Frieze

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Ericka Beckman: The Game Changer

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26 MAR 2018

With her first major solo exhibition in the UK, the US filmmaker Ericka Beckman speaks about video games, socialist Monopoly and breaking rules

Pablo Larios *Virtualization, interfaces, shifts in agency and the 'rules of the game' – these aspects of even your early works seem remarkably prescient today. How did you begin making films?*

Ericka Beckman I was interested in using screens to form a coded system within a space. The rear-screen allows you to have multiple timestamps and timeframes coexisting and affecting each other. The film *Hit and Run* (1977) basically opened the door for me to work as a filmmaker. Here, I created juxtapositions through the superimposition of different activities: an equivalence between a word, a graphic and a performance. I can say now that it was based on performance; but more importantly it is based on gesture, and communicating physical and graphic directions, as well as temporal ones: rhythm.

PL *What's an example of such an equivalence?*

EB In *Hit and Run* I asked a performer to make a circle by moving a stick or sword. And then that circle becomes the integer, 0. Then the integer becomes a word: 'Oh.' Then as the screen-image got smaller and quieter, a character would hold up a circular plate in their hand, another character would smash it, and that scene opened to another with me jumping through small loops.

PL *Did you use animation in the films? Did fellow artists, such as Mike Kelley or Ashley Bickerton who appear in your films as actors, also work on the sets or props?*

EB No, everything is done by me: the entire production, from creating the props to shooting the film to editing to sound. There's no digital animation or effects.

PL *What were you watching when you were making these early works?*

EB Surrealist films and early 1920s black-and-white films such as Man Ray and Jean Cocteau. I was looking at contemporary dance, experimental theatre and experimental music; Simone Forti and her collaboration with Terry Riley in the late 1970s. And then, of course, Robert Wilson and Philip Glass. Also important was a New York group called Mabou Mines, who worked with David Warrilow, who performed solo Samuel Beckett performances that were very minimal. Nothing but a mirror. Very intimate.

PL *Some of the visuals in your 'Super-8 Trilogy' remind me of Beckett's television play* Quad*(1981), in which four performers wearing different coloured cloaks move on a platform, and each has a corresponding 'sound' that accompanies them. What else were you looking at?*

EB Anything that broke space and formal temporal properties. Stuart Sherman was a performance artist that used language in a way that I really respect. Language was my way in to making work: I was figuring out a gestural and visual language that could substitute speech. I knew that performance and dance had that ability to translate. I looked at Kabuki theatre, Tibetan dance and Gamelan Theatre; plus lots of puppet theatre, too.

But the music scene was why I went to CalArts. They had a composer named John Bergamo who was a percussionist and I knew I had to work with percussion.

PL *Why percussion?*

EB Percussion has the ability to allow you to recognize different temporal patterns and your body reacts instantly to it. It was important for me to make an experience in film where you felt like you were participating in some way, where the viewer begins to feel the same movement as performers on screen – or remembers the feeling of those movements and then is capable of mimicking them mentally.

PL *Was there ever a live element?*

EB Never. I wanted the works to remain films because I liked the black space of the screen and I wanted them, initially, to not reference reality. If you make an edit in the black space of a film frame, you don't see the space changing. You can't do that with a stage or a horizon line in a film.

My hope was to create a film that could be shown with the work of performance groups. That was even unheard of at the time. Performance was performance, and music was music. It took a while for that to break down, aided by spaces like The Kitchen. At the time, I had to feed

myself all kinds of rules because it was impossible to engage any cultural venue in my work. That has changed for me now and for media artists in general.

PL *Rules are an ongoing concern in your films.*

EB Yes, *You The Better* (1983), for instance, is all based on rules. It's based on a group of people who are trying to understand the rules of the game and are bent on changing them. Rules aren't stable, though they make sense while they happen. You have to look at the over-structure to something beyond what you see on film and think about why they're doing what they do. And that tells you what the film is really addressing.

