

Ericka Beckman | Fair Game

12 September 2021 to 9 January 2022

A world governed by structures and systems in which performance and optimization are constant concerns, and gamification is used as a means of increasing social participation: Long before the use of social media and virtual interaction, the video pioneer Ericka Beckman (*1951 in New York) began exploring these themes in her films in the early 1980s. The exhibition *Fair Game* at the Kestner Gesellschaft presents the animated multimedia installation *Nanotech Players* (1989) and two films by Ericka Beckman that play a central role in her work: her first 16 mm film *You the Better* (1983) and her latest film *Reach Capacity* (2020), which will be shown for the first time in Germany. The films are separated by almost 40 years, and yet both deal with a current topic: the use of games as a means of structuring capitalist society. The artist asks: Can a dominating system ever be outwitted?

With the exhibition, which was created in cooperation with the M Museum in Leuven, Belgium, the Kestner Gesellschaft is presenting Ericka Beckman's first institutional solo exhibition in Germany. The aim is to focus on this video pioneer who attracted attention early on in the 1970s with immersive video spaces and her criticism of capitalist and patriarchal structures.

Ericka Beckman produced the film *You the Better* based on the visual and musical aesthetics of a low-budget children's program from the 1980s. Most of the film shows a group of uniformed players in a black room who follow a few clear rules. Their opponent is the depersonalized capital that continually outwits the players. Thus, winning strategies quickly become losing strategies. In the end the question arises: Who actually won the game?

Ericka Beckman realized the two-part performative video installation *Reach Capacity* in 2019 and 2020 as a reaction to her personal experience with the exploding real estate market in New York: Beckman had to leave her affordable loft apartment in Lower Manhattan because it was demolished to make way for a speculative construction project. In the first part of the film, the construction boom seems to be unstoppable. Traders in blue suits continually invest in new buildings. In the second part of the film, the screen turns 180 degrees. The focus is now on the workers who thwart the capitalist game and ultimately transform it into social justice.

"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," said Ericka Beckman in an interview with Pablo Larios in *Frieze*.

During her research for *Reach Capacity*, Beckman immersed herself in the history of what is probably the most famous board game: Monopoly. While the game today symbolizes the extravagant sides of capitalism, its predecessor sought to denounce its excesses. In 1904, the stenographer and feminist Elizabeth Magie created the first version, "The Landlord's Game." Her aim was to expose blatant injustices such as growing speculation, monopoly positions, and unacceptable income inequalities in American society.

Magie's hope was that children would develop a natural distrust of injustice by playing the game and maintain this awareness into adulthood. When Magie's concept was purchased by the game manufacturer Parker Brothers, they reinterpreted the original anti-capitalist idea and released the game in 1935 under the name "Monopoly," which became one of the most popular games in the world.

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Ericka Beckman lives and works in New York. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Washington University in St. Louis in 1974 and attended the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1975. In the late 1970s she graduated from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) outside Los Angeles. With the groundbreaking exhibition *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984* at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (2009), Beckman became known as one of the protagonists of the Pictures Generation. Her works have been presented in solo exhibitions at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts (2019) and at the Secession in Vienna (2017), among other venues. In 2018, Kunst Werke Berlin presented a four-day screening of her works. The artist was represented in the 2019 group exhibition *Where Art Might Happen: The Early Years of CalArts* at the Kestner Gesellschaft.

An exhibition catalog will be published by Mousse Publishing with texts by Marie de Brugerolle, Valerie Verhack, and Marc Cutler.

The exhibition is supported by the NEUSTART KULTUR art fund and the Förderkreis der Kestner Gesellschaft. It is a joint production with the M Museum in Leuven, Belgium.

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