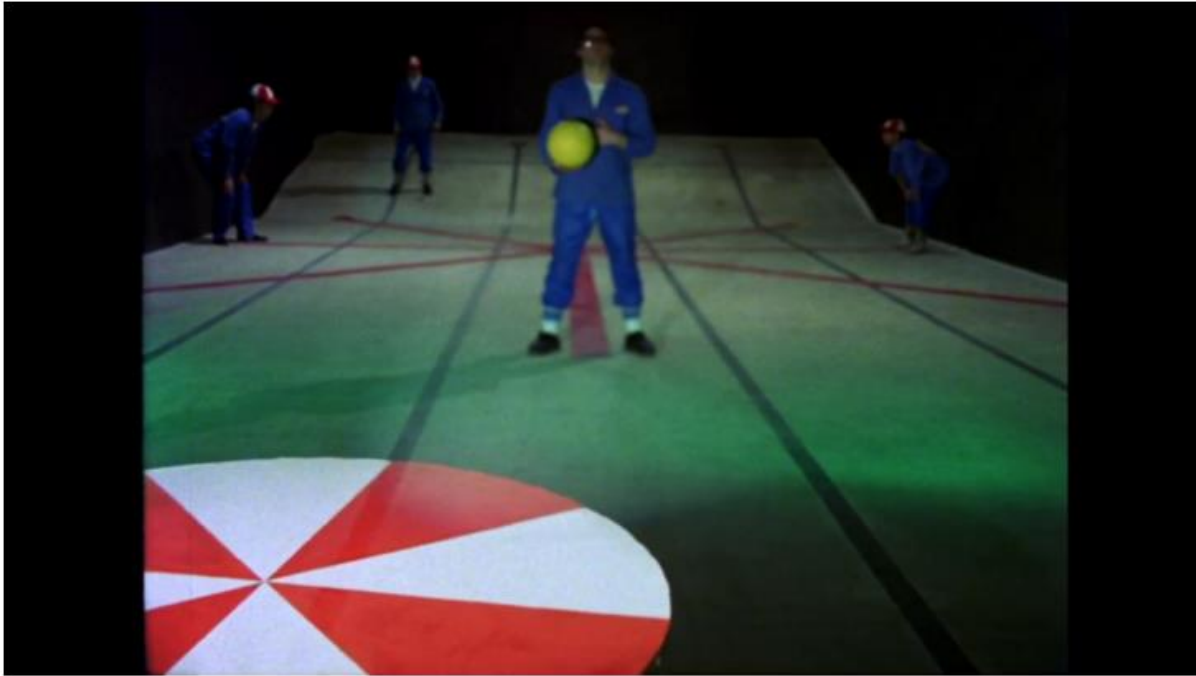


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EXHIBITION REVIEW: “ERICKA BECKMAN: DOUBLE REVERSE” AT MIT

July 28, 2019 By JAKE MULLIGAN



still image from *You the Better*, courtesy the artist.

When artist Ericka Beckman premiered the first of her two partially animated tech-oriented 16mm musicals about gaming and labor, [You the Better](#) (1983), audiences were unwilling and perhaps even unable to pick up on all that it was putting down. The first, most obvious, and indeed most oft-discussed example of this came on the night of its NYFF premiere, where the audience gathered—to see Jean-Luc Godard’s 1982 film *Passion*, which *You the Better* had been paired with—reacted to Beckman’s film with such disdain that J. Hoberman would later somewhat gleefully dub it the “scandal” of the festival. Even when returning to NYFF last fall with restored iterations of both *You the Better* and the second of her experimental 80s musicals, *Cinderella* (1986), Beckman recalled the “the half-hour pandemonium” that originally transpired at the premiere of her 32-minute film: “There was a rumbling going on through most of the singing in the center section, [and] then the crowd stood up,” she recalled, “They were saying *get the sports off the screen, we didn’t come here to watch TV*, and then pellating their playbills at me... Nobody understood the film in the time it was made, even when I showed it around in other circles.”

