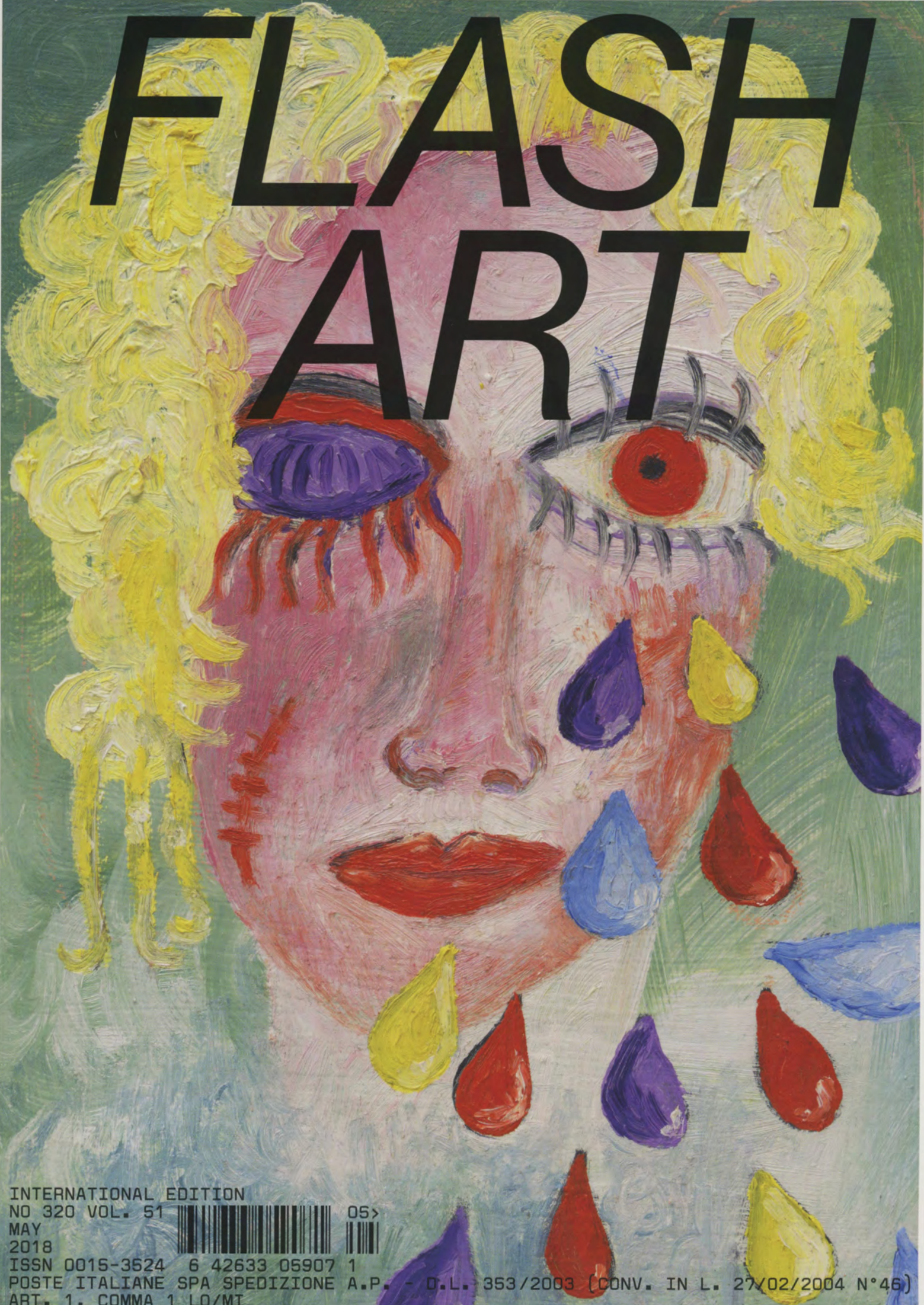


FLASH ART



Jutta Koether. *Emma*. 1984. Oil on canvas. 30 x 24 cm.

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Over a career spanning more than forty years, Ericka Beckman (b.1951, US; lives in New York) has created pioneering works in film, sound, performance, and installation that engage game structures – as found in sports, arcade games, and casinos – to explore role playing, memory, and cultural values.



Friends, artist peers, and art professionals often perform in these works, reducing the distance between art and everyday life. Beckman discusses with Attilia Fattori Franchini the use of digital technology as a political tool, and together they consider some of the main themes and subjects presented in her work.



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Attilia Fattori Franchini: You studied at CalArts and were part of John Baldessari's "post-studio" class. How did L.A. influence your work in the beginning? And what was the beginning?