Everything that you need to know about the film is in the content of the work. But when I started to do *Cinderella* (1986) and *You The Better*, I began to work with ideas aside from the formal qualities of communication and identification: social systems, or learned behaviours that had been ingested and filtered through this process of translation. And I started to embrace a more theatrical form.

PL *Sports, games, casinos – what other social systems?*

EB I'm working on a new film that uses two game boards to play two competing games. The screens serve as the game boards. The film deals with the flip-side of the board game *Monopoly*; the story behind *Monopoly* is that it was based on a socialist game to teach and promote a socialist tax system, *The Landlord's Game*, created by a female economist named Elizabeth Magie in the early 1900s. This game was co-opted by Charles Darrow in the 1930s, who fixed it as the capitalist game we all grew up with. Magie's game was played by economists and utopian communities on the East Coast. I'm re-envisioning her game and pitting it against a monopoly-styled game. My film also reimagines new roles for labour. I'm trying to portray the Georgist theory – based on the writings of the economist and social reformer Henry George – it was based on in the clearest way that I can. You know, I don't even know if it's plausible, but the point is that it hasn't been disproven.

PL *What accounts for your interest in socialism?*

EB For one, I live in a city that is demolishing housing for artists and people of low income.

I'm shooting more documentary material, for example, in abandoned urban structures that have been co-opted by the military and capital in New York and St. Louis, Missouri. I'm working with architecture and animating models, and using stop-motion, and juxtaposing different structures into abandoned places. And the screen becomes a game board as well, as well as a plain documentary frame.

Secondly, I grew up in the countryside. Since moving to the city I am aware of how the countryside formed from a spirit of exploration and playfulness. The threatening of our

natural resources by capitalist interests and expansion really disgusts me and I want to do something about it.

PL *The new work shows a game by a woman turned around by men. I'm curious: what happened to the other women around CalArts during this time?*

EB Many female artists were at CalArts while I was there in graduate school. They were ambitious, creative role models for the male artists. Upon coming to NYC in the late '70s and witnessing the subordinate role these women played to their male counterparts, they chose a road less travelled by men, where there were fewer roadblocks. Some became writers, architects and publishers or went into fashion.

PL *Do you seek to maintain a distance to contemporary technology, or does it interest you today?*

EB I did a lot of research on virtual reality and interactive games for *Hiatus* (1999/2015). I'm very interested in what I could do with virtual reality. I hope I get the chance to do something with 360 video because I know exactly what to do with it.

Last summer at Secession, Vienna, I added material to a film I made called *Tension Building*(2014). There was a set of bleachers opposite a large film screen projected within a viewing box. It was just a film screen and set of bleachers. Viewers had to pass through it to get to the other rooms in the gallery. People would come down this quiet staircase and get bombarded with my film's highly amplified sport soundtrack – drumming, cheering and marching bands. The film was also shot at a high frame rate. If they felt it was offensive, they would pass right through it.

Viewers who watched the film from the bleachers had the experience very much like the experience of real sports, watching people walking through who didn't want to be there. And viewers in the bleachers watched what was really going on in the film. The ending revealed the subtext of the film in both its spectacle and its politics; that sports is a form of control and is used to promote political agendas.

PL *Politics as sport?*

EB In the case of my film it's more about national identity, because I'm talking about American politics in my ending. The people on the bleachers could see this in my ending clearly but they also had the feeling of what it's like to dismiss it. It worked in a way that I never expected it to work. In this installation there are people who are willing to see content and there are those who just shut down based on visceral overload.

PL *What's on view in your solo show at the Zabludowicz Collection in London?*

EB I have the wonderful opportunity to stage a small survey of my work. I have two films that portray games played by girls in two adjoining galleries and in two smaller spaces, annexed to these large film installations, are shorter works that are all filmed in industrial locations. The show has a very nice structure to it demonstrating major themes against smaller themes in my work.

Ericka Beckman is an artist who lives and works in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include at Kunst-Werke, Berlin, Germany (2018) and Secession, Vienna, Austria (2017). Her exhibition at theZabludowicz Collection, London, UK, is on view until 8 July 2018.