Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ericka Beckman, 2022 June 28-July 8

Funding for this interview was provided by the Alice L. Walton Foundation.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ericka Beckman on June 28 – July 8, 2022. The interview took place in Housatonic, Massachusetts at the artist's studio, and was conducted by Marina Isgro for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Ericka Beckman and Marina Isgro have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

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[00:00:00.39]

[Cross talk.]

[00:00:05.89]

ERICKA BECKMAN: [Cross talk.] Okay, I'm supposed to say, "Got it." Okay.

[00:00:09.81]

MARINA ISGRO: [Laughs.] All right. This is Marina Isgro interviewing Ericka Beckman at her studio in Housatonic, Massachusetts, uh, on June 28, 2022, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is session one. So, hi, Ericka. How are you doing today?

[00:00:31.52]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Really good. Really good. Beautiful day. Beautiful weather. Glad to be here. Glad to be with you [laughs].

[00:00:37.52]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, thank you so much for doing this.

[00:00:40.29]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah [they laugh].

[00:00:40.93]

MARINA ISGRO: So, [cross talk] I thought we could start with some very basic biographical details. So, maybe, just start by telling us when and where you were born and a little bit about your family.

[00:00:51.96]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay. Um, well, I was born on an Air Force base in Long Island [NY] in 1951, which means that I'm from a military family. This would put me, um, right after World War II. My parents got married and they moved to Levittown [NY], which is a very famous suburb in Long Island. And from there, I—first of all, I'm also, um, the oldest of three children, which meant that I traveled, probably, the most of my—more than my siblings. Um, growing up in a military family, at that particular time, right after World War II, meant that we traveled a lot. So, I was never in one place more than two years as a child.

[00:01:47.18]

And, um, a little bit about my father and mother, my—they both are from Massachusetts. And my mother was a Smith [College] graduate and had pretty high ambitions for herself. And, uh, the War came along, and she worked, obviously, like a lot of women, and her ideas

about the future, I think, changed during that time. And she wanted to, uh, marry a very practical man, and not, like, a Harvard graduate, as, you know, she often told me. And so, she married a military man who did not have a college education.

[00:02:33.83]

So, they were quite different in their backgrounds. Um, my father was a draftsman, and he designed airport—Air Force runways and bases, and, therefore, got out of combat in World War II and, uh, the Korean War. He was a very quiet, focused man who paid a lot of attention to his wife and his job but not to his children. Being that he wasn't an officer, because you had to be college-educated to be an officer, he was of the working class in the Army. That meant he was a sergeant, Master Senior Sergeant when he retired. It meant that we were very middle-class. And we—um, I was exposed to a lot of blue, blue-collar and lower-income children, based on the fact that we moved toward—to all of these locations that, um, were in the middle of nowhere, in cornfields and various places. Not cities, because air bases are not near big cities. So, um, I think, talking about my childhood, it's really important for me to go place by place, if it's okay with you?

[00:04:13.25]

MARINA ISGRO: Yes, please.

[00:04:14.03]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Because each one of them was a new experience. So, if I—you know, I—because I lived in various locations, and I grew up around all kinds of different people than—very different people than my family, I was exposed to constant—I think constant change is the way to describe it. When I was very young, I lived with my mother and my grandmother in Massachusetts. My father was in the Korean War and also in Japan. So, for the first two years of my life, I didn't have a father.

[00:05:05.44]

So, I was raised by my, my mother, primarily, and my grandmother. Um, that was very idyllic, very, very beautiful in Northampton, Massachusetts, and I remember great things about that early childhood experience. We met my father in Washington, DC, on an air base [laughs] after about a year. So, after two years, there was this man coming home called my father, and I had no idea what to expect. And it was a, a little bit of a shock and, uh, very exciting, but, you know, there were definitely problems between my mother and father at that time.

[00:05:49.45]

Between 1955 and [19]57, uh, I was living in Japan. And that meant, between four and six years old, I was exposed to Japanese culture in a very direct way, in that my, my mother sought to learn everything about Japan, about Japanese culture, so, therefore, she left me in the care of housekeepers, you know? And, of course, we're also talking about the fact that this is an American household on an American military base household with incoming Japanese caretakers or house carers—housekeepers who do not speak English. And, um, we're also talking about a discrepancy in class. Even though military is super middle-class, we're talking about this hierarchy between a servant class and a—you know a servant class working for a military family.

[00:06:58.91]

MARINA ISGRO: Right.

[00:07:00.77]

ERICKA BECKMAN: There were a lot of things that were great about the experience. And I remember learning Japanese. I remember—we were living next to a tiny little town called Misawa, Japan, which was quite agricultural and very rudimentary, in terms of being—um, it wasn't, at the time, an industrial town, which it has later become. So, I was exposed to a lot of festivities and children's activities that were Japanese. My housekeepers would take me out into shopping areas, and we would just walk around, and talk with other children in Japanese, and, mostly, experienced the weekly festivals that would happen.

[00:08:04.03]

Now, uh, the other thing that—what's notable about that particular period for me, and very importantly, is that I learned how to draw from a Japanese woman.

[00:08:16.41]

MARINA ISGRO: MARINA ISGRO: Oh, really?

[00:08:17.11]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, what that meant is I learned Japanese perspective as opposed to Western perspective at, around, age five. And what that meant was that, first of all, I was drawing, like, really abstract drawings. I was drawing frame within frame, sort of like a [Frank] Stella. I don't know why. I would get to the—draw these colored lines, I'd get into the center, I'd go, "Golly, it's over, there's nothing more to draw, and what do I do at the center?" As if there's something important about being in the center. So, that's where my mind was.

[00:08:53.32]

And I was doing this daily, um, because, as a military kid, you have to occupy yourself a lot. You don't necessarily have a lot of friends. So, I'll get into that [cross talk]. But, so, you learn to draw—as an American child, you learn to draw the ground, your mother, and father, and yourself as primary figures on this, like, horizontal landscape, and then, you draw the house in the background. And then, finally, sequentially, you might draw a tree, and you might draw the sun at the corner. Now, you know, kids who draw, they, they repeatedly draw the same thing over and over again.

[00:09:40.66]

Now, when the Japanese woman that was taking care of me at the time looked at it and watched me sequentially draw it, she stopped me and said, "No, you've got to do this completely different. You've got to draw the world first. You've got to draw the sky and the sun."

[00:09:59.37]

And then, what's next? What's the next biggest thing in, in the world? Well, the next biggest thing is a mountain or your house. And, eventually, you work your way down to the smallest thing, which is people. And so, the landscape, learning about, like, how to think proportionately and sequentially differently at that age was really great. And I remember going back to the States, um, to go to school—I think, it was probably second grade that I came back to the States for—and we were—I was very confused about the calendar because, in Japan, you learn a different—you—children are one years old when they are born, and they don't turn one year after one year. So, we always are later. And I was so confused about that.

[00:10:58.90]

Um, so, basically, upon returning to the States, we—again, we moved every couple of years. The first place that we lived was outside of Washington, in Virginia in a place called Newport News. And, um, this was a time that my mother decided we were never going to live on-base again, that we were going to be living with—off-base and in suburbs. And my experience was, pretty much, grounded in, um, going to local grade school in Newport News. I think, the, um, important thing about growing up in the military—and we're still—I'm still talking about moving around quite a bit—the important thing that I gained from it was a sense of self-sufficiency and self-reliance because you—you can't really expect to have friends for any period of time. And so, that was a, kind of, discriminatory experience for me. Choosing a friend was very difficult and very important because a friend had to affect me for the time that I was going to live there.

