

ARTnews

At Performa, Ericka Beckman Offers an Anti-Capitalist Musical Adaptation of Jack and the Beanstalk



BY EMILY WATLINGTON  October 29, 2021 10:57am



Ericka Beckman's performance *Stalk*, 2021.
COURTESY PERFORMA BIENNIAL

It felt fitting to catch up with the artist Ericka Beckman in a black box theater, since that's where the Pictures Generation filmmaker has shot nearly all her films since the 1970s. When we met at the downtown New York venue Performance Space, though, she wasn't shooting a film, but rehearsing for her first-ever live performance at age 70. Her Performa biennial commission, titled "Stalk", premieres Saturday night.

Beckman was directing six dancers, a choreographer, a percussionist, and her lead, played by Gigi Kalweit, who was singing and coordinating with a stunt double. Kalweit is performing as Jack (of Beanstalk fame), and for the performance, her double, a circus performer named Madison Ward, will dangle on green silks in front of a giant beanstalk projected onto Pier 3 at the Brooklyn Bridge Park. The veteran filmmaker's latest work is a funny yet probing musical take on the classic fairytale.

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Ericka Beckman
PHOTO MATHEW WAGENKNECT

During the rehearsal, the show's choreographer Emily Coates, who has frequently collaborated with artist Yvonne Rainer, kept repeating one simple directive again and again: "Staccato." Coates gently reminded the performers that they aren't so much dancing as farming to a rhythm. They practiced, for instance, putting their imaginary spades in the ground on the downbeat, and tossing invisible dirt on the upbeat. With the direction of "staccato," an Italian word familiar in music and dance that literally means "detached," Coates was suggesting they think of each step as a pose to strike, rather than a string of gestures to flow through.



View of Ericka Beckman's 2017 exhibition "Game Mechanics" at Vienna Secession, showing the film *You the Better*, 1983.
COURTESY PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY LOS ANGELES

Beckman's works often take on a slew of themes—feminist critique, games of chance, behavioral norms, capitalism—that are expertly balanced. They're often cheery yet biting musicals. Lyrics drive her

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narratives, and the songs help her less-linear stories feel strikingly cohesive. It might sound impossible to imagine all this congealing, but in Beckman's hands, miraculously, it does, time and again.

In "Stalk" investing in stocks (and stalks, as it were) is the game of chance at hand. Beckman doesn't rehash the well-known tale. Rather, she uses it as an archetype to challenge its moral. It's not always wise to risk it all to get rich quick, and few tellings of the story adequately warn that those who tell you otherwise tend to have their own agendas. She paints Jack as less of a hero or innocent mama's boy than a middleman. He climbs the beanstalk to liaise between the workers down below and the corporate clouds above. Eventually, the farmers begin to distrust his allegiances. Does he actually care about them, or is he trying to rip them off with false promises and a shady investment deal so he can climb to new heights?

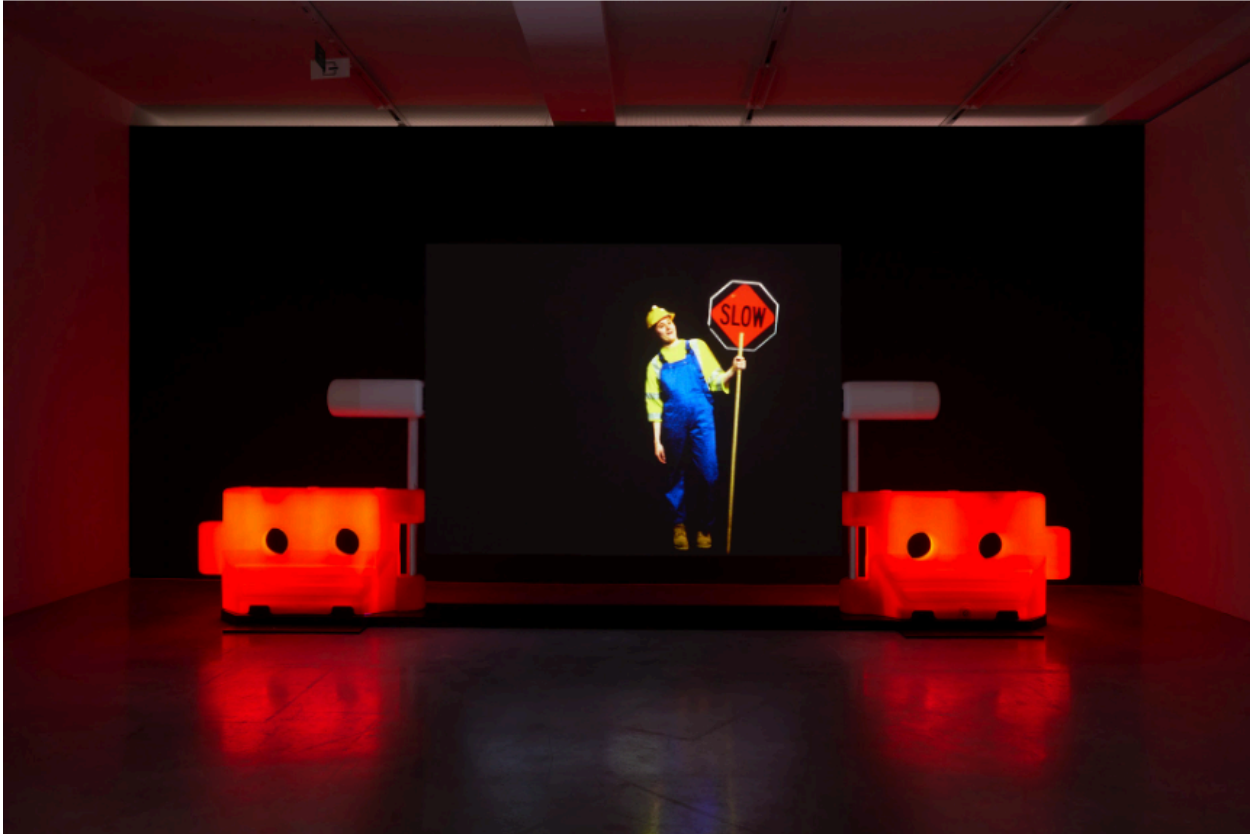
Beckman made a video that will serve as the play's backdrop, and she watched it on a laptop while the dancers and musicians rehearsed. It has to all sync up just right. But she also edited it in such a way that allows a little room for her collaborators to improvise. She told me, "I still want "Stalk" to feel like a community play, like it's local folks getting together to put on a show."



