

Jan Braet looks at art and life, in bloom and decline, like roses. This week: the exhibition Fair Game by Ericka Beckman at Museum M, Leuven.

The idea of learning through play inspired Ericka Beckman (69) in her first experiments in art. In the late 1970s, she hung out in New York with Laurie Anderson, Joan Jonas and other women artists who were trying out a new, multimedia art form with elements of music, performance, theater, film and visual arts. Because she also enjoys puzzles, Beckman combines the game element with her basic interest in economic matters in her film installations. Through interactive techniques, she turns the spectator into a participant who must discover for himself the logic behind that combination.

Curator Valerie Verhac presents Beckman's film installations, You the Better from 1983/2015 and the brand new Reach Capacity, alongside the multimedia installation Nanotech Players in three rooms of Museum M, together accounting for the exhibition Fair Game. An ideal world functions according to fair rules. But what if the world functions according to the rules of speculative capitalism, where the vagaries of the money market disrupt sustainable investment, not least in the real estate sector? Then we are largely at the mercy of chance, which also rules in the world of gambling and sports betting. In You the Better ('You, the bettor'), we are hounded at breakneck speed to gamble on the winners of a very physical ball game as well as to speculate on the housing market. Like the athletes on the field, animated by the urge to win, we notice too late that the rules of the game are constantly changing and that we are doomed to lose. The puzzle behind the film installation Reach Capacity has three components: the philosophy of the Monopoly game and two of Beckman's unfortunate experiences in real estate. During the reconstruction work in Lower Manhattan after 9/11, many middle-class homes and old industrial buildings - including Beckman's studio - were expropriated and demolished to make way for expensive condominiums, which fitted in with the expansion of Wall Street. Around that time, she also moved to her hometown in Saint Louis, Missouri. There she filmed the clearing of the neighborhood inhabited mostly by black families, where the government was planning a large military complex, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. The residents were able to sell their properties to the bank at a price that was not enough to buy a new property, so they had to take out a mortgage loan from the bank.

In the film installation Reach Capacity, Beckman uses computerized props, maquettes of houses, talking points, puppet-like figures and Chinese shadows to simulate the course of the Monopoly game: the succession of real estate operations with changing odds and the victory of the monopolist. Only, the artist has a surprise in store for us when she suddenly makes the screen literally turn over and offer a new perspective. Indeed, in the spirit of Monopoly's inventor, Elizabeth Magie, she devised a variant of the game that puts an end to the monopolist's empire and gives everyone a fair chance to acquire a piece of land and a house.

The exact rules of the never-commercialized variant of the game have not survived, but the philosophy behind it has. In Reach Capacity, the figures representing the working people perform a pantomime that depicts a fair labor theory: they compress their work within a strict time limit and thus have the necessary time and energy left over to do things together, such as founding banks to stop the monopolists.