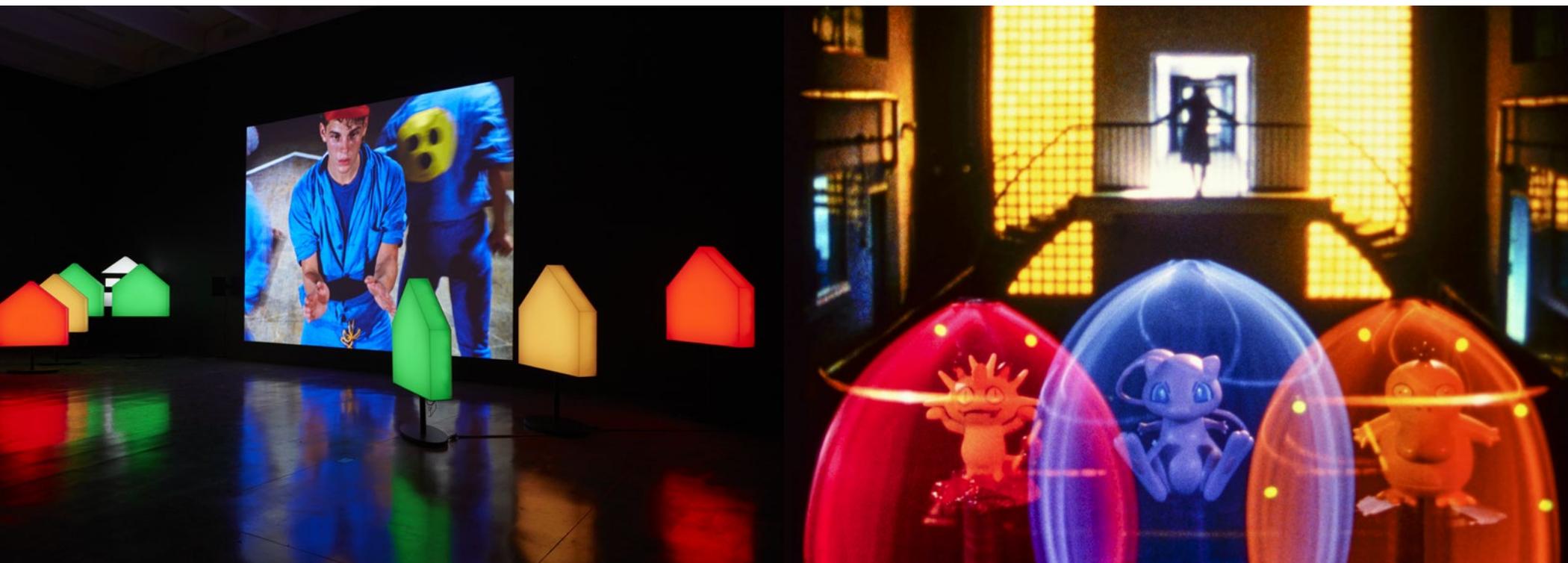


MIT List Visual Arts Center  
20 Ames Street, Building E15  
Cambridge MA 02139

[listart.mit.edu](http://listart.mit.edu)

## Ericka Beckman: Double Reverse

May 24–July 28, 2019



ABOVE: *You the Better*, 1983/2015

Installation view: *Less Than One* at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2016.  
Image courtesy the artist and Walker Art Center. Photo: Gene Pittman

FRONT: *Switch Center* (still), 2003, 16mm film, transferred to HD video, color, sound, 12 min.