[00:12:39.76]

And my friends, for the most part—even though we were living off-base, we lived in these housing suburbs that were near enough to the base that most of the children were Army or

Air Force kids. So, we all had this common experience of traveling, of being exposed to different cultures, of being self-reliant, being able to play by ourselves, and not really great with social skills. Okay? And, um, so, I learned through, through my experiences with, with my early friends how to play, and how to play, you know, in a way that meant something to me. Not necessarily playing what everybody plays as a child, but finding unique ways of playing with kids that grew up around constant change, as well. Okay?

[00:13:46.27]

MARINA ISGRO: Interesting. How would you say that was different from, sort of, typical children's play?

[00:13:50.17]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, I didn't play typical children's play, but what I did know was that I didn't like playing dolls. [Cross talk.] And dolls are a very important, important thing for a kid growing up in the [19]60s. I mean, we transitioned from baby dolls to Barbie dolls. Okay? And that was a big, big transition. But, most importantly, I have to say that, um, there was this thing about playing dolls that was a type of socialization process that I understood did not come directly from the child but came from the parents. In other words, you were given certain dolls to play with by the parents. And there were, in these suburbs that I lived in—and I'll go into a little detail about some of them, but the mothers, in ways—in trying to get the kids to socialize, would set up play periods. And that's not too different from what happens now, but the play periods were around dolls. And that meant that girls' personalities were expressed through their dolls.

[00:15:03.52]

And I remember, one time, I was over at a, a new friend's house, and, uh, she wanted to play Queen of Sheba. Okay? And I didn't like that idea of playing a game with a historic female character that is dominating. And so, I just said that's the end. And I don't think I played dolls after that experience. There were—there were a lot of things surrounding dolls, for sure, that were very—I was—I strongly moved away from playing dolls. Um, one thing that happens—happened that, I think, formed a real impression on me and was, probably, the base of my creative energy was when we moved to Illinois. I probably was nine years old. Nine, 10, something like that. And we moved to a place in Illinois that was, primarily, farmland and mining towns. And so, therefore, even though the suburb had mostly military children in it, going to public school, we went to school with farmer kids and coal mining kids.

[00:16:46.35]

And it was a real—it was just as much of an interesting period to understand about how other families lived and how other kids grew up as it was when I was in Japan. Um, and this idea of encountering these different cultures, taking, kind of, what—learning from them, and then, knowing that you're not going to really have to live there. You know, you don't have to stay there because everything will change. There's constant change. So, it forced me to really take advantage of every kind of situation I was in at a young age. Like—so, in terms of play, because I know that you're interested in aspects of play that influenced me, because my early work is grounded in play—in, in the time that I was 10 and 11, I met a young girl who lived across the street who also didn't like playing with dolls [laughs]. And so, we would take these little animals that you would get from the dentist’s office, and we would invent stories that were kind of mashups between places that we lived, Sunday school stories, books we read, children's books, places that we heard about through our parents.

[00:18:31.83]

So, we matched up historical times, locations, fantasy. And this was a kind of genderless play because it didn't involve dolls. It was these two little animals and all the escapades that they could play. Um, and we would build elaborate scenarios. And this was collaborative. And we would play until we couldn't think of anything else to do with the scenario that we, we created. And we did this daily, and daily for a couple of years. And then, Barbie dolls came in and wrecked, wrecked the whole thing for us [they laugh]. I hate to be talking down about Barbie dolls—

[00:19:17.09]

MARINA ISGRO: No, it's funny, [cross talk] you know, I didn't like Barbies, either. I also rejected Barbies, so, I feel you [laughs].

[00:19:24.08]

ERICKA BECKMAN: But, it was the first time Barbie came into circulation, and we were, sort of, forced, culturally, to get one and try to play with them. And we couldn't, but it also killed off the other activity, because just when, when something comes in to replace—I mean, this is also the culture of the mid [19]60s. Music and dance were constantly changing. And so, one thing would push another thing to the side. Radio programs changed. Television show programs changed.

[00:20:00.11]

Everything was in the present and pushed to the past in culture. So, if something came along, and—like a hula-hoop or a Barbie doll, and you couldn't assimilate it, or you couldn't work with it, then, you know, everything else—you couldn't—you actually couldn't go back to the past and pick something up that was there. So, you had to move on, and that's, kind of, very interesting. I don't know if children feel that now, that they have these really strong passages that they go through. I'd be curious.

[00:20:37.58]

MARINA ISGRO: It's a great question. Is there anything else you want to say about, sort of, your early education, any early encounters with art, for example, at school?

[00:20:48.17]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I think, my most impressionable and important one was learning the drawing from the Japanese woman [cross talk]. I mean, really and truly. There was no art in my family. There was no consciousness of art. We were—we—you know—the idea never even occurred to me, although, most of the time, I drew, and most of the time, it was just an activity that kept me very busy as a child, just drawing. But, it didn't—it was more a way to develop my imagination rather than to think about it in relationship to something I saw in the world. There was no art.

[00:21:31.77]

Probably, by the time I was about 12, my mother said that we had a painter, a famous painter in the family, on her side of the family. And we went to the Saint Louis Art Museum to take a look [laughs]. And even to this day, I don't remember the name of the painter. It was some kind of Impressionist person. But, I mean, it was just so bizarre, and it wasn't anything that I was interested in. I was not a child growing up to be an artist and that had no influence on my childhood.

[00:22:12.40]

Education, I have to say, wasn't until I was in my, uh, junior high school years that I actually had contact with really good teachers, and—in that I left—well, oh, I would say that, probably, experience taught me more than my education. And, again, experiencing this constant flux, and learning about everything in a state of flux, and drawing and pulling out remnants of things that I could use in the next location was really important to me. So, to stay on this topic a little bit—I think it's kind of important—um, so, the, the upbringing of, you know, of being in the military meant that there was a real, uh, cultural difference between the military family and local families. So, that meant, in some way, we were privileged because we had a socioeconomic background—um, environment, I meant to say—that took care of us.

[00:23:46.88]

We weren't exposed to the economy of the surrounding communities. We, we had low-cost health insurance. I mean, health insurance was free, but we had low-cost food, and clothing, and housing. So, if my father earned the living he did in the military, and we lived outside of the military, we would be super low-income people. Um, trailer trash. Okay? But, because of the military, we led this kind of socialized existence. And that kind of clash, clash between my—the culture that I was in in public school and, then, what we lived as a family really

made an impression on me. And also at the same time, this, this constant moving every two years, up until when I was about 13, meant that I had a very episodic life, where I drew upon experiences from one place and took them to another.

[00:25:06.95]

And then, that next context, context would change, and I would have—my experiences were challenged. And so, I would have to think again how to start again. I would think, again, what is important about being here? Most importantly was what did I take with me from the past and bring it to my new place? As I got older, maybe around 10, 11, 12, it became an identity issue. It meant that—and this is also important because the kids in my neighborhood that weren't military kids didn't have this in them, that they could change.