Yet it was not only these initial viewers that were steps behind *You the Better*, but also the technological resources which Beckman hoped to use in presenting it. “I am building sets to display [with] the films”, the filmmaker noted in [a 2016 interview](#) with *Art Journal Open*, “It is natural for me to do this because this is how I wanted the films to be seen years ago. It wasn’t possible to do this before we had digital resources, and then a new audience had to find me...” In other words, now that 16mm footage can be digitized in high-quality, and then projected in that high quality via a loop format at relatively low cost, these very hopes have now been realized—most recently in “**Ericka Beckman: Double Reverse**”, an exhibition at the MIT List Visual Arts Center (curated by Henriette Huldish) which presents four of Beckman’s single-screen features

in a looping format, with three of the four also featuring sculptural or installation elements placed between the screen and the seating area.

Upon entering the exhibit one is cued to proceed either left or right, and on the right hand side is *You the Better*, installed so that it's beset on either side by sculptural objects that resemble a Monopoly-style "house." ("The house shape is the predominant motif, and it keeps on changing from being a target to a scoreboard to representing an actual house," Beckman once explained.) That symbol is first introduced in the film's unofficial overture, and then continues to recur throughout its main action—which depicts a series of uniformed teams competing in an unspecified (and seemingly unending) game that incorporates elements of both gambling and sport (although the symbol is presented within the context of actual real estate at first, the house quickly becomes "the house," the establishment, the dealer behind the card deck).



Installation view of *You the Better* within "Ericka Beckman: Double Reverse" at MIT List Visual Arts Center. Photograph by Peter Harris Studios.

Beckman's complex use of pitch-black backgrounds and in-camera effects (and to a lesser extent her editing techniques) allow the sharply-colored house shapes (and the other entrancing objects which make up the ongoing game) to be layered above, below, and even into the action of the live human player/actors (additionally, each of the houses 'installed' in the MIT space is outfitted with LED lights that glow specific colors aligned to what's happening on the screen—another effort requiring a level of technological coordination that would've been unfeasible if not impossible circa 1983). There is a clear allegorical critique to be interpreted from the material, but as with *Cinderella*, the film endures by way of another achievement, that being its ultradense mixture of visual planes: In offering such an early depiction of the kind of stacked-and-layered visual composition that has become so common in conjunction with the rise of digital photo and video-editing technologies, *You the Better* and *Cinderella* bridge a gap in the development of the American cinema that one might not have even necessarily realized was empty until seeing these two artworks fill them.

Though perhaps counterintuitive (since *You the Better* is chronologically speaking the earliest work in the program), I'd actually recommend entering the exhibit on the left instead, in which case you'll begin with the most recent works in the survey, *Switch Center* (2003) and [Tension Building](#) (2016), both architectural studies that make extensive use of stop-motion animation techniques. Neither of these pieces, each of which clock in around 10 minutes, is nearly as radical or revelatory as Beckman's two musicals, but they nonetheless proffer a rather thorough introduction to her exceptionally versatile sense of craft and artistic practice. Made in collaboration with the Béla Balázs Studio (a film/video collective based in Hungary), *Switch Center*, which the MIT catalogue lists as Beckman's "first work in 30 years made outside the studio," depicts a number of industrial spaces in and surrounding Budapest. Repeatedly matching shots of workers turning wheels or gears against brief animated sequences that get the architecture moving in response, the piece

achieves a nervous and anxious energy while simultaneously (and more simply) creating a record of the spaces themselves—two efforts that collide in the final movement, which depicts a chase scene of sorts where a woman seems to be running away from the very structure that houses her.



Installation view of *Tension Building* within "Ericka Beckman: Double Reverse" at MIT List Visual Arts Center. © Ericka Beckman. Photograph by Peter Harris Studios.

