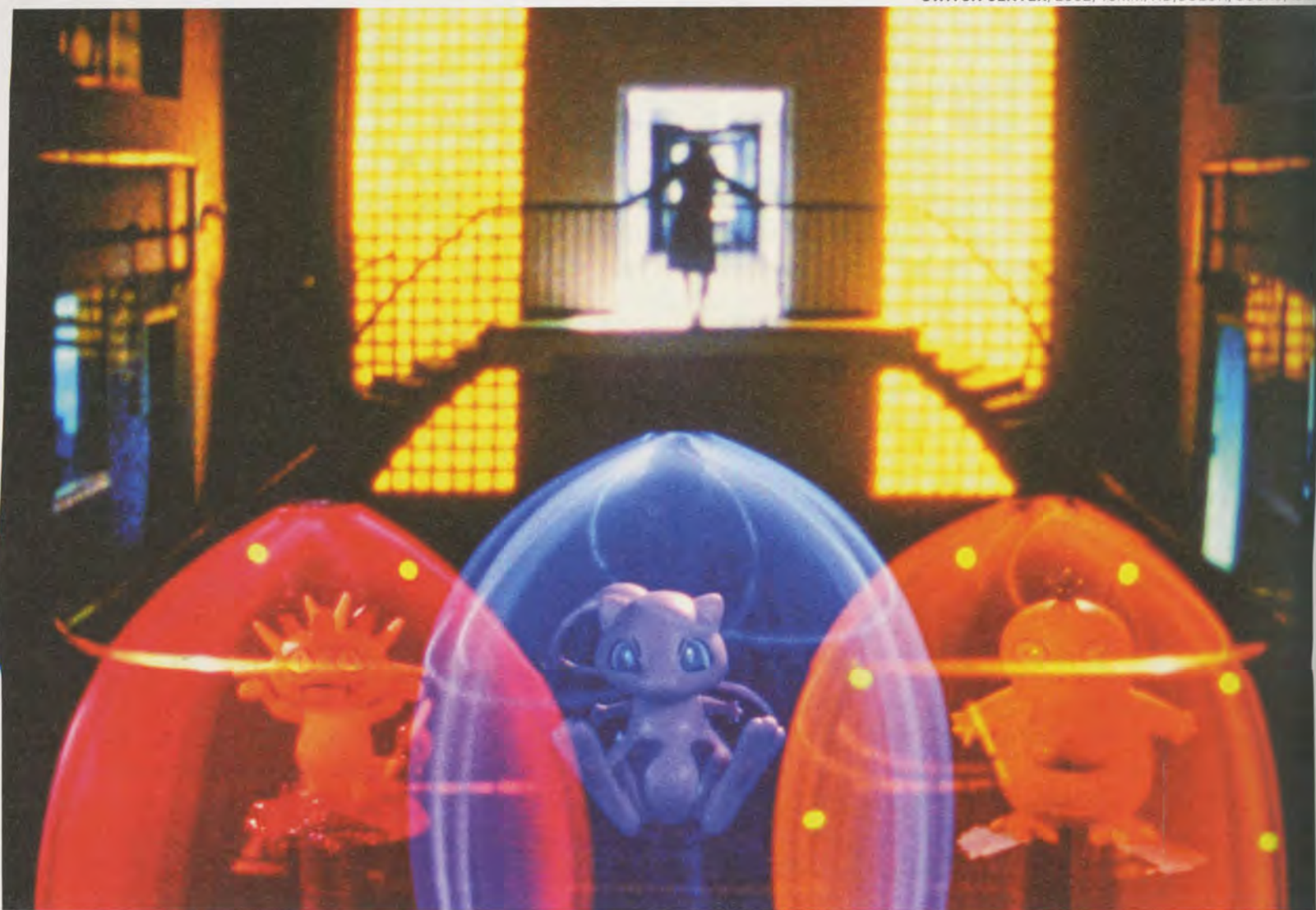
When the film was released in 1983 the response was muted, to say the least. There was a smattering of positive reviews, but it didn't quite fit into the prescribed categories of either the art world or experimental film world at the time. Then, when Beckman screened *You the better* at the New York Film Festival, it brought the house down. A similar thing occurred with *Hiatus*, a film about a young woman slipping into the persona of her online identity, named WANDA, and trying to create her own space within a virtual reality. WANDA must fight Player33, a greasy, unpleasant cyber-cowboy from Houston, who wants to occupy WANDA's animated garden. *Hiatus* was a flop at the Rotterdam Film Festival where it was screened in 1999, the year of its release, although in the past few years it has been exhibited and garnered acclaim.