Image courtesy the artist. ©Ericka Beckman



MIT List Visual Arts Center

# Ericka Beckman: Double Reverse

Hayden and Reference Galleries May 24 – July 28, 2019

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Since the mid-1970s, Ericka Beckman has forged a signature visual language in film, video, installation, and photography. Emerging out of the fertile environment of CalArts, Beckman developed the cornerstones of her filmic vocabulary in her early series of Super-8 films, which are distinguished by their energetic pacing, the performers' repetitive, ritualistic actions, deceptively simple special effects, and chanted and percussive soundtracks. Often shot against black, spatially ambiguous backdrops, her subsequent moving image works are structured according to the logic of child's play or fairy tales, and populated by archetypal characters and toy-like props in bright, primary colors. Employing the frameworks of games and folk tales to parse the foundational relationships between such culturally embedded forms of entertainment, the larger structures of capital, and conditions of labor, Beckman's films engage profound questions of gender, role-playing, competition, power, and control.

The List Center exhibition presents four films made over three-and-a-half decades, including *You the Better* (1983), *Cinderella* (1986), *Switch Center* (2003), and *Tension Building* (2016), which mark the evolution of the artist's thematic concerns as well as the development of her stylistic approach. Beckman's more recent works, for instance, integrate on-location footage, and in the last decade she has made installation presentations for the films that include sculptural elements and theatrical lighting, heightening their immersive intensity. *Double Reverse* features these moving image installations, providing the first opportunity to more fully survey Beckman's contribution in a US museum.



Still from *You the Better*

## ***You the Better*, 1983/2015**

16mm film transferred to HD video, color, sound, sculptural elements with programmable LED lighting, 32:00 min.

In this film Beckman replaces the logic of linear narrative with a game structure, devising rules of play based on jai alai, a ball game of Basque origin and a popular betting sport, as well as chance-based casino games like roulette and craps. Briefing a cast of performers with her directives, the uniformed players, amongst them Beckman's artist peers Ashley Bickerton and Tony Conrad, enact a semi-improvised ball game. In the filmic world, the shifting rules of a game at which there is no chance of winning are set by an off-screen character referred to as "The House." Its name is a reference to the colloquial term for a casino and also alludes to the imagery and music of the film's opening sequence,

which features stop-motion animation of model suburban houses set to a chant-like song about real estate development, imbricating the ceaseless prospecting of land for residential property development with the culture of gambling. Despite the players best efforts to adapt to a new set of imperatives introduced by a chance element, by the end of *You the Better*, viewers understand that it is impossible for the players to win.

Shot in 1983 in the black-box set she created in her studio, Beckman created all of the film's visual effects in-camera through stop motion animation as well as multiple exposures on 16mm film, or "rewinds." Later, working in collaboration

with the programmer Mark Rosen, Beckman developed an installation presentation of the work to include freestanding sculptural houses illuminated with LED lights

sequenced to correspond with the film. *You the Better's* immersive world-building visual language is further heightened within the space of the installation.