Ericka Beckman rehearsals *Stalk*, 2021, for the
Performa
2021 Biennial.

PHOTO KATHY NOBLE

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View of Ericka Beckman's film *Reach Capacity*, 2020, at Museum Leuven, Belgium.
COURTESY PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY LOS ANGELES

In the early 1980s, Beckman—who took John Baldessari's famed post-studio course at Cal Arts with the likes of Tony Oursler, John Miller, and Mike Kelley—made the decision to pivot away from performing in her art and toward directing instead. “I wanted to get behind the camera,” she said. “I didn’t want to hire a cameraperson and have to translate my ideas.” In watching the rehearsal for “Stalk”, it became obvious that she’s a deft director. The artist was graceful and firm—she knew what she wanted, but she also welcomed feedback and improvisation from her trusted collaborators, like performer Kalweit and composer Brooke Halprin, both of whom have worked with Beckman in the past. (Beckman fans might recognize Kalweit from the artist’s 1986 film “Cinderella”, arguably her magnum opus.)

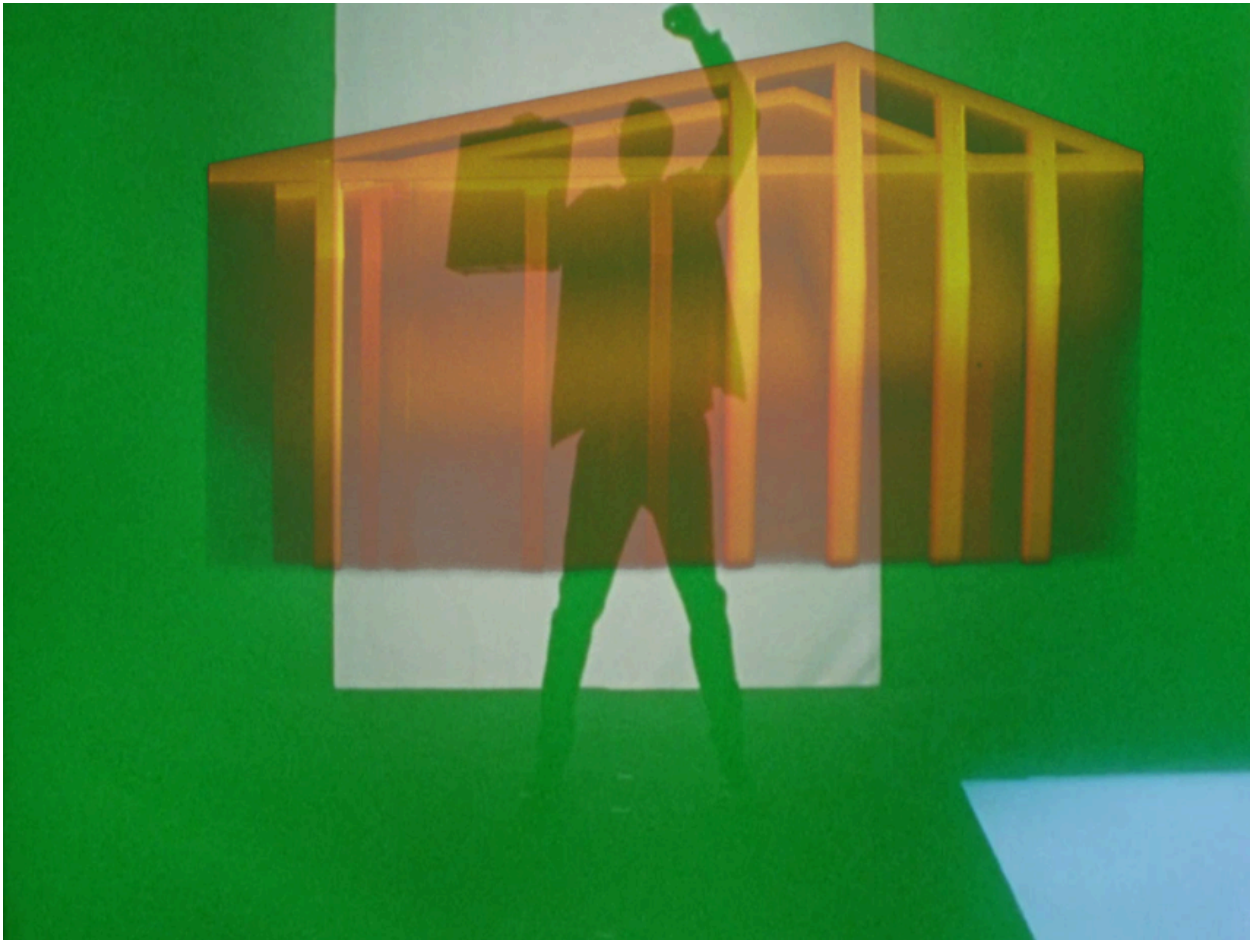
Beckman has given significant thought to how she might make a live performance a bit more like a filmic work beyond simply merging the mediums. Her films greatly rely on her skillful and rhythmic editing, as well as her signature use of in-camera effects—unlike most artists today, she still shoots exclusively on celluloid—and animation. She told me she was thinking about abrupt changes in her soundtrack’s tempo, which is almost entirely percussion, as analogous to the hard cuts that are hallmarks in her films. As with her previous moving-image works, handmade props and primary colors will be central to “Stalk”. Beckman filmed a beanstalk made of green leaf puppets against a black backdrop, the gigantic version of which will be projected onto Pier 3. (The work’s premiere was pushed a day, from October 29 to October 30, because of a rainy forecast).