Ericka Beckman: I came to California from the Midwest and decided to enroll in CalArts, as I was specifically interested in the school's vibrant music department and the unstructured format it offered. At the time, CalArts was one of the most experimental programs in the country, and as I made the decision to be a filmmaker, I searched for an educational format that could allow complete openness. The artist groups surrounding Baldessari's Post Studio Art classes – which met most of the time in his Santa Monica studio to discuss the different exhibitions on display throughout L.A. – were highly influential to me. There was this feeling that L.A. was ephemeral: artists were using the vast urban setting for conceptual art projects; there was no institutional center. The city was a vibrant, open-air artistic field where diverse and live art projects were appearing and disappearing.

Guy de Cointet's studies on the use of signs and symbols had a great impact on the way I started thinking about narratives and defining my interest in repetition and gesture in performance and film. Pivotal figures that highly impacted my thinking during that period were Yvonne Rainer and Vito Acconci. Rainer was at CalArts only briefly, working on experimental ideas of breaking up narrative tropes into categories and assigning them different types of filmic representations. Her focus was aimed at untangling all the narrative forms of film displayed through a more performative, theatrically detached methodology. I fell in love with her process. Acconci was an incredible mentor. I met him on my last semester at the school and continued to work with him on *The Red Tapes* (1977) project, and again later in New York.

Indeed, you then moved to New York. Did that change influence structures in your work?

My first encounter with New York was through the Whitney Independent Study Program. I decided to apply, as Yvonne Rainer was teaching there, but I didn't study with her again. New York unfolded to me a world of experimental dance, theater, music, filmmaking, and performance, completing the education I had in California. For the first time in New York I was part of a network of practitioners that were

interested in experimentation and were finding ways, locally or abroad, specifically in Europe, to financially support and distribute ephemeral practices. It was a challenge – and a great experience – to be a woman working with media and part of the eclectic and male-heavy scene of the 1980s.

Your work has been often connected thematically with the Pictures Generation – you were included in the 2009 exhibition "The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art – but somehow I feel your position escapes that, embracing a more cross-disciplinary appropriation that exposes the proximity and complicity society has with these images.

I really love your question and I love your insight into that. The members of the so-called Pictures Generation were friends and part of a unique network of practitioners. We would gather every Saturday to discuss the exhibitions in town. It was a real cohort – a peer group focused on critical exchange and artistic dialogue. This vibrancy changed very much in the '80s with the formation of a commercial market and gallery scene, which inevitably created some divisions among the group. My research focus has always been parallel to the Pictures Generation: while they were investigating the power of mediated distribution, I was more interested in collective signs and symbols, our capacity to process them, and how information is absorbed when not fully understood. I choose as the subject of my films very recognizable images, collective symbologies, gender stereotypes, to engage the audience in a direct way and unfold hidden social behaviors and roles.

All your films are shot in a black box with specific architectural sets, costumes, and props. I'm sure this is a means of controlling the result, but I wonder if it's also a strategy to create parallel realities inspired by real structures reproduced in a subversive way.

The behavioral studies of Jean Piaget had an enormous influence on me, and I wanted to translate various ideas about prelinguistic thinking into film form to activate new patterns. The particular period between 1977 and 1981 was an intense studio time for me, working only in a black box to acquire the kind of confidence that I needed as a filmmaker. Piaget's ideas allowed me to understand the difference between a personal reality and a social reality. I made films about subjects

that offended me in a personal way, transforming subsequently the concept of the subversive as a tactic. I was very interested in making films that seemed to be, on the one hand, colorful, playful, easy to watch – sort of mesmerizing – while suggesting a sharp critique of social attitudes, to break down patriarchal and oppressive structures. You can see these intentions clearly in *Cinderella* (1989) and *Hiatus* (1999/2015).

The protagonists of *Cinderella* (1989) and *Hiatus* (1999) are somehow archetypal. The first is a tragicomic restaging of the classical story, transformed into a game – achievement measured by scores and points. We observe both female protagonists moving across locations while playing between fantasy and everyday expectations. The films are metaphors for the female condition, the romantic dream, social pressure, and emancipation.

Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, and generally postmodern philosophy developed an interesting idea about how the Cinderella story can be summarized as an exchange between established patriarchal cultures. There are many different versions of the story. Some deal with women trying to survive in a male patriarchal society, rather than being part of or escaping from a female household. Some versions narrate women in the struggle to disguise themselves as men in order to financially survive in complex environments. Cinderella's ability to emancipate herself along the aforementioned postmodernist ideas were the main sources of inspiration for that specific work. Both films use technology, arcade games, and virtual reality as a narrative format to create complex scenarios.

As a starting point, your films take specific moments when everyday life becomes indistinguishable from a gaming interface. I find this gesture extremely political and more relevant now that we are experiencing the failure of democracy and hypermediation. Has the advent of social media changed the way you think about interfaces?