The next film on the left-side path, *Tension Building* (its title is a pun that applies equally to both these recent works), begins with animated motion through the empty seats of the Harvard Coliseum football stadium (the sculptural element in this room is a bright-red bleacher on which you may sit to view the piece) before incorporating additional footage that depicts two other stadiums, a small-scale model of the coliseum, and some clips from a game itself (live plays, cheerleading, injury stoppages). Like *Switch Center*, this short film establishes a speedy and sometimes jittery rhythm, often by moving quickly in circular patterns around certain elements of the given architecture. In this they both recall a line by critic Amy Taubin, who is along with Hoberman another longtime Beckman supporter—"I can't remember seeing an actual boomerang in any of Beckman's works," she wrote in *Artforum* circa 2011, "but so many of the trajectories of camera and object movement in her films evoke that kind of kinetic and aggressive back-and-forth that to include the thing itself would be redundant." While their on-location productions set them far apart from the other diptych of films displayed in *Double Reverse*, *Switch Center* and *Tension Building* introduce many of the artistic qualities and preoccupations that are considered and expanded with such extraordinary imagination in both *You the Better* and *Cinderella*: For instance Beckman's use of cinematic techniques that have been oft-underutilized (including double exposures, animation, and flicker effects) to first record physicality and performances (such as dance, sport, and "work"), then juxtapose those images with symbols or suggestions of the forms of state power ("the house") which in film and life alike give inflexible shape to those very same forms of expression.

One finally reaches *Cinderella* in the back corner of the exhibit, playing above sculptural elements that resemble props used in the film to represent tools, rocks, anvils, and hammers. These same objects are seen throughout Beckman's 28-minute retelling of the fairy tale, which casts the protagonist (Gigi Kalweit) as a laborer in a forge (over the running time we see it develop into a more industrialized factory) who each night leaves home to play the "Cinderella game" (in those meaningfully repetitious passages, she works to woo a well-off prince, and seems to "lose a life" in the style of arcade games on each night she fails to do so). "I wanted to draw a parallel between the history of industrial production from past to future," Beckman told *Brooklyn Rail* late last year, "and the struggle of women to own their own image and voice."



Installation view of *Cinderella* within "Ericka Beckman: Double Reverse" at MIT List Visual Arts Center. Photograph by Peter Harris Studios.

While the pair of later films do share many techniques and thematic concerns with the earlier pieces, it must be said that *You the Better* and *Cinderella* display audiovisual designs entirely unique to themselves. Starting with rhythms set by their frustratingly catchy music and lyrics (co-written for both films by Brooke Halpin), the movies play out against the pitch-black walls and backgrounds of the filmmaker's aforementioned studio, allowing Beckman (who's listed as director/producer/cinematographer/editor) to incorporate animated objects, early digital effects (in *Cinderella* specifically), and various other efforts towards bisecting live-action with more unreal cinematic techniques—while simultaneously using the constant dark background to mask the edits and cuts and overlays which help create those same effects. The end result in so many ways anticipates the digital world of stacked tabs and crisscrossed visuals in which we all now reside—years before those concepts had entered the public consciousness, and decades before they were more commonly represented within the visual language of American movies.

This allows for Beckman to explore layers of depth within the frame and expand them to an exhilarating extent, for instance by creating moments where objects and images cross over from one layer to another, such as one scene in *Cinderella* where an "X" representing a failed attempt at the Cinderella game is superimposed over the very-real title character as she's running across a very-artificial digital SFX ramp "set"; and when the X actually collides with her it (by way of an invisible/magical edit à la Méliès) becomes a physically tactile part of her costume, yet another instance of artful and meaningful continuity across the seemingly distinct stages on which Beckman produces her films. Envisioning an existence where both physical and virtual life have been gamified and rigged from the top down in exceptionally constricting terms, Beckman's films were some of the very first to address how the digital revolution had altered our lives, and more specifically our visual languages—and remain, to date, some of the only movies to consider that subject with the appropriate level of skepticism.

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ERICKA BECKMAN: DOUBLE REVERSE. ON VIEW AT MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER UNTIL 7.28. 20 AMES ST., BUILDING E15, CAMBRIDGE. ADMISSION AND PROGRAMS ARE FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC. OPEN TUE-SUN NOON-6PM.