



TEXTE ZUR KUNST

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Ericka Beckman, "You the Better," 1983/2015

When it comes to contemporary conditions of reception, it appears that very few experiences have been spared the paradigm shift – from an assumption of basic integrity and political substance to a turbo-media environment of “spin” and demagoguery – symbolized by the recent presidential election in the USA. The ongoing rabble-rousing of Donald J. Trump, who makes visible contemporary American values even while undermining the ideal of what he claims them to be, undoubtedly inflected my viewing, this summer, of Ericka Beckman’s “Game Mechanics” at Vienna’s Secession. After almost a year of Trump’s spectacular public rallies, showcasing his

artful knack of upping the ante in any standoff and promising the certainty of “winning” to his loyal base, Beckman’s engagement with the social and symbolic arenas of games and gaming belies such pageantry with a meditation on the sinister nature of such structures, mechanics, and systems of power. In a career spanning more than forty years, Beckman – a filmmaker who participated in New York City’s No Wave scene and whose work has been art historically subsumed within the broader commitments of the Pictures generation – has repeatedly delved into the complex circuits mediating the relationship between images and subject formation. Significantly, the tightly



"Ericka Beckman: Game Mechanics," Secession, Vienna, 2017, installation view

curated selection of works she includes in this exhibition does not nostalgically cast the 1980s and its postmodern critique of representation as a heroic moment that cannot be exceeded; nor does it present the Pictures generation's strategies of critical deconstruction – which had been devised to make visible the social context of both objects and subjects – as remaining unaffected by historical transformations. Rather, Beckman, by pairing her 1983/2015 "You the Better" with her most recent film, "Tension Building" (2016), alongside notebooks of preparatory material (1982 to 1997), including concept drawings formative to her filmmaking, communicates the urgency of engaging with the current mediated rituals of identity formation while taking stock of the historical processes that shaped their foundation.

Among this selection of materials, "You the Better," a 16mm film installation, serves as the anchor. A low-fi simulation of a video game (in the form of a single-channel projection flanked by freestanding monochrome lightboxes), the work delves into capital's logic of incessant reproduction and the integration of this logic within all forms of life. Not only does capital propel suburban planning, casinos, and rites

of leisure, the work suggests, it also contributes to the constitution of an individual who is programmed to "play the game," the game of achieving an ever-more elusive American Dream. In the projected video, a team of five uniformed players engages with a complex sequence of familiar diversions – basketball, pinball, dodgeball, slot machines – carried out, here, according to indeterminate and evolving rules that never cohere into a lucid structure. Preceding the games is an opening sequence that establishes the film's conceptual framework: building blocks resembling gaming pieces rotate next to a yellow circle, as a duo of electronic voices robotically intones, "I'm big and strong as a building can be, I look past the community and what do I see? I see land out there stretching far and wide. I think I'll blow up and subdivide." At every repetition of the word "subdivide," the blocks either explode or they multiply and become evenly arranged into a suburban housing lot (the chorus sings: "Subdivision knows no end, you break into a unit and you do it again"). The configuration of identical houses starts to spin, recalling a roulette wheel, as the yellow circle replicates into numerous balls or "points."



Ericka Beckman, "Tension Building," Secession, Vienna, 2017, film installation

But what do you have left, when there is nothing? Nothing left. Nothing left at all ... (points), in the distance (points), on the land (points), make it possible to expand, uniting the lines of our plan, points awaiting our demands ... so go out there and get those points, it's up to you to get those points, everybody wants to get those points ...

As this opening ditty and its accompanying visuals suggest, the "games" in this work cannot be disassociated from the entrenched systems of power that organize even the most "innocent" pastimes while obscenely veiling the growing separation between public space and private life, subsuming both into modes of cultural consumption and entertainment. Cue the Trumposphere. This grotesque reality is underscored by the gameplay portrayed in the filmic action, the aforementioned, seemingly familiar yet incoherent procedures through which players acquire and lose points in pursuit of becoming "you the better" (and, as wordplay would have it, the "bet-tor"). As the film unfolds, the elision between self-improvement with risk-taking and the constant adaptation to an unpredictable field of play leads to exuberant highs as well as loss and animosity between teammates. As the players try to "get those points," the polarities they experience

keep them in a state of precarity, thus permitting "the game" to extend into new geographic and biopolitical territories.

Meanwhile, Beckman's "Tension Building," a film she began in 2012 and revised after the US elections of 2016 by adding the phantasmagoric final image of the US Capitol, employs an American football game as a topos through which to reflect on contemporary social, architectural, and ideological configurations. Beckman shot the work at Harvard Stadium in Boston (1903, Lewis Jerome Johnson) and at the Artemio Franchi Municipal Stadium in Florence (1932, Pier Luigi Nervi), combining this footage with stills of various architectural models. The mixed stop-motion and live-action film is edited at a rapid, almost vertiginous tempo as the camera scans the reinforced concrete constructions and captures the exuberant performance of national identity within it. We hear the rhythms of a marching band and the typical clamor of a football game – cheerleading chants, score announcements, team commands, public exclamations – as the camera repeatedly and often erratically circles the stadium, hovers above the playing field, and follows the motions of the various actors that

make up the ensemble. This whirlwind of sounds and actions locates the film's gallery audience (seated on bleachers installed within *Secession's* space) as participants in the spectacle; yet the same hypervelocity and sensorial overload also produces a critical estrangement that makes it virtually impossible to be completely immersed in the spectacle's thrall. The game dutifully follows its script, with everyone playing their part in the ritual (which includes the unfurling of a giant American flag) and, as day turns into night, the film concludes with the Capitol hovering above the stadium.

In response to the homogenizing forces of capital that manufacture social distinctions and propagate them via a constellation of media, and contra the instrumentalization of language by political opportunists, Beckman's films deploy media forms in a way that frames the complexity of our contemporary moment without being cloying or reductive; in fact, beyond using games to interrogate the rational administration of life under conditions of late capitalism, her work is a meditation on the difficulty of performing critique when all aspects of society are so profoundly entangled. The distinction between "critical" and "reactionary" practices, which had been heatedly debated in the 1980s context of the Pictures generation, no longer hold. Yet it would be a misnomer to categorize Beckman's practices as "post-critical"; her films direct us toward a critique by eliciting our desire to narrativize them only to confront the inadequacy of such hermeneutics. Here, the drawings become constitutive as the particularity of each study, doubling as media "frame," reveals the artist's wariness of being overpowered or seduced by a temporal chain of events that appears transparent

or inevitable. Analyzing the structural dynamics of a social world built on an imperative to be exceptional, differentiate oneself, and "win" may not allay our anxieties, yet it may nevertheless allow us to construct a new politics of the image at a time when an alliance between "tricksters" and turbo-capitalism are aggressively changing the rules of the game.

"Ericka Beckman: Game Mechanics," *Secession*, Vienna, July 6–September 3, 2017.