My work employs lot of chance elements in its making and avoids postproduction. I had developed a playful approach to filmmaking, shooting live action and then double-exposing it to new animations or layers, allowing unexpected things to happen. These particular results emerge only through random

experimentation, working with mistakes and unstable processes. Instead of composing each film as a scripted linear narrative, I would create these specific tableaux and then double expose them to a different idea. This process is very similar to online browsing and smartphone devices – accessing multiple things at once – so somehow I have always envisioned my work as a very specific type of digital interface.

I am particularly interested in your portrayal of systems. The protagonists of your work are always faced with a system: “the house” in *You the Better* (1983) or “the levels of a game” in *Cinderella* (1989) or the idea of virtual reality in *Hiatus* (1999). Performed as the voice of societal pressure, each system in your films becomes a driving force and an oppressive control mechanism.

The key word here is “system.” Our whole democracy is based on competition. Social competition forces you into a strategy-building scenario in which you either protect yourself or advance in complexity. I have chosen games rather than personal narratives as a driving structure in my work, as I was interested anthropologically in how games have developed through

culture. Games can be simplified as a process of teaching people certain behaviors, and this is a key tool for looking at broader political structures.

Your films expose the limits of certain imposed structures, but within them we can also observe the prospect of an alternative.

In every game film I have ever shot – I’m now on my fifth one – I have always created escape mechanisms. My first game film, *The Broken Rule* (1979), was based on very simple ideas: What is the definition of a rule? What is the difference between social and personal rules? Moving forward in my work, I have attempted to have two strong ideas coexist: the game as infinite continuation; and the possibility of an alternative, a dual structure composed of opposites.

Do you think the advancement of technology has empowered women?

I believe that through social media women can finally have a much stronger and independent voice. My fascination with experimental media in the 1970s was also related to the possibility of affirming my own format and transforming it into an independent political voice.

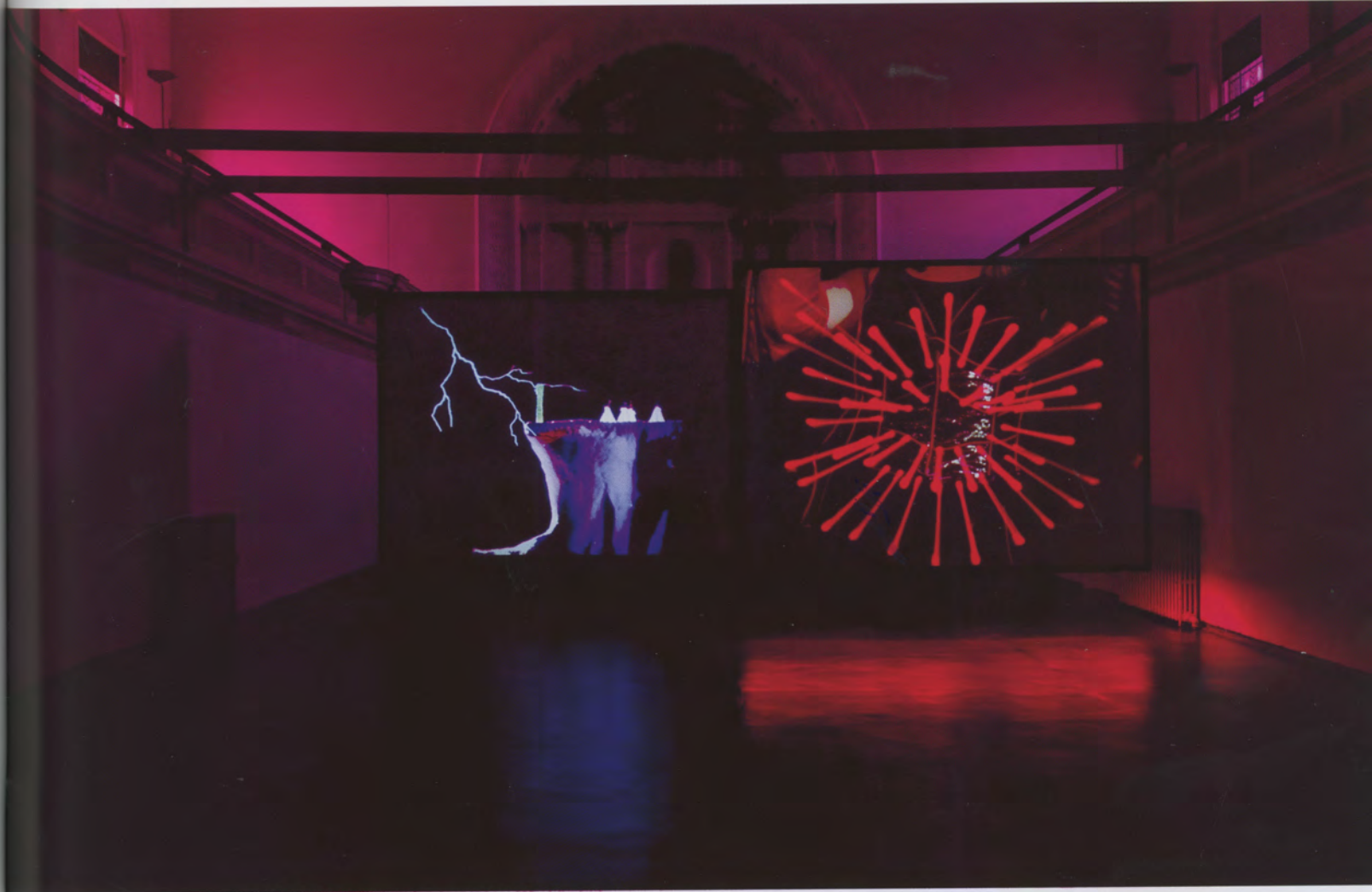
You have been really interested in the idea of virtuality as a parallel reality; but have you thought of experimenting with VR?