The thematic focus of Beckman's work builds upon ideas of gaming, play and the rules one must follow in order to win. Gaming is not only the subject matter but also acts as a structural device for many of the films. "Most of the people of my generation at that particular point in time went to Hollywood to become screenwriters," she explains. "But I wanted to keep working as an artist and didn't want to go into narrative feature at all, so I chose game."

Born in 1951 in Hempstead, New York, Ericka Beckman began her career as a visual artist, moving into experimental filmmaking while studying at CalArts in the 1970s. She was an active member of the so-called "Pictures Generation", collaborating with artists like Mike Kelley, Matt Mullican, Tony Oursler, Ashley Bickerton and James Welling, however her work remained unappreciated for years, known only by a handful of insiders.

Beckman's work has been under-exhibited and under-screened for years however, eventually, in the 2010s this began to change. In 2013, her work was presented during a two day Image Games screening at Tate Modern in London, and in Kunsthalle Bern and Centre Pompidou. In 2014, she had a show at MOCA, L.A., swiftly followed by a whole host of gallery and institutional shows in both the US and Europe and culminating in her first solo exhibition at the Secession Building in Vienna. Maybe now, the opening line of *You the better*, an ironical homage to the power of faith, has finally come true: "If things could change, it could only change for the better." In the meantime, Beckman has never ceased to explore her field of interest, nor abandoned her distinctive visual language.

To watch these two films today—and this applies also to other intriguing examples like the Super 8 Trilogy in the 1970s, revolving around the theories of Jean Piaget about playing and learning or



You will continue shooting on your new film tomorrow.
What is it about?

I just started shooting a couple of weeks ago. It's a game film, based on economics and research I did about the board game Monopoly. Originally, Monopoly was a socialist game invented by a woman in the 1900s and played by utopian communities and colleges in the US. Eventually it was co-opted after the collapse of the banking structure in the late 1920s by a man who turned it into Monopoly. I am using the source of Monopoly as the basis of my film. It is a performance film; it has a lot of animation in it, and it will be a multi-screen piece.

Are you still working as you always did? Meaning analog, on 16mm film, using techniques like stop-motion and real props made by yourself...

Yes and no. A lot has changed. I am still working on 16mm. I bought a bunch of film from my favourite company, Fuji, before they went out of business and I am trying to use up all that stock. I have an animator working for me who works solely in 16mm. What is different is that I am using a lot of 3D printing for the fabrication as opposed to doing the props by hand and I am using robotic control for my animation. Most of the editing, compositing and output will be digital, but initially the process is still very performative, very hands-on and very labour intensive. I don't make things sitting in front of a computer screen. I make them in a space.

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Why is what? I would imagine that it's like handwriting
is for me: it gives you more time to reflect...

Exactly. That is what I tell a lot of people, like my students, when I teach them on 16mm. The main thing is the time of reflection, the formal staging process. And you have one chance at doing it. You have to get it right, and you have to live with it. I do a lot of experimentation that involves chance. I accept that, I enjoy it and I like to work with it. Eventually, very soon, I will probably shoot digital, but I will be looking for a way to keep working with the same expectation that I only have one shot at it. I don't like the idea that everything is re-workable and never finished.