[00:25:48.94]

And the military girls that I hung out with always thought, "Well, in the next place I live, I'm going to cut my hair, and I'm going to wear this kind of clothes, and I'm going to be this kind of person, and I'm going to try out this personality." And that was, for me, even though I didn't think about it in terms of clothing, hair, outward look, it meant that I would try out new things and, I would try—where I didn't succeed in one place, I would try to overcome that difficulty in the next place and try something else. So that was my experience of growing up.

[00:26:32.71]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. You've described it mostly positively. I wonder, were there times when it was difficult for you, or did you, sort of, just accept it as part of life that you would move every couple of years?

[00:26:43.82]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, I think, when you're a child, you don't really—you don't have that kind of critical look on your life. Even though I lost friends—and this, this was the sad part, is I got very bonded with certain girls, especially, uh, the ones I played with that—you know, the one I spoke about that had this collaborative experience, and they would disappear. They would just disappear in the night. They'd be gone. The family would be gone. And they—that was the hard part. But, other than that, no, it wasn't—you know, you grow up learning from your context, and that was my context for early childhood. Yeah.

[00:27:35.47]

The only other thing I should say about this is the authoritative nature of the military men that my friends grew up with, there was an awful lot of trauma, childhood trauma, fear of the father. Also a lot of runaways, kids who left home because of authoritative fathers. And, this came out a little later in my life in high school, much later, but, um, I was—I remember, you know, being on an Air Force, base. It could have been Japan or it could have been in Washington, DC, where we were constantly doing air drills.

[00:28:37.57]

So, you know, something would be interrupted. Your mom would come pick you up at school, and you'd have to board a bus, and you'd have to travel around the air base in this bus waiting for the air raid drill to be over. And I remember seeing women marching on the air base in uniform, in gray uniform, in a group. And I looked out, and I was very young, and I looked out, and I said, "You know, this is, this is something I haven't seen." I haven't seen women working. You know, I only saw mothers, and I saw caretakers. I mean, military wives did not work. They didn't have to work. But, here were women that were career women marching on base. And I was really—that really, you know, as a memory, stayed with me quite a bit. It's like, "Okay, there's something else to do besides, you know, being a mom or all that." [laughs]

[00:29:39.91]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. Interesting. [Cross talk.] So, okay, you mentioned high school a little bit. I think we should shift to high school if you feel like you're ready.

[00:29:48.52]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah, okay. So, we finally settled—um well, when I was in junior high school, in Illinois, my father retired in 1964 from the Air Force. And he was quite traumatized and went into a deep depression, not knowing what he wanted to do. My mother wanted to get out of the military. She had, had just gotten an inheritance, and wanted to find her dream home and settle down. And my father wanted to be a lifer. And we would have moved on to the Philippines. Um, there was a little conflict there, and my father did not know what to do with his life and took some time off to think about it.

[00:30:46.42]

And I was at a critical juncture, 1964 to 1967, when I was in junior high school through the second year in high school. Even though, um, my father retired and got another job at the McDonnell Aircraft in St. Louis [MO]—so, he worked with them. He was designing aircraft at that time—we kept on moving. So, I had, probably, five locations for junior high and high school.

[00:32:36.99]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, my father retired from the military in 1964, and I was 13. We were still living in Illinois. And this is a really important time in childhood, as everyone knows. You're in fifth and sixth grade, and everything is crazy. And, um, I knew that we were not going to be in military neighborhoods for the rest of my life. And I knew that this was a time of great change because it was a great change for my family. My father wanted to be a lifer and wanted to stay in the military, and my mother wanted to get out. So, she won [laughs]. And for me to, kind of, just get a kind of sense of belonging to a community in rural Illinois, in 1963 and [19]64, right at the height of—um, you know, right at the height of segregation, I became a cheerleader and a marching band person. And I played the trumpet.

[00:33:52.29]

And those two activities brought me to all kinds of small schools and neighborhoods, um, small towns in southern Illinois, as either a marching band person or a cheerleader backing the teams that played sports. And the schools were segregated. And so, you'd have a town that was a coal mining town. You'd have a Black, a Black town, and then, you'd have these white, blue-collar towns. And the experience was just as eye-opening to me as a child in Japan, in that I understood that the world surrounding me—that, that I had spent growing up in a military enclave, and that the world was gigantic, and problematic, and really, really interesting to me.

[00:34:59.92]

And, um, I have to say that there was really no—because—because there were these suburbs that had the upper-class white families, the merchant class, and then, you had the blue-collar suburbs, that the blue-collar and working-class suburbs were really aligned with all working class. And because the military was Black and white, meaning because it was racial, mixed-race military, you, as a child growing up not in the rich enclaves in these small towns, but growing up in these, like, blue-class, middle-class, lower-class suburbs, it was a mixture of people.

[00:35:58.76]

And with all their different backgrounds, as well, um, really allowed me not to carry on—not, not to be—you know, not to think of, of myself as a white person that's exclusive. And it became problematic in high school because—um, I wouldn't say it was definitely race, but class issues were really apparent in high school with me—that what, what I'm talking about now is the fact that, we—in high school, we were in the midst of a lot of social turmoil. Okay? We're talking about the years [19]66, [19]67, [19]68, [19]69. And, um, from one end of the spectrum to the other end, of those years, everything changed. And I went through quite a bit myself during that time. One is that we were settled, no longer living with military kids around me or having anything to do with the military, but living one place after another because my mother wanted to find her dream house. And we just kept moving from one suburb to another outside of St. Louis while my father worked for McDonnell.

[00:37:47.13]

And, um, I carried with me at that time my cheerleading. So, I was very athletic. And I was

just—I said, "This is the one thing that I'm going to keep on doing, no matter what. Wherever we are, I'm always just going to—this is my continuity." But, it became pretty apparent, once I was of age [laughs] where I could be more independent, um, where I could leave house, where I could find friends wherever, that there was a lot going on between the difference—there was a lot going on between suburban life and inner city life. And it's the first time that I was close to a city, which was St. Louis. Prior to that, it was all country life. And so, I was very rebellious, and I would leave home as soon as I went to bed. I'd climb out my window, and get on the back of a motorcycle, at the age of 14 and go into the city, and just take a drive around and look at what's happening in the city at night.

[00:39:15.77]

Well, this was St. Louis, and there was a place in St. Louis, a very hot spot called Gaslight Square, which was a place that had nightclubs—jazz, folk, and blues. And very important people, apparently, were there. Um, I was too young. But, it was something that I saw and experienced a massive amount of people getting together on the streets, dancing, partying, mixed racial area. It was fantastic, and it was—it was full of vitality and creativity. It was something really to see on the back of a motorcycle. You know?

[00:40:06.80]

And eventually, I got, sort of, more drawn into the city life than where my parents were temporarily living while they were searching for their dream home. And I would—um, my friends became inner city kids. That meant that I hung out in high school with really smart kids. A lot of writers, people who became writers, poets, um, Black musicians, young gay men who didn't know they were gay. We'd participated in various things that were happening in the city, um, at that time. And a lot of it was music-based there—because St. Louis was a very lively scene. It was a passageway from New York to San Francisco. And so musicians that had gigs in both places went through St. Louis. And there were—there were a couple of different venues.

[00:41:14.42]

One was a big one, where all the bands played, and then there were smaller ones, little clubs that had taken over, um, that had—that were established after the Gaslight Square district was burned down by [Alfonso J.] Cervantes, the mayor, in order to push the Blacks out of the—out of inner city of St. Louis. And, um, so, spending a lot of time in coffeehouses and alternative music venues brought me in touch with a lot of people were—where, you know, I shared their interest, and I found them to be the people that I learned the most from.