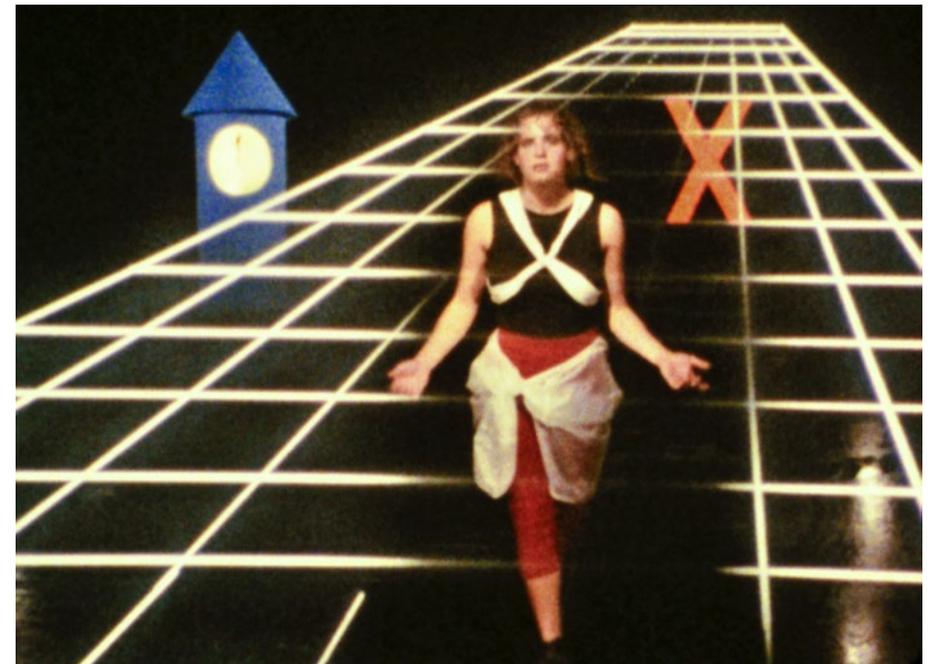
## ***Cinderella*, 1986**

16mm film transferred to HD video, color, sound, 28:00 min.

Beckman's interest in *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, a 1928 structural analysis of the genre by Russian literary scholar Vladimir Propp, prompted her to reimagine the story of Cinderella. Upending a narrative that pivots on the social and economic validation of a downtrodden female protagonist through her marriage to a wealthy and powerful man, her *Cinderella* offers a feminist re-telling and a parallel commentary on the history of industrial manufacturing. Beckman's research for the film included visits to a Ford Motor plant, where she documented the automobile company's manufacturing

process as a study for the mechanisms of automation and mass production.

Disguised as a young man, the film's heroine toils in a forge rather than in her stepmother's house, operating a set of bellows. Other male workers cast molten metal into coins and an enigmatic foreman, played by the artist Mike Kelley (a frequent collaborator of Beckman's), intones a rhythmic dirge on an accordion. A magical gift box dispensed from the hearth contains a ball gown that transports Cinderella, by way of a pumpkin carriage traversing an Atari-like cybernetic grid, into the fairy



Still from *Cinderella*

tale's iconic ball scene. There she is to win the prince's affection and consequent freedom from her menial labor. Failing to gain his attention, Cinderella is repeatedly ejected from the scene and returned to her place at the hearth. Wrestling with both the displacement of her previous job in the forge as it transforms into a factory and her growing dissatisfaction with the rules of the courtship game, eventually Cinderella decides she is better off without the prince.

The film continues Beckman's collaboration with composer Brooke Halpin for a soundtrack that includes a final musical

number performed on-screen by Cinderella in the style of a 1980s music video. The artist here, for the first time, added computer-generated imagery to her repertoire of stop-motion animated props. The Cinderella dolls and gridded staircase were rendered with early animation software, and Beckman again utilized her distinctive multiple exposure process, filming her computer screen with 16mm film already exposed with the live action sequences. Beckman hand-fabricated *Cinderella's* sets and props, some of which she presents in various installation configurations around the projected image.

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## **Switch Center**, 2003

16mm film transferred to HD video, color, sound, 12:00 min.

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Beckman cites Ferdinand Leger's avant-garde cinema classic *Ballet Mécanique* (1923–24) as an influence for *Switch Center*. Her film's ethereal narrative follows the repetitive choreography of a group of laboring factory workers: pressing buttons, flipping switches, cranking, twisting, and turning the plant's heavy machinery. Echoing the Marxist principle of alienation—a symptom of labor's commodification and the consequent estrangement of the laborer from what they produce—the workers' efforts appear to yield no tangible result. Their rhythmic performance of tasks is ruptured by a fanciful sequence in which a female worker encounters a group of Pokémon characters and flees the factory. Removing her uniform as she ascends the spiral staircase of a large tower, the laborer transforms into a fairy-tale heroine. In the tower summit, she witnesses bulldozers razing the buildings in the complex below, presumably for profit-driven redevelopment.