You first started as a visual artist but changed your focus to filmmaking during your time at CalArts. How did this come about?

I went to CalArts because I was interested in music and animation. I wanted to go to a place where a lot of people were classically trained in both animation and music, but had a very experimental approach and were interested in investigating alternative forms of animation and music.

I was a visual artist, a painter and the first critique I got there was from a feminist artist, Miriam Schapiro. She came into my studio the very first week, looked at my paintings and just said to me: 'You can't do this, you are a woman. It's too beautiful. You can't make beautiful art.' Then she walked out.

How did you react?

I just said to myself: 'Okay, I am not going to paint anymore. I am going to devote myself to making films'. It was very straight forward. The situation at CalArts was very special to me because I worked closely with the music department. My relationship

with music had begun before anything else, before I ever started performing in front of the camera. My early films were performance films in which I was doing very abstract things with my body; creating rhythm structures just with my body, in a kind of minimal dance. Early on, I was developing a language that was based on performance, gesture and music.

What or who were your influences back then?

I was not interested in film culture and movies. And even to this day, I am not the best moviegoer. Back then, my major influences were Yvonne Rainer and Vito Acconci. I actually worked with both of them. My influences were people that I worked with. Dan Graham for example. Other important influences were Jack Goldstein, Julia Heyward and Laurie Anderson. Regarding experimental films, I loved the work of Owen Land, who was then known as George Landow. I also have to mention the composers Rhys Chatham and Glenn Branca, my contemporaries. And of

course, experimental theatre. I was very influenced by Mabou Mines and Robert Wilson.

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HIATUS, 1999/2015 16MM/HD, COLOR, SOUND, 22 MIN. DUAL SCREEN INSTALLATION, EDITION OF 8

I have read in past interviews that you consider film to be a performance medium – could you explain this a bit more?

It goes back to how I started using film a long time ago. For me, filmed performance means using the recording medium of film as a temporal container. I wanted to experiment with what temporality

was superimposition. I don't think I would ever have done a film if I hadn't had a camera that allowed me to do multiple exposures. Film allows me the freedom to combine two unrelated temporal events in the same frame, to really think about what is real and what isn't and how to make sense of cause and effect.

Cinderella had industrial production in it. Play started with these very simple gestures on film, making a play space, then gaming, boy's games, girl's games, multiplayer online games, virtual reality.

There is a progression going on, and I am always involved in some kind of

HIATUS



truly is. Performance means movement and gesture and meaning. I wanted to break things down into very simple units that could all be interchangeable. A gesture could be interchanged with a sound, a graphic, an image or text. For me, the film camera itself became an editing tool, with which to bring together different temporal events. The key to my work

How do you find ideas for your films?

I think there is a kind of logical progression in my work from my first investigations and experiments all the way up until now. Everything is based on this exploration of work and play. I've always been interested in industry, robotics and economy. The film I'm working on right now is dealing with economics. Prior to that,

research. I collect a lot of material and when something eventually crystallises, it comes from all these different directions. The film itself has to involve an original and dynamic visual scheme, as well as having political and social content that I feel is important to express at the time.

Your early films are already characterised by your now characteristic bright colours, flamboyant costumes and simple shades in front of a black background. How did you develop this unique visual language?

I was very interested in simplicity, symbols and signs. I grew up on the advertising of early television and I was fascinated by its directness

A CHILD WILL INVENT
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AS WE PROGRESS TO
ADULTHOOD, WE REALISE
THAT WE ARE SOCIAL

I wanted to use very complex ideas, but I did not want to talk about them. I didn't want to use narrative structure or autobiographical sources and structures. I just wanted to have the ability to communicate on a very clear simple level, something much more complex.

Especially your Super 8 Trilogy is based on the work of Jean Piaget,

CINDERELLA, 1986, 16MM/HD, COLOR, SOUND, 30 MIN.



and how easily you could form your own sign language. I looked at all the components that made something work as advertising or games and I developed my own. Everything had to be as simple as possible, easily and quickly readable so that I could combine things, build more complex relationships and bring new ideas to these simple elements.