[00:42:03.22]

There was a place in St. Louis called, um, Block Bookstore. And this was René Block, the gallerist from Berlin's, brother. So, as a teen, like, 13, 14—I don't know, 15, I would always go—would go and start my weekend by going to Block Bookstore and looking at Fluxus editions and poetry books. And so, somehow, I knew that I was going to be a writer, and I was going to be, like, a poet. And I would try to write poetry at night, and I would try—that was my focus. And in high school, I was published, um, in some journal that I don't even know. But, it was, it was—I also, um, wrote for the St. Louis Free Press. I wrote band reviews, like, big band reviews. So, I was very active in a, kind of, alternative, um, cultural movement in St. Louis that was based on music and, I would say, experimental theater and poetry.

[00:43:17.24]

And that led me to SDS [Students for a Democratic Society], which, by the time I was a junior in high school—um, I think, it was, probably, 1967—no, I was 16 years old. Yeah, junior in high school—I started to work with the anti-Vietnam movement in St. Louis. And we set up a peace center. And there was a group of people, young kids—you know, high school kids got, got very involved in the peace movement. But, this, this was in downtown St. Louis, and I spent most of my weekends working in the, the peace center and planning for, um, demonstrations that were going to take place at the Chicago Convention and every—many demonstrations that were also local to St. Louis, dealing with the rights of of unions and the protection of, of Black workers in these unions. Um, there, there was this issue in St. Louis, which was very conservative—I mean, Missouri's conservative, yes.

[00:44:38.22]

St. Louis is supposed to be liberal, yes. But, it is backed up by conservative people. And so, the—when, when Gaslight burned down, it was apparent, because this is also where the counterculture movement was centered. All around this music, very, very developed Black and white music scene, that, um, once it was pushed out, there was retaliation. People wanted to start alternative venues immediately. But also, we were super—people were super aware of what the power structure in St. Louis was doing, in terms of trying to relocate these families.

[00:45:21.86]

And they relocated them to a place, uh, called Pruitt-Igoe, which was designed by the same architect that did the World Trade Center [Minoru Yamasaki -EB]. Now, Pruitt-Igoe is a famous footnote in the history of architecture, because it was torn down in 1972, because it was unfit for living. So, these Black families were moved all over St. Louis, in the north part of St. Louis. And, um, one time, when we were living temporarily in rented housing while looking—while the dream house was being built in some suburb, we were living in Ferguson, Missouri—about two blocks from where Michael Brown was killed.

[00:46:13.35]

And this was really a difficult time because the Blacks were being pushed out and into white suburbs. And there was a lot of tension in neighborhoods, um, tension that didn't—that I wasn't on one side or the other, but I could feel it. So, the political activity that I got involved in in high school also meant restoring rights to all citizens, and, especially, the working class, because the powers to be in St. Louis were afraid of having the workers, which were Black and white, blue-collar auto, auto workers, riot the way they were in Detroit [MI]. Okay?

[00:47:24.14]

In 1967, the riots in Detroit were, were prevalent. And St. Louis was— but the, the at—the feeling was that the city was being burned and, and leveled, like all these cultural neighborhoods, these beautiful French homes were being burned and abandoned. Um, and people moved away from the city into the suburbs in St. Louis and left the inner city, kind of, barren. And that was a result of, of fear—fear of the, the inner city, of disenfranchised families rioting and revolting the way they were doing in, in Detroit. So, this was the kind of background.

[00:48:24.97]

And we wanted—I, I, especially, with my friends, wanted to do something about it. And, for the most part, it meant organizing protests and getting involved in, in political action in high school. So, one thing that I did was I joined SDS, which had these meetings that were not in the suburbs but were in the city and mostly with union, union kids, kids that were, you know, from union families. And, um, of course, it meant an SDS organizer that came from somewhere else—maybe, Detroit, maybe up in Chicago. I don't, I don't know where, but an older, an older person in their thirties who got a lot of young kids together to, uh, form S—the SDS movement to local—to, to, to bring awareness to these issues to high school, to the high schools.

[00:49:34.73]

And so, um, one thing that I—that throughout—that came out of that experience, even though I didn't take my SDS training directly to the high school I was in, I wanted to work with the inner-city group and do something to help kids in Chicago during the Chicago Convention.

[00:50:06.23]

And so, what that meant was that we took a van up to Chicago before the convention, a week before the convention. And it was known through the organizers that there were going to be a lot of youth coming to Chicago for the music, and that Chicago had placed a curfew in the city a week before the convention. And any person on the street after 11 o'clock [PM] would be picked up and taken to jail or detention. And so, we were go—we went up there to rescue kids that were coming in. And there were all these, like—I call them, maybe, be safe houses. But, they were all these apartments that people knew about where you could take—they opened the doors to the kids that were coming into Chicago for the music.

[00:51:00.58]

And it—you know, historically, we've understood, by now, that was not approved. That the—the big concerts were not approved. And so, therefore, these kids didn't know that they didn't get the permits for the music and the bands to come. Nobody knew. And, in fact, in picking—in going there a week early, and, and picking—and finding people that were walking around, and taking them to these apartments, you know, to sleep over and to be educated about what's going to happen in Chicago, um, there was talk about the police also shooting Black kids because Black kids did not understand that there was a curfew, also didn't know much about the convention, and didn't, didn't know what was going on. And so, we were a—picking up Black kids and taking them home, as well. That put me in jail, uh, overnight. I was booked. [Cross talk.]

[00:52:08.40]

MARINA ISGRO: How old were you at that point, did you say?

[00:52:10.56]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I was 16.

[00:52:13.06]

MARINA ISGRO: Oh.

[00:52:14.57]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah. [Cross talk.]

[00:52:15.29]

MARINA ISGRO: And how did your parents—how did your parents react to all of this?

[00:52:19.68]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, um, my father didn't take any kind of interest in me. So, there was not an authoritative response. My mother—this is, probably, the only time in my life that my mother came down on me a little bit and said, "I think this is a little bit too much. We need to do something about this. Okay?" It was a little shocking to her that I had gone that far. Um, but my mother is the kind of person who really encouraged me to be and do whatever I wanted to do. So, this was hard for her to, to accept that, that she had to come and get me out of jail and take me home.

[00:53:07.22]

And, as a result, the turbulence in my family then started. So, the last year in high school, I was sent to a girls' Catholic boarding school. Now, that also coincided with—and this was after the convention, which I watched on television. There was this, this arc of excitement and revolution that I felt as a young teen through music, through the hearts and minds of young people who wanted change. And there was a slow arc downward as we watched the police, you know, come on to the—I mean, I was in Chicago for the first day of the riots. And, yes, I lost my shoes. And, yes, I got clubbed and all, all of that. And I left swiftly after that.

[00:54:04.09]

But, the point is that that excitement about change and revolution slowly diminished my last year in high school, like, 1969. But, the idea of being politically motivated and choosing a political life did not, um, coincide with what the events were surrounding me at that particular time. I was still very interested in an active political life. But, going to a girls' boarding school after, you know, being on the streets of Chicago, and wearing a uniform, was like a pause where I said, "Okay, I am going to take up the next new thing," just like a young kid, you know, just like, "Okay, so what's next? This is certainly not it, right?" [laughs].