Well, I did back in 1991 when I worked on *Hiatus*, but the technology was not yet ready as an artistic medium. Right now I am more interested in using 360-degrees and the extended vision it offers. Nevertheless, what I find thrilling about VR are the possibilities of developing a singular experience into a collective one. The way I would like to approach it in the future is through choreography, working with live acts redefining bodies, movement, and space.

ATTILIA FATTORI FRANCHINI is an independent curator and writer based between London and Milan. She is currently curating: BMW Open Work, a new program of commissions launched at Frieze London 2017; the “Emergent” section of Miart 2018; the third edition of Curva Blu, a residency project in Favignana, Sicily.

ERICKA BECKMAN’s first major solo exhibition in the UK is on view until July 8, 2018, at the Zabłudowicz Collection, London.

- i *Cinderella*, 1986. Film still. 16mm transferred to HD video, color, sound, 28’30”. Photography by Ericka Beckman. Copyright of the artist. Courtesy of Zabłudowicz Collection, London.
- ii *Switch Center*, 2003. Film still. 16mm transferred to HD video, color, sound, 11’06”. Film installation at Kunsthalle Bern, 2013. Photography by Ericka Beckman. Copyright of the artist. Courtesy of Zabłudowicz Collection, London and VK (VeneKlasen/Werner), Berlin.
- iii *Cinderella*, 1986. Film still. 16mm transferred to HD video, color, sound, 28’30”. Film installation at le Magasin, Grenoble, 2014. Copyright of the artist. Courtesy of Zabłudowicz Collection, London.
- iv *Hiatus*, 1999–2015. Dual screen installation, 16mm transferred to HD video, color, sound, synchronized LED track, 20’15”. Installation view at Zabłudowicz Collection, London, 2018. Photography by Tim Bowditch. Copyright of the artist. Courtesy of Zabłudowicz Collection, London.
- v *Cinderella*, 1986. Film still. 16mm transferred to HD video, color, sound, 28’30”. Film installation at VK (VeneKlasen/Werner), Berlin, 2015. Photography by Jörg von Bruchhausen. Copyright of the artist. Courtesy of Zabłudowicz Collection, London.
- vi *Tension Building*, 2016. 16mm film transferred to HD, wooden, bleacher, sound, 8’32”. Film installation at Secession, Vienna, 2017. Photography by Iris Ratzinger. Courtesy and copyright of the artist.
- vii *The Super-8 Trilogy*, 1978–81. Super-8, color, sound. Film installation at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2018. Courtesy and copyright of the artist.
- viii *Ibid.*
- ix *You the Better*, 1983–2015. 16 mm film transferred to HD, 8 animated DMX, controlled light boxes, sound, 30 mins. Film installation at Secession, Vienna, 2017. Photography by Iris Ratzinger. Courtesy and copyright of the artist.



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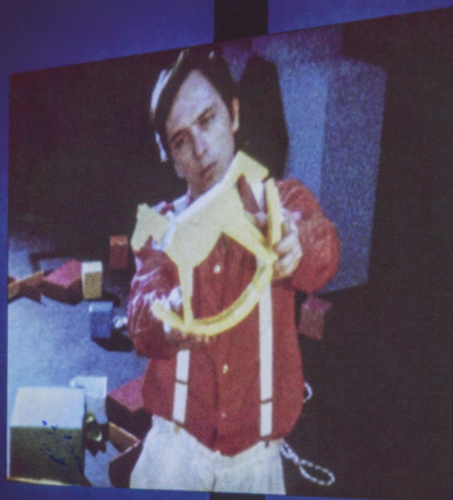
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