

ART | By [Moritz Gaudlitz](#) | 19 October 2015, 9:35 am

ericka beckman on virtual reality, games and today's image of women

Long before virtual reality and computer games, the American film artist Ericka Beckman dealt with digital technologies and games in her films. We spoke to the artist about her work and her current exhibition in ...



The list of all solo exhibitions by New York underground film artist Ericka Beckman is long. And also those of the collections in which her works are represented: MoMA, Whitney Museum, Tate Modern. Beckman studied fine arts at the prestigious California Institute of The Arts (CalArts) before specializing in filmmaking. She has been making art films since the 1970s. Strongly influenced by Jean Piaget's developmental psychology, American college sports, Hollywood films, digital technologies and fairy tales, your films move stylistically between performance and play.

Veneklasen / Werner in Berlin is now showing for the first time a selection of their video works from the last 30 years and presents a complex of works of drawings and collages. We met the artist for an interview during the exhibition.

Mauritz Gaudlitz: Her list of works is large and has now spanned three decades. How exactly did the selection of the videos *Cinderella*, *Hiatus & Switch Center*, which will be shown in Berlin, come about?

Ericka Beckman: The gallery let me decide which films I wanted to exhibit. At first there were discussions about it. First I wanted to show newer films in the main room of the gallery, but then I decided to do exactly these three video works because they probably give a good overview of my work and my artistic language. That changed my decision-making process for the time being, but the works work together. It was my intention to bring works to Germany that reveal contextual connections, and I wanted to present my work to the German public. The work is a good introduction to my work.

MG: One of the films, Hiatus, deals with the journey of a tech-savvy woman into virtual reality. Immersed there, like in a computer game, she is challenged by a male, macho player. Tell me more about it.

EB: This is a very special project. It started in the early 1990s when I decided to invent an interactive, narrative game for young women. But it should always be a movie. During that time I did a lot of research on virtual reality and its technologies in Silicon Valley, and talked to software and hardware developers. I did so much primary research for the film that I knew which direction it was going. I shot it to 16mm, there wasn't that much 3D rendering and animation. It was a long process because analog and digital were then combined. In 1999 the film was released, but it fell into a hole. In the heyday of the Internet, the audience was a little disappointed that it was shot on 16mm. Then I put it aside and brought it out again in 2012. The audience received him wonderfully, because he deals with the technologies that were promised in the early 90s but never materialized. Today it exists, but the film is nostalgic. And because it was so well received, I added a second screen for installations to expand the gameplay character.

MG: The film was made at the right time, so to speak, but was released at the wrong time?

EB: Hiatus has a very interesting history because it was created in two times. When the project started, it was the beginning of video games like Warcraft. The project consisted of working with developers and portraying a young, tech-savvy woman in a game. Back then there was no internet. So, I joined an online community in San Francisco called "The Well." I lived in New York and exchanged a lot with them. They were people who discussed a lot about the structure and analogy of the Internet. How does that work Internet uses, what does it look like spatially? - Questions about freedom and access These fruitful ideas and discourses then flowed into the development of Hiatus.

MG: What are you interested in virtual reality and computer games?

EB: Since the beginning of my artistic work, it has always been about connecting two-time windows: combining the imaginary and the real. In my case it was more conceptual. I saw the films as an interactive performance in order to be able to involve the audience as much as possible, physically and mentally. The films are templates for the interactive dialogue. The film only works with the audience. I was very interested in interactive-narrative cinema myself, in which you can influence the development of the plot even in the cinema.

MG: So, is "play" an important part of your work?

RB: Yes. I've just spent a long time doing research on this topic. I've stayed out of what is going on in the art world, even if it interested me and didn't pass me by. But I've been so busy studying the history of the game. I've read a lot of Piaget, and I've been into sports and its culture. It felt like I could do research forever. It was about the game.

Philip Martin Gallery

MG: Her influences are, in addition to the philosopher Jean Piaget, the areas of sport and architecture. You can see that in your 2012 film *Tension Building*. The recordings of the stadium towards the end are also reminiscent of Leni Riefenstahl.

EB: Lots of pictures in the film *Tension Building* are from America. It's college football. I was very interested in the field, the combination of sports and the military. That's why I shot the end of the film in a stadium from the time of fascism in Florence. There is a dynamic in the buildings and in the film, but a lot is also about the basic structures of experiences. And that is exactly what it used to be about: the controlled, the regulation of time and space. That is the origin of the film. It's about movements and the interruptions of movements. A lot of my films have a spatial model and this film has a tension that builds up to a final point.

MG: In your three installations *Cinderella*, *Hiatus & Switch Center*, which Veneklasen / Werner shows, the woman is always the protagonist. What is the role and meaning of women in your films?

EB: As I said, these are very special films. You were not originally created with the idea of having a female lead. But the element stands out, yes. I think it has to do with the video viewing world. When I was making *Cinderella*, I knew there were video games for women. *Hiatus* and *Cinderella* are two special films that deal with identity, and there are certain problems with identity. I tried to find a state where you only trust your intuition and memory. The girl game wasn't really represented in the cultural world back then, so I wanted to promote women in the technology industry. I also worked with new media back then. So I thought, why not show that women are doing something?

MG: You said that you first have to create space for your works. Now you are showing drawings and collages for the first time. Are these also to be understood as spatial studies for your films? And why are you only showing them now?

EB: In 2012 a curator came to my New York studio because we were planning an exhibition for the Kunsthalle Bern. He came into my empty studio and was totally amazed. He wasn't used to being so empty in an artist studio. (laughs). I told him I have a lot of drawings and showed them to him. He said it should be shown and other curators were of the same opinion. Then I was too. The drawing decides what is shown in the film. When I paint a motif, I keep painting it until it is so strong for me in its message that it can also become part of a film. I didn't want to publish the drawings because many of the motifs didn't make it into my films. I studied painting and know the techniques.

MG: So you only start working on the film when you are satisfied with the drawings?

EB: It is exactly like that! For me, painting is a very natural part of the process of making my films. I paint and collect notes - a script is never my film source.

MG: Do you think that art films can still function as a performance medium today?

EB: I think it's better today than ever. When I started, there was little other way to show the work other than showing media art in galleries on bulky video monitors. I didn't do that because I didn't like the resolution and format. So you got little feedback. Today a lot of people tell me that I should see it as a new career because I can now show the work in a new way, just as I imagine it to be.

MG: In order to fulfill my pop culture assignment, I have a very specific question about a scene in her film *Switch Center*: The elegant protagonist is throwing Sophie Scholl leaflets into a stairwell and suddenly three Pokémons appear.

EB: The filming location in Budapest, at the Switch Center was also used for commercial purposes. At that time, the Pokémon advertising was filmed there. I really wanted to include the Pokémon commercial in my film. When I got into the room, however, they were already finished, had dismantled and there was nothing to work with. When I got back to New York, I put in animated Pokémon - and that changed the whole dynamic of the film. It created tension between the Soviet workers and the young woman in the film. That had to happen with the Pokémon in order to move the film from industrialization into the present.