[00:55:08.33]

MARINA ISGRO: I mean, were you thinking about the Women's Movement as well at that time? You've talked about—[cross talk].

[00:55:13.01]

ERICKA BECKMAN: No.

[00:55:13.23]

MARINA ISGRO: —sort of class sensitivity, but—[cross talk].

[00:55:14.99]

ERICKA BECKMAN: No, no, no. But, I mean, certainly, right at that particular time, it became very apparent to me what was going on. And this was 19—I graduated from high school in 1969. So, upon leaving high school and wanting to get as far away from my parents as possible, I went to the Aspen School of Contemporary Art, which was sort of an outgrowth of something called Center of the Eye [COE] Institute. So, I found this in the back of a *New Yorker* magazine. Like, "If you want to learn about contemporary art, writing, poetry, theater, go to this school in the summer." And I worked really hard to get the tuition together. And I went out there on a little plane to Aspen, Colorado, right after high school.

[00:56:10.04]

And [clears throat] I was—I, again, was—there was no such thing as art in my life. But, I, I was a writer. I was writing poetry. And so, I took a workshop with Robert Bly. Mmm [affirmative]. And that was my—probably, my first encounter with what it felt like to be a feminist in that here was a man who was extremely authoritative, and domineering over his students and only talked about himself, very nihilistic. And I felt there was something similar between him and my father. And I was such a rebellious kid against my father, the military, that anything authoritative really rubbed me the wrong way. And I hightailed out of that workshop immediately.

[00:57:10.81]

I almost had, like, a writer's block because I did not want to be in this room with this man and, apparently, learn from him something. So, I hightailed over to the film area in this summer camp sort of art school, which was being taught by Ken Jacobs, who's an American experimental filmmaker. And this was just prior to when he was going to head—or teach, I guess, teach at the time—at Binghamton. And he had collected a group of young people to attend his summer workshop that were accepted into the program at Binghamton and give them an introduction to his way of teaching. And it was super, super interesting—uh, a lot of perceptual exercises, ways of looking at things that, you know, are—perceptual exercises. I'll just leave it at that.

[00:58:17.54]

And that group also attracted people who had come out from schools back East, like Yale and Harvard, to be in the theater group. And so, there was a convergence of theater people, would-be filmmakers, experimental filmmakers, and a group—political kids who were also prepping—preparing at that time for the campus riots that were going to take place in 1970. And so, this was sort of a hotbed. Even though it was, quote, "art," it was, like, this meshing together of people. And it was a way for me to continue my political activity.

[00:59:05.73]

I was super involved. I wanted to be involved in what was going on in campuses because I knew I was going off to college. And here was a program that featured filmmaking as a kind of political tool, but not political in a documentary sense but as an alternative, like, a different way of picturing the world. And I was super, super excited about it, not necessarily wanting to be a filmmaker but wanting to be close to any activity that was still going to promote change. And the contradiction was really apparent that there were young women—myself included, 18-year-olds—who, um, were there to experience filmmaking at the very begin—you know, at the beginning, for them.

[00:59:59.45]

And Ken Jacobs was very charismatic and had this, kind of, air about him that promoted

activities around idealization, that you could think about a different sort of world that could exist within yourself and your perceptions. And that is, sort of, enough. Okay? That this is idealized. If you can achieve this inner perceptual state where there's beauty and peace, that is, like, the highest thing that you can achieve. So, he was very idealistic and, at the same time, taking us, the students, on these little caravans through the woods to stop and ponder nature or think about looking through the lens and the light and the color and all that. Meanwhile, his wife was carrying all the heavy equipment.

[01:01:23.00]

And that, to me, was a discrepancy. I really—again, I did not like to see what his wife was subject to, at that particular time in my life. And, um, so, that was, like, my first taste of, of this kind of contradiction between an elitist sort of culture, or of trying to strive for perfection in some way, and then, having—you know, pushing off utility and labor onto somebody else. And in this case, it was a woman.

[01:02:03.62]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, absolutely.

[01:02:04.67]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah [they laugh].

[01:02:07.28]

MARINA ISGRO: So, would you say—was it, sort of, that summer experience that pushed you to get your BFA [Bachelor of Fine Arts]? Is that when you really started thinking about it seriously?

[01:02:17.63]

ERICKA BECKMAN: At the time, I was so, sort of, taken aback by this contradiction that I saw between Ken—Ken Jacobs—and, and of course, there was Stan Brakhage and there were, like, all the men that were doing all of the stuff. And there were all these women that were just, like, hanging out. So, I decided that writing wasn't going to be what I was going to do anymore. I couldn't write. I was blocked. It was over, [cross talk] completely over. So, I decided I would try to learn from art something. Okay?

[01:03:12.41]

So, I decided to get a BFA and go to art school. And I made the mistake of going to University of Denver, which was a party school. And I was still there—and, and, you know, this was the time of ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corp] burning and a lot of campus riots. And here I was in a party school. And the art education was horrible. And I, um—you know, to cut a long story short, I just left and went back to St. Louis, where I went to WashU, Washington University's School of Fine Arts. And that school had terrific education—it was a terrific education, um, because of its heritage, in that, after World War II, a lot of Bauhaus people—I mean, after World War II, there was an influx of Bauhaus students to the States, and they went to Chicago.

[01:04:09.23]

And then, from Chicago, some of them came down to St. Louis. So, there were students of Bauhaus teachers in St. Louis. And there were—Max Beckmann taught there in the [19]40s. And his—he brought in Philip Guston. And so, there was a very strong sort of abstraction, you know, painter—painting abstraction, and fig—this relationship between figure and abstraction going on at the school at the time but mostly taught by Bauhaus. So, there were these—um, for me, it was a training exercise. It wasn't conceptual art. It wasn't thinking about art. It was learning art history and learning what it, what it takes to be an artist—you know, not the craft of how to mix color. [Video freezes.]

[01:05:09.52]

I had a drawing teacher who was German. And, you could—at that time, the program was such that you had to draw and paint for three years. There was nothing else. And so, I had—I didn't want to take figurative drawing because it was so ancient, in a way. I wasn't

interested in it. But, so, I took this other, parallel drawing course, which was taught by this German man who was very rigid and spoke in a very—you know, his English was kind of broken. He didn't express himself very much. But, he had these incredible exercises. So, we did have a figure. I mean, we drew a figure, just like everybody. But, we were taught other ways of seeing, so that the figure was in relation to the context. So, it was architectural. [Video freezes.]

[01:06:11.86]

MARINA ISGRO: Ericka, you're freezing up a little bit.

[01:06:15.25]

ERICKA BECKMAN: —planes, hitting planes, lines. Are we okay technically?

[01:06:19.57]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. I, I lost you for a second, but you're back now. So, continue. Sorry.

[01:06:23.77]

ERICKA BECKMAN: It could be my internet here in Housatonic. [They laugh.] But, anyway—so, I took a parallel drawing course with a very rigid German. And he had these exercises that were based on a model being in the classroom. But, we learned how to draw architectonically. That meant drawing forces and dynamics of the body in relation to context and architecture. And so, when there was a pose, it wasn't about representation. It was about forces. And so, of course, he was abstract. And, of course, he was, um, an expressionist. I never saw his work.