Beckman's first work in thirty years outside of the studio, *Switch Center* is a collaboration with the Hungarian avant-garde film and video collective The Balázs Béla Studio and was filmed during a residency in Budapest at the studio's invitation. As a result, its production style is comparatively spontaneous. Whereas Beckman spent years researching and drawing in preparation for her earlier films, for *Switch Center* she produced storyboards each day and filmed at night. The Pokémon sequence, for instance, was devised in response to a commercial that the Nintendo franchise filmed in one of Beckman's locations, a defunct waterworks on the outskirts of Budapest, temporarily suspending her own shoot. Beckman experienced the rapid pace of state sponsored redevelopment in the region. In the six months between location scouting and production, many of the sites she planned to film in were demolished, necessitating adjustments to the film's premise. Her



Still from *Switch Center*

roving cinematography—much of it shot with a 16mm Bolex camera mounted on a pushcart—makes full use of the remaining locations, which the Hungarian government also soon planned to demolish. Energetic camera pans, as well as stop-motion

sequences, animate the distinct architectural features of the complex's towers and machinery, highlighting the importance of their history and spatial dynamics to the film's concept.

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## **Tension Building**, 2016

16mm film transferred to HD video, color, sound, stadium seating, 08:15 min.

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Beckman's treatment of stadium architecture in *Tension Building* relates the recurring design elements in these purpose-built structures to the pageantry surrounding sporting events. Considering the stadium as a site for displays of state power, the film more broadly addresses political ideologies that support competition as spectacle. Shot in three distinct, but related locations—the Harvard University Coliseum, University of Massachusetts Amherst's McGurik Field,

and the Municipal Stadium in Florence, Italy—*Tension Building* combines stop-motion and live-action sequences from these sites with additional stop-motion footage of an architectural model of the Harvard Coliseum that Beckman constructed in her studio. In the filmic world, these locations merge into a single, composite stadium, and as the camera appears to quickly orbit the concentric tiers of spectator seating, an insistent score—a fight song performed by UMass Amherst's



Still from *Tension Building*

Minuteman Marching Band—heightens the frenzied cinematography, creating a sensation of perpetual motion. This axial rotation is punctuated by abrupt collisions with the stadium's concrete dividers and crosscuts with footage of the cheer squads, color guard, and UMass football players on the field, warming up and in action. Competitors and field entertainers crescendo to on-screen blurs, while the stadium itself pulsates wildly, an effect that draws together the architecture with the excesses of embodied labor involved in sports events and competition.

With *Tension Building*, Beckman places a set of rules onto the operation of her camera, devising explicit guidelines to determine

its path around the stadiums. At Harvard Coliseum, Beckman treated her 16mm Bolex camera like a "surveyor's transit," positioning its registration cross bars on a specific architectural feature and shooting single frames from different vantage points as she paced the stadium's circumference. With this tactic, the geometric design of the stadium is set into motion, appearing to alternately collapse and expand. Like many of her earlier works, Beckman devised an installation component for the gallery presentation of the film—blue theatrical-lighting casts a chilly glow behind the projection and a tier of bleacher seating painted primary red, washed in red light—to situate viewers in an architectural setting similar to that in the film.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ericka Beckman (b. 1951, Hempstead, NY) lives and works in New York and Boston.

*Ericka Beckman: Double Reverse* is organized by Henriette Huldisch, Director of Exhibitions and Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalog with contributions by exhibition curator Henriette Huldisch and others, published by Hirmer Verlag.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### Artist Talk: Ericka Beckman

Thursday, June 6, 6:30 PM

### Sketch Session: Games and Play

Wednesday, June 5, 12:30 PM

## EXHIBITION READINGS

Readings that have informed the works on view:

David Bohm, *Causality and Chance in Modern Physics* (1957)

Jean Piaget, *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (1937)

Jean Piaget, *Genetic Epistemology* (1955)

Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928)

Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Feminine in Fairy Tales* (1979)

**All programs are free and open to the public. RSVPs are required.**

For more information about these events and to RSVP: [listart.mit.edu/events-programs](http://listart.mit.edu/events-programs).



## MEMBERSHIP

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## SPONSORS

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