

PERFORMANCE

TAKING STALK

Piper Marshall on Ericka Beckman

October 29, 2021



Ericka Beckman, *STALK* (detail), 2021, still from the HD-video component (color, sound, 30 minutes) of a mixed-media performance additionally comprising a mechanical stage prop and live drummer.

FOR MORE THAN FORTY YEARS, Ericka Beckman has coaxed viewers to assume the perspective of a child. Her earliest films, in 8 and 16 mm, featured simple performances, bright geometric shapes, and crude computer graphics layered into staccato vignettes. (Critics such as Sally Banes have likened their looping, repetitive structure to children’s songs.) The camera was her editing tool: Beckman double-exposed the film to alter the tempo and animate the tableau. Rehearsing the dynamic between caregiver and ward, teacher and student, these early, small-gauge works complement pieces such as Joan Jonas’s *The Juniper Tree*, 1976, or the educational complex of the filmmaker’s frequent collaborator Mike Kelley.

Beckman spent the 1970s between Los Angeles and New York, simultaneously earning an MA from the California Institute of the Arts and completing the Whitney Independent Study Program. Those first films earned her the title “Village Vanguard Filmmaker of the Year,” as well as placement in three Whitney Biennials. Since then, she has been neatly tucked into a genealogy of Pictures-generation art, thanks in part to her association with Jack Goldstein and to her concern with the materiality of film. Yet if Pictures is defined by a fixed subject position, extended duration, and the return of representation, Beckman’s collaged animation exceeds such qualities, releasing differential reception, dispersed subject positions, and an alternative syntax. Now, Beckman explains, she “performed the camera”—fitting concepts from developmental psychology to an early prosumer device, the Fujica Single 8 camera, and trading narrative development for the step-by-step cultivation of cognition.

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In *We Imitate, We Break Up*, 1978, Beckman, clad in a school uniform, enters the frame as “The Imitator,” who mimics the movements of Mario the marionette. Quick gestures—toes tapping, arms windshield-wiping—invite the viewer in, only to dispel their identification with a cut in the film and a shift of the beat. The longer, 16-mm works are more theatrical. In *Cinderella*, 1986, Beckman imagines a factory that spews out the eponymous gown-sheathed dolls. Her protagonist liberates the fairy tale from the ideal, divesting it of the sparkling slipper, the charming prince, and the cagelike dress. During the premiere, at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center in Buffalo, Beckman circulated a scenario for “The Beanstalk and Jack,” a capitalist allegory in which agricultural fields are bought and traded like stocks. To illustrate the depletion brought on by this futures exchange, Beckman displayed photographs of abandoned farms: electrical transformers dominating a tilting gambrel barn; a trim wood frame decomposing into a pile of worn beams.

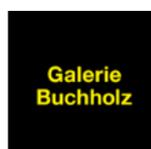
Thirty-five years later, when Beckman proposed returning to the Beanstalk and Jack for a new outdoor performance—titled *STALK* and staged in Brooklyn Bridge Park for Performa 2021—she crafted a narrative that correlates climate destruction with the financial industry. In Beckman’s version of the fairy tale, Jack is an antiheroine tasked with ending a drought. Six farmers, silhouetted against a bank of video screens, intone their lament: “But the rain won’t come / Won’t give us a drop / The rain won’t come / To nourish our crop.” Jack, played by Georgeanne Kalweit, enters from stage left, crooning, “I’ll climb the chart / Show you a thrill / Put your money down / My buckets will spill.” The screens rain seed until a green stem thrusts upward, its head separating into lush arms, germinating shoots and fluttering leaves. A field grows fast and tall. Yet the right angles of Manhattan’s Financial District stand sentinel behind it—orthogonals anchor the action—confining Jack and the growth to the grid. The stalk diverts from vital root into rigid trunk, extracting wealth from the earth. When Jack suggests the farmers lease the land in exchange for shares of the profit, the farmers balk. So the venal Jack bets against gain, shorting the stock and toppling the vine herself.

Beckman’s farmers respond by cumulatively gathering, then expiring, breath: “How the trade winds / How the trade winds / Blow—sustain.” The artist here pulls us toward a more resilient resource. As the chorus builds, a blue pinwheel transmutes into a turbine; the depiction whirrs on-screen. The song rejoins in relation to the pulse: “Wild is the spin / Bend with the wind / Wild is the wind / We are off the grid.” Beckman’s performance attunes us to the power of the wind: “Blow!” “Sustain!” “Spin!” “Bend!” Under enchanting night, the air heaves, signaling us to convert its elemental force.

Piper Marshall is an art historian based in New York.

This essay will also appear in Artforum’s November issue

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