[01:07:08.80]

But, this kind of drawing really affected me because it was about inner forces and about dynamics. And, um, it, it didn't matter if, if the outline looked like a figure or not. And it was—so, I challenged him. I was really rough on him. He was, again, an authoritative figure that reminded me of my past experiences. And I rebelled, and it—I, I drove him crazy. But, I kind of got through it, and I moved on. And there was, like, no need to rebel that, that much after that. And, I think, it was just his authoritative nature that really offended me. It was the fact that he couldn't communicate. He had a lot of bottled energy.

[01:07:58.57]

But, he was sup—not going to give me any support, although he used my drawings as examples, you know—as examples in class. But, he wouldn't give me any personal support and encourage me. And that was, also, when I realized that there aren't that many women who can make it in the art world at that time. That was the education. That was the early, early thought there [laughs].

[01:08:26.71]

MARINA ISGRO: Were there other professors who, sort of, were major influences on you during that period? [Cross talk.]

[01:08:31.39]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah, there were. Yeah. Being that it was a relatively—it wasn't a school like Harvard or Yale, Yale, but it was up there. It attracted people from New York, uh, to teach. And there were a lot of young professors I had that showed me that there was a different energy in—outside of the Midwest, okay? And so—not that I even thought about—again, thinking—I never—I really didn't think of myself as an artist at the time. I was really just trying to find what it is that I want to do.

[01:09:20.34]

And I had—it was a tough time because art history was fascinating, absolutely fascinating. But, we didn't learn anything beyond World War II. And so, I would spend most of my nights in the library reading everything I could find on contemporary art. I was an avid reader of, like, *Studio International*, *Avalanche*. I even got a magazine called *The Fox*, which came from

NYC, a very difficult read. But, I was aware—*Film Culture Reader*.

[01:09:59.28]

I was aware that there was a lot going on outside of the Midwest. But, here I was, back in the Midwest. And it was, it was going to be very important for me to pursue getting, getting, getting out of the Midwest. But, again, I was trying to take everything I could learn from that experience, which meant a very strong foundation in visual art. And, um, at the same time, going on in my head was, like, if I'm going to be an artist, what am I going to do if I don't want to make objects that sit in elite homes?

[01:10:36.21]

I mean, there was really—there was just a little bit of information you could get from, like, *Avalanche Magazine* that there was something going on called Earthwork and conceptual work. And there was a lot of intellectual debates going on in these magazines about how to make non-elitist art. And I wanted to be close to that. And I—the young professors that came from New York had a little bit of that in them, but not that much, because this was a traditional art school. Okay?

[01:11:10.17]

MARINA ISGRO: Interesting. So, how did you—how did you learn about CalArts [California Institute of the Arts], and what, what drew you to CalArts for your MFA [Master of Fine Arts]? [Cross talk.]

[01:11:16.41]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Interesting. Yeah, well, um, my first draw to CalArts—there were two of them. The first one was that, in the library, when I was reading all these magazines about art that is international and contemporary and that falling in line with the Fluxus multiples that I would see at the books—that I saw in the bookstore in high school, and the things that were happening in Aspen that were publications around design and architecture, um, influenced by people from Italy and New York. I knew that I had to go somewhere where I could find the right teachers, I say, and could actually take these experiments that I was doing in undergraduate school at WashU in, in film.

[01:12:25.66]

So, just to backtrack a little bit, I had—there was no such thing in my art school—at the time, there was no photography, no program in photography. That was a night school program. And I got very close to the teacher, and he lent me a camera. And the camera was a Fujica Single 8 movie camera. And it would allow you to do rewinding of the film. It was like an audio cassette that you would put in the camera. And I did these experiments that, I thought, reminded me of, Ken Jacobs' experiments. But, I would do them differently, and I would do them with my friends. And I won't go into, into it, but it was just an experimental sort of sidekick that I loved doing it. But, it had nothing to do with art. Okay?

[01:13:19.30]

Art and this kind of experimentation did not match—meet up in any way. On that side of experimentation with media, I was a partner—or dating the cousin of Jerry Rubin in college. And he was involved in the, um, cable—early days of cable television and Portapak media, which meant that there—being his partner, I went to all these conventions where the frontiers of cable arts were being defined. That meant that newsrooms, television stat—newsrooms, and production for television news was being localized in communities. And so, within that, there was this fervent idealism about Portapak culture, that you could bring this low-cost video camera to places, towns, and they could generate their own news, have their own news stations.

[01:14:35.96]

And this was the early beginnings of video art. And I remember going to a conference in, in Vancouver as an undergraduate where I met all the people that were involved in Ant Farm and all of these, kind of, revolutionary video people [the Video X conference of 1973-EB].

[01:14:53.79]

And, again, this was another occasion where the women were supportive but not the speakers. So, SDS, and then, the early video movement, there were always women, but the women were supportive, running the food kitchens and cabling but not necessarily being, like, the propellers of ideas and information. Um, so, by the time I was finished with undergraduate school, I was really ardent, really looking for the next place where I could find the kind of people that I wanted to hang out with. I mean, that's basically it.

[01:15:32.97]

And I was in the library, reading. And I came across an article by Paul Brach, B-R-A-C-H, who was the dean of the School of—School of Art at CalArts. And he wrote this incredible essay, which I can't remember where it was published, but it was on his ideas of education and what an, what an art school should be. And he took those ideas and came to CalArts and implemented them. But, these were his theories about what it takes to be an artist now, after, you know, the turbulent [19]60s, the Vietnam War, um, the, the race riots, the mass killings, all of that—all of that turbulent time and energy.

[01:16:27.19]

And, and he, kind of, shifted education into—it wasn't claiming that it was influenced by feminism. But, it was directly influenced by alternative, creating an alternative way of making art that, somehow, has an impact on culture that is not, necessarily, elitist and buying into this—I guess, what he experienced in New York in the [19]60s. And so, that, that was number one. That was my—I said, "Okay, there is something going on CalArts that's like an incubation. Maybe, I'll find a lot of people there that I—that, like—maybe, like Oberlin, that are flocking to places where, where you can discuss change."

[01:17:20.40]

And then, there was also the two women in my undergraduate program who were not artists. They were, they were in the School of Liberal Arts, and they were going to CalArts. And if so, if CalArts could take writers and put them into an art program, I surely belonged there. So, I went to CalArts.

[01:17:44.38]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, so let's, let's move to CalArts, then. How are you feeling? Do you need a break or anything? Or—[cross talk].

[01:17:49.77]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Do you need a break? I could use some water. [Cross talk].

[01:17:52.14]

MARINA ISGRO: Go get some water. I'll have some water, too [laughs].

[01:18:03.88]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, really, I'm sorry about starting so late today.

[01:18:07.06]

MARINA ISGRO: Don't worry.

[01:18:07.63]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I mean, two o'clock. I mean, I prob—hope I didn't disrupt your day.

[01:18:11.20]

MARINA ISGRO: Not at all. Honestly, I got to skip a meeting that I didn't really feel like going to anyway. So, [they laugh] it's great.

[01:18:17.17]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay.

[01:18:18.34]

MARINA ISGRO: So, all right. So, you studied at CalArts between [19]74 and [19]76. But, at the same time, you were also doing the Whitney's [Museum] independent study program in New York in [19]75 and [19]76. So, I thought I would ask you about, sort of, both of those experiences and how this, kind of, bicoastal experience shaped your work. So, why don't we start—[cross talk].

[01:18:45.62]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay. So, I'm from a restless background.

[01:18:49.63]

MARINA ISGRO: Yes. True. We've covered that. [Cross talk.]