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COMPETITION EFFICIENT.

on his theories of learning and of games. How did you get interested in him and what kept you fascinated?

The game part evolved right out of Piaget. I was making a film and was working with the artist James Nares, who was performing in my film. He thought that the way I talked about my film was very similar to the concepts of Piaget, so I started

reading and it really did take over my production for many years. But I read Piaget's books more as poetry than as academic studies. What I was fascinated by was his logic—how he took a theory and tested it on children in observational studies and then devised his ideas, based on what he saw.

I learned a lot from his books and they gave me the confidence to build my own logical structures. I envisioned the little experiments he had done with kids but as full-scale performances with props, and tested out his theories through my work. The Super 8 Trilogy are directly tied to his books and are all about symbol formation, rule formation, identity and language formation, play, memory and symbol. After I finished the Trilogy, I was confident. This was the work that gave me my confidence, and you need confidence as an artist.

In the Super 8 trilogy there is, for example, *Broken Rule*, starring Mike Kelley as the central character. What kind of rules is he breaking?

Broken Rule came out of a question, which is posed at the end of the film in a little song: 'If everybody does it, will it be a real rule or not?' It goes back to this division between children and adults in understanding what a rule is. When children play—I remember this from my own childhood—they repeat rituals, doing things over and over again until they take on the character of a rule within the repertoire of the gameplay. That is an invention. A child will invent something and make it a rule. As we progress to adulthood, we realise that we are social bodies and that these rules end up being rituals that make the game efficient or make competition efficient.

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HIATUS



For me, *Broken Rule* was really about trying to understand the difference between a rule that forms in one's imagination and a social rule. Kelley was a very good friend of mine back then, and I chose him not only because he is a great performer but because he also represented to

me the character that I wanted—someone who tried but could not fit in. Kelley got what I was trying to do right away and we designed the ending together, which was that he broke apart, got lost in his own space and ended up creating a meaningful moment for himself,

while everybody else stayed on course with what they were being told to do.

You the better, a film you shot in 1983, is intriguing in another way, as it plays with the idea of interactivity long before interactive video games were even invented. Now the situation has changed.

desensitised to. It is the same for me: I am no longer interested in interactivity either.

How did you approach the concept of interactivity back then, for *You the better*?

The interactivity part came a little

things from a kind of philosophical point of view, and then I fell into gambling. The gambling scene seemed to occupy both of them. There was a lot of faith in chance, but also probability and even determinism. I got very involved in going to the casinos and watching people play and reading about gambling history, processes and math.

Eventually, I came across the game in California, in the desert called Jai Alai. My ideas were nailed at that point. It was a casino game in the middle of nowhere. There were these Mexican male players playing this high-velocity sport and then cowboys, middle-class white men and women, who were betting on them. This was a form of sport and gambling made into one. I decided to make the participant in the film the audience, so there would be this triangulated relationship between the performers and the bettor and this off-screen character called the House. The whole film sort of evolved around a disclosure of the mechanics of the game itself. Anyway—when the film came out nobody understood one bit. The audience hated it. They could not understand this film. But now they do.

Do you think about the audience when you are working on a film?

At some point that is all I am thinking about. I really do care about the experience of it. I want it to be playful and I want it to be enjoyable. It is very important, but the only way to get to that is to have things worked out ahead of time.

Your film, *"Cinderella"*, from 1986 is indeed very playful. It is a unique adaptation of the eponymous fairy tale of the Brüder Grimm, which for ages seemed to be Hollywood's favourite story from the collection...

It is so disgusting.

Earlier today I had a conversation with a Mexican curator about how we are surrounded by interactivity through all our everyday devices, so it has become boring nowadays.