With a view of Lower Manhattan’s skyscrapers serving as a readymade backdrop peeking over the rural landscapes she’ll project, the metaphor is clear: Jack’s beanstalk-climbing is all about accrual and greed.

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The across-the-river backdrop also holds personal significance for the artist's own dealings with corporate greed: one of those skyscrapers recently replaced Beckman's longtime downtown studio.

In a recent film, "Reach Capacity" (2020), which premiered this fall at the Museum of Modern Art in New York before screening at this year's New York Film Festival, Beckman looked more explicitly at the Lower Manhattan real estate landscape, in particular at the men who view flipping properties as some kind of game. Simultaneously examining contemporary real estate and the history of Monopoly (the board game was created in 1904 by a socialist woman named Elizabeth Magie, who called it the Landlord's Game before selling her patent to Parker Brothers), "Reach Capacity" reimagines the city's grid as a game board. Colorful squares are superimposed onto city lots regardless of whether they are empty or occupied. We mostly see construction workers onscreen, but it's clear the offscreen developer voices call the shots. Punctuated by a rhythmic mix of construction sounds, the film's chanty jingle at times resembles a '90s commercial for a payday loan, advising, with a catchy tune, viewers to "take a loan out now, take another one."



Still from Ericka Beckman's *Reach Capacity*, 2020, single-channel video, twelve minutes, 54 seconds.
COURTESY PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY LOS ANGELES

For that film, Beckman said, she "wanted to work with an alternative energy source that would be generated from the workers, allowing them to reclaim their power." But Covid affected her plans to shoot those scenes as she originally envisioned them—she was supposed to film in rural Missouri, but couldn't travel safely. So instead, she told that part of the story "very abstractly, relying mostly on

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lyrics.” She decided to take on “Jack and the Beanstalk” while still thinking about alternative energy. Toward the end of the “Reach Capacity”, we see an animated tool used for tapping oil after the invisible developer cheerily informed some lucky person—or unlucky, it’s not clear—that they’ve found an energy source under their property.

That tool, it turns out, is called a jack. Beckman came to “Stalk”, which she sees as an alternative ending to “Reach Capacity”, through wordplay—a common feature of her lyrics. Near the end of the performance—spoiler alert, for those dedicated fans preparing to brave the chilly weather—she realizes her vision for worker-powered alternative energy triumphantly. The farmers, after finding a way to harness the power of the wind, cut down the stalk and discard the unsatisfying contracts Jack had offered them. The papers get swept up in the wind and then, in an origami flurry, are converted into pinwheels (stand-ins for windmills). The workers start a wind farm, and then a whole new economy—one where they are in charge. But that’s not the end.

An interest in labor has been an undercurrent in Beckman’s work for the past 50 years, but in “Stalk”, exploitation is the main theme. “The situation we’re all in right now is really a call to action,” she said, referring to the ways the pandemic has exacerbated myriad inequities. “It’s reigniting what I felt as a teenager [in the 1960s], when there was a lot of emphasis on redistributing power.”