[01:18:51.25]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I think that's—I think that's covered. So, this idea of going back and forth, coast to coast, was not a problem for me.

[01:18:59.08]

MARINA ISGRO: Right.

[01:19:00.14]

ERICKA BECKMAN: But, it was always—it was always in pursuit of what—I have to say how that happened, actually.

[01:19:06.07]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, yeah, please.

[01:19:07.54]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah. So, um, at CalArts, I got in on a scholarship. Paul Brach—well, I could teach a class as a graduate student in printmaking. So, I did. And I—that got me a full scholarship to CalArts. The primary experience, I think, for me, starting, like, within the first couple of weeks at CalArts, was that I had a studio visit by Miriam Schapiro. And, you know, we had these little studios. They're not these grand things that you, maybe, thought happened, but they were these little cubicles.

[01:19:48.88]

And I put up all of my print work. And I was ready for my first CalArts critique. And at the same time—maybe, even the same day—I was rolling around with a video camera on me, like Joan Jonas, down a hillside, you know? That kind of rolling, breaking up video thing. But, I—this was art, and I was going to have a good studio visit. And she came in, and she said to me, "You're making beautiful work. If you want to be a woman artist, you can't make beautiful work. It's not what you can do. You have to stop making beautiful work." And I said, "Great. I have something up my sleeve," [laughs].

[01:20:39.72]

So, I knew what—I knew that ended that. And then, I decided that the Super 8 camera was going to be my tool. And, in the program at CalArts, there was no film equipment, but there was a film program. There was an art program. There were all these great schools, but they didn't share resources. So, there were—you had to be self-sufficient in the art school if you're going to make media. And most of the women made media. I have to say, there were incredible women in my class making media—photography, video. And I was the only person using a film camera.

[01:21:26.61]

But, um, we had a lot going on. Now, this was also right after the women's party—I guess it was called *Dinner Party* with Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. This was after that existed, after that took place in Los Angeles. And there were remnants. There were women in the art school that my—in my first year, who had attended that, who were so against the art world that they left CalArts to become architects, writers, publishers, fashion designers, everything but making art. And so, there was this, this feeling like I wanted to be around strong women that were challenging and making really independent, thought-provoking work. And yet, I came into these caucus meetings—these talks, getting to know the women, and they were all abandoning it.

[01:22:33.06]

And there were just a couple of people—just a couple women like myself who stayed in the program in this particular year, okay, in this particular year. And, um, so, the—there were—at CalArts, at the time, most of [John] Baldessari's poststudio program took place outside of CalArts. So, only when we had to show up on campus, we would. Most of the time, we went to shows and had meetings, either at his house in Santa Monica or in, in various places in Los Angeles. So, he exposed us to all kinds of work. That was the best thing about being at CalArts was that. There was no relationship—there was no hierarchy between the professors and the students. Everyone was on a level playing field.

[01:23:30.81]

And, not only that, it was that we were supposed to learn from everything that we came in contact with, that we—you know, were challenged by everything. And so, we had constant studio visits with, with artists that were coming to Los Angeles that Baldessari brought. For me, at that time, a very important first—after Miriam Schapiro's [laughs] studio visit, um, three women came to CalArts and set up teaching for a semester. And that, that was Yvonne Rainer, Pat Steir, and Lynda Benglis. And, the few women that, I have to say, were making art and involved in the MFA program, gravitated a lot towards Pat Steir and Benglis. And I gravitated toward Yvonne Rainer.

[01:24:32.97]

And Yvonne Rainer, at the time, was working on her—um, she had just made *Lives of Performers*. And she was working on her next film. I think it was *Kristina Talking Pictures*, if I'm correct. And she was dealing with narrative. And she was trying to figure how to break narrative down into elements that could be performed separately and create new relationships with each other that aren't your standard narrative form.

[01:25:03.39]

And so, she was doing experiments and let us in, the few of us who attended her workshops, into her work—working methods. And I was really excited about what she was doing. And it was, um, you know, it was conceptual art, but conceptual art taking—it was a conceptual way of analyzing narrative form, which, again, was something that I didn't study, never studied in school. But, I was learning from an artist how to critically look and, and analyze narrative form and how to break it down into elements that you could reposition, rework, and put together again in different forms. Like, how to do a movement exercise that was a narrative passage or a statement between, like, a man and a woman.

[01:26:06.64]

How could you do that through movement? How could you set up a scene where spatially, you—the dynamics between people are expressed spatially? Um, how could you use text and image? In California, the dominant work at the time that I saw through, uh, the poststudio art program at CalArts was conceptual work, and mostly photography and text.

[01:26:32.66]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[01:26:33.62]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, this meant that narrative in California was big. You've got Hollywood. You've got CalArts making movies. You've got kids learning how to go into studio production

or fighting against studio production. Narrative was pretty much everything. And so, to the artists that were thriving in LA, they were there because of this relationship to narrative that they wanted to have, in order to work with it in some way. And so, you did have a lot of conceptual art photography that used text and image in very interesting ways.

[01:27:15.11]

And a lot of the work at CalArts, men's work at CalArts, was, was in that form—large poster images with text underneath it, saying something that's not in the picture. And, of course, Baldessari's work at the time was really about that, like his *Blasted Allegory* series. And so, you know, whatever Baldessari was interested in, he found ways of, of bringing us, the students, into it, into his interest in art. Um, one person that I visited in relationship to Yvonne Rainer that was influential to me was Guy de Cointet. [cross talk] Guy de Cointet was living in Los Angeles, and he was working in Super 8 film, like myself. And so, we had something in common, and we really bonded. And I saw his performances, and I was absolutely—I just felt so wonderful in the presence of those performances because, again, he was using narrative.

[01:28:34.58]

But, he was using other signs and symbols to represent things in the narrative. And how he worked out a performance situation between an object—he, I mean, he—he put objects on the same level as, as actors and props at the same level as actors, in that all of these were instruments to create a complex narrative. But it was all displaced.

[01:29:02.80]

MARINA ISGRO: Right.

[01:29:03.26]

ERICKA BECKMAN: And so, performance art in LA was super interesting. And, uh, that was invigorating me, as well as the music scene at CalArts, because it was world music, percussion, and it was experimental music. So, I—as, as a first-year at CalArts, I was making these films, and I was hanging out in the music school with—and I was trying to learn musical theory and all that stuff so I could, like, work on rhythmic studies in film, figuring out a way to put things together that's performance art and music. Um, when this—when I met Yvonne Rainer, and when I had attended her workshop, I felt like I had to follow her. And so I went to the Whitney program in hopes of following her.

[01:29:57.90]

MARINA ISGRO: Oh, so that's what brought you there. [Cross talk.] Yeah.

[01:30:00.27]

ERICKA BECKMAN: She was in the—she was teaching in the Whitney program. And she took a little bit of time off to go to CalArts to teach. But, by the time I got into the Whitney program, she was off in Berlin making [cross talk] *Journeys from Berlin*. So, I never did get to reconnect with her. Um, but that put me in touch with Structuralism, and Phenomenalism, and everything else that has to do intellectually with language. At, at that early time, when I was at the Whitney program, I had, I had been influenced by the performance art in LA. But, I was also very interested in text in relation to image.