You see how things change and are affected by what is going on culturally and what we are sensitised and

bit later. The film itself was really about this collision of chance and determinism. There were a lot of philosophers that believed that everything in the universe was predetermined and at the same time you would have this great belief in chance. I was looking at those two





So, how and why did you get the idea to make another film about it?

Two things were going on. One was that I was very interested in industry at the time. I looked at the history of industrial production and I went from the very beginning—the first thing that was produced in the forge, to the very end. At the time of making *'Cinderella'*, it was robotics in the car industry. I actually did shoot robotics. At the same time, I wanted to make a game for a girl. I work on a lot of things simultaneously in these periods between productions. So I did research into industrial production, as well as fairy tales. I took a Jungian fairy tale course with a student of Marie-Louise von Franz, looking for a story to work with.

I needed a story that had a kind of tradition and exploration, that would allow me to move through time, as a parallel to industrial production. I was keen to focus on finding a story about a woman, but I was

also interested in stories that had depth. I was reading a book called *A Morphology of a Folk Tale*, by Vladimir Propp who structured all these fairy tales into basic narrative motifs and symbols and looked at how stories in the culture would change over time. I came up with *Cinderella* through an anthology of *Cinderella* stories put together by a woman in New York, and through an anthropology book called *Three Hundred and Forty-Five Variants of Cinderella*. I became fascinated because there is an underbelly to the story that is not at all what we live with as the *Cinderella* story of Hollywood.

What is it instead?

Most of the stories are about girls having to survive in the workplace without a father. It is a story transmitted from woman to woman, mother to daughter or caretaker to girl. The business of the prince and the shoe come in crazy late. There are many ways the *Cinderella* film could have evolved into something else but I was keenly interested in game;

I wanted to do a feminist retelling of the *Cinderella* story and also to get to the core idea of what a mass-produced copy carries. I was very interested in these early ideas, like the Baudelairian ones about copy versus the original. It was motivated by a kind of feminist energy, but really I was interested in this idea: What is original, what is a false copy of an ideal, what is a decoy, what is a false image? Eventually, what it comes down to is this: A girl finally being able to believe in her own narrative.

In *Cinderella*, and also *Hiatus* from 1999, a film that shows a woman diving into the virtual reality of a video game, you sort of anticipate the discussions brought up by Anita Sarkeesian in 2013 about the stereotyped "Damsel in Distress" in games. Isn't it bitter how little has changed in all these years?

I didn't follow that discussion. I came upon it much later when somebody else told me to look into it. I got involved in virtual reality research in 1990 by going to California to NASA



BOTH IMAGES FROM HIATUS

Ames. It was the very beginnings of virtual reality. Two things were going on at that time: There was a strong scientific community that was developing medical equipment and robotic mining equipment using virtual tools managed by people in different locations. It was almost entirely medical and military research.

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At the other side you had another, very optimistic, badge of people in the Bay Area. They were involved in a softer, more experimental side of virtual reality. With these people, I got involved. I began to think about how you could use dance and performance and gesture in virtual space to build things that would be sort of shared realities. I was interested in these imaginary, playful spaces and then, for one reason or another, science took over and this kind of optimism and play disappeared. The film was a result of this takeover—the idea that something very imaginary, private and personal would be co-opted and used by a corporate identity. The film was a response to that early period.

Before VR became popular in games and entertainment...

I had a lot of friends who were working in the new technology, and I did some research into game companies in LA. I went to Disney, I went to the Gameboy/Gamegirl companies. I was looking at people that were designing games for girls.

What kind of games did they design for girls?

GameGirl and Zelda. But it's still the same thing: Damsel in Distress. Boy as hero, Girl surviving torture or tricky situations. My interest was to get beyond what existed at that particular time. I was trying to think about how a girl could design her own space for herself and create a world. In the film *Hiatus*, that is the garden and the Indian culture. The film made more sense later on when I returned to it and made the double screen version. As a single screen narrative it became too much about the competition of the girl and revenge. The double screen brought out all the animation and the development of her game world and gameplay.

Many of your films, and *Hiatus* is one of them, have had a bigger response from the audience just recently, years after they came out—why is that? Do you have an explanation for it?

I really don't know. This is always amazing. I had some studio assistants

when I was making a documentary in 2008, about the music scene in Lower Manhattan during the 70s, when I came here. They were graduate students helping me. We were transferring a lot of Super 8 films to digital in my studio, and I just said: 'Why don't you look at some of this early work that I did and tell me what you think.' They responded so positively! Other people did the same thing and eventually, I broke through.

There was a long period where my work was not understood. I think culture just caught up. It is very simple. In the 1990s the art world started accepting media more and my friends of the time,

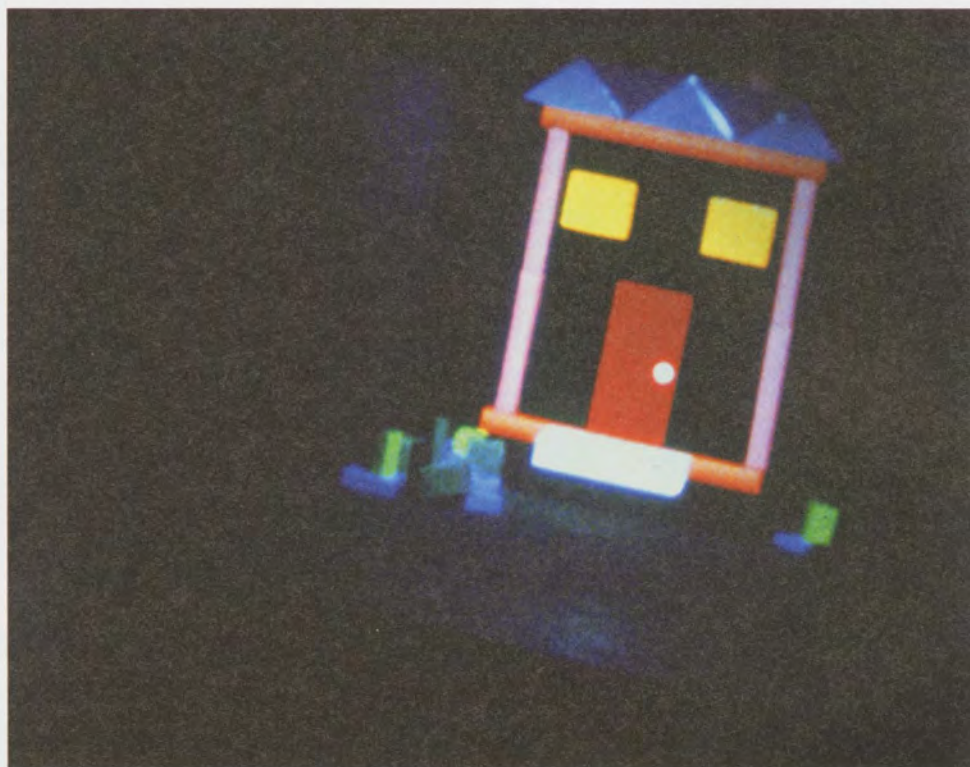
like Mike Kelley and Tony Oursler, were saying: 'Do something about it, do something about it.' By that point, I had developed such thick skin because nobody understood what I was doing. I just pursued and pursued my own work until, finally, some younger people came around, saw the stuff and started to get very active with it.



YOU THE BETTER, 1983
16MM/HD, COLOR, SOUND
30 MIN.



SUPER 8 TRILOGY
OUT OF HAND (3/3), 1980
SUPER 8/16MM/HD, COLOR, SOUND
30 MIN.



SUPER 8 TRILOGY
WE IMITATE, WE BREAK UP (1/3), 19
SUPER 8/16MM/HD, COLOR, SOUND
30 MIN.