[01:30:39.93]

And I was trying to, to figure out a way to make films that were based on [Ludwig] Wittgenstein's ideas. And so, I was thinking—I was trying to figure out this kind of new language with cinema, with film because film is temporal. And it can use everything in the world as its media. But, I wanted to figure out a way to, um, to, sort of, break down our way of thinking about conventions and, and display—and, and finding new ways of representation and thinking about things through the use of language as text and image.

[01:31:25.74]

And these were a very, you know, very formative times for me at, at, um, the Whitney program because they're—again, at this particular time, Ron Clark was running the program.

He retired. And he brought in a lot of people, just like Baldessari did. It was a program where you did studio visits. You just went from one artist's studio to another. And, there were people—the people that I was interested in that I went to visit were dancers and musicians, like Philip Glass, Constance de Jong, Simone Forti, Trisha Brown. We had studio visits with other artists. But, actually, at that particular time, the more interesting work was being done in alternative spaces and venues.

[01:32:23.30]

And so, I gravitated towards experimental theater in New York, and performance music, and dance as a, kind of, foundation of learning about those forms in order to inform my filmmaking.

[01:32:43.05]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. Do you want to say anything else about the, sort of, contrast between New York and LA at that time? I know when we had a previous conversation, you described LA as being, sort of, more of a free zone than New York [cross talk.]

[01:32:54.30]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[01:32:55.44]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[01:32:56.35]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, that's—that's—see, Los Angeles, when I was there, was coming off of a moment where it was a second city for artists from New York to do multiple production. Gemini GEL [cross talk] was a big player. And, um, there was not a real interesting scene going on with painting and art production in Los Angeles. What was really more interesting to me were the performance and conceptual work that was happening and the alternative spaces that were forming at the time to support this kind of work.

[01:33:43.85]

And based on—you know, when you live in Los Angeles, you have to adapt to this feeling of a, a no zone, of, of there's, there's a place where there's nothing going on between where you start and where you end. There's no relationship. There's no connective tissue. Once you're in your car, and you're spending that 30-minute to 40-minute drive somewhere, you are nowhere. And this had a kind of impact on everything that you would see, as if, as if people took advantage of the fact that this is ephemeral, that this is only taking place now, and it'll disappear. And that, that was in the music. That was in the play of what people took from environments, whether it was the new music of, like, you know, Southeast Asia coming in and influencing local musicians, whether it was, um, you know, Balinese dance affecting white American dancers [laughs], that these things just touched up against each other. And they were—they had the impact, and then, they were gone.

[01:35:06.88]

And the fact that—I mean, I, I now look back, and I think about how the impact of Hollywood had—the—what impact Hollywood had on the art scene because it was temporal-based. And it was also a provisional thing. It would only—would just be manufactured, and it, sort of, went into the world and disappeared. There were a lot of artists who had these, uh, kind of public personas, like—um, oh, I'm not going to name names [they laugh], but had public performance, had—like Chris Burden, okay?

[01:36:02.55]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. [Cross talk.]

[01:36:04.64]

ERICKA BECKMAN: —had a, had a public persona where there wasn't a—where—wherever Chris Burden made an event, you knew that it was something to see, but it would disappear

—that it had nothing to do with this private life, that you knew nothing about this artist, but, you know, you were in contact with really important work and that it was an event. And so, the—this idea of an event structure is, is where art takes place was so prevalent in LA at the time. You know? You didn't know where you were going to go to see something. You had an idea if it was like, what we would call now, a popup place.

[01:36:47.40]

But, it was simply, like, an alternative venue. Something would happen there. It would be very exciting. And you'd leave it, and that would be the end of it. And you, you—nothing would last. Um, and, in New York, it was quite different. The feeling was that there was a lot of—of course, this is a place of history. And there was a lot to rebel against, against the art world at the time. And the structure of the art world was something to really question. And the people that—um, so, it was a very—the alternative work that I found in New York had a stronger kind of confrontation. You know? There were things that you really rubbed up against and battled with. And you could see it in the work, and you could hear it in the voice. And you could see how difficult it was to break from it. And it was a real struggle because, you know, it's all compacted. The city is very compacted.

[01:37:59.86]

MARINA ISGRO: That's really interesting. So, I want to jump back just for a second to CalArts because I realize we didn't talk about Vito Acconci.

[01:38:06.82]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah.

[01:38:07.21]

MARINA ISGRO: Do you want to talk a little bit about, about him and his role in your education?

[01:38:12.82]

ERICKA BECKMAN: After going to the Whitney program and making four or five works that, finally, put me on a path that I knew I was, I was committed, I went back to CalArts, and Acconci was there for a full year. And I decided—I don't know how these things—I don't remember how these things happened. You just, sort of, picked people that were your mentors. And whatever they wanted you to do, you did. Um, and, sometimes, it meant that you would just have, like, four or five studio visits with your mentor. And you would be independent and working in your studio or doing whatever else you were doing. But, in terms of Acconci, like Yvonne, he wanted to bring his students into his process.

[01:39:15.14]

And not that we made work at CalArts—we didn't make his work at CalArts. But, he was experimenting with ideas. He was in a, kind of, transition between being involved in sculpture to being—wanting to do performance art, direct-to-audience performance art. And so, I, you know—I think I tried a few things out on him. And then, he—I don't—I really don't remember too much about it except that, um, I thought that he was one of the better teachers that I had because of his relationship with language, because he had such a way of speaking that was rhythmical.

[01:40:06.62]

And he broke language down into units. And he, he was a walking poet. But he was mixing up text from all over the place. Like, he would pick, you know, advertising, poster art, lyrics from music, you know, pop music, bring that into his body, and, somehow or another, problematize everything, and then vocalize it. And he also tried to find a way to work with objects and to work with architecture. And so, this, this, to me, was really exciting because he talked about—and I just remembered this at the time, that there are all these multiple selves that are in the world. You have an inner self, an outer self, what you represent to yourself, what you represent to others, what the culture sees in you.

[01:41:07.54]

So, it was all this, kind of, feedback between who you are, what your inside is, what your outside is, what kind of effect you have on the community, what your community sees in you, what is the value of that community, what's your culture, what's your nation, what's your world, you know? This sort of accordion, spatial accordion, that he put every text through., everything was problematized through this multiple mirroring. And I found his mind just exciting. And I asked if I could work with him in New York. So, when I left CalArts, I was part of his, like, studio team for about a year or so. And we made *[The] Red Tapes* together.

[01:41:56.99]

MARINA ISGRO: Amazing. You—so, you mentioned earlier that the other women in your program at CalArts were, primarily, working in video and photography and that you were, sort of, the lone one using film. So, I wonder if you could talk about film and that decision, and then, also, kind of, the hierarchy of these various media in the art world at that time.

[01:42:22.21]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay. Well, um, the hierarchy was definitely—there—okay, there was any—okay, the way to answer that is to say that video was a standard tool. If you were going to make media, you either had to use photography or video. Film was something else. And, um, I didn't like the idea of using a television, at all, based on growing up around a television [laughs]. I didn't like ped—the idea of a pedestal, and I didn't like the idea of media as sculpture. And I was more aligned with performance art. And I wanted to make a kind of film that was a particular document of a performance that only could be done in, in, in film.

[01:43:23.93]

And when I say film, I'm actually not talking about real-time documents of the real world, which video captures perfectly. And video work, at the time, was all about setting up the camera and looking deeply at your life, especially women's lives, and, um, sort of, looking at the absurdity of these framed places and spaces that women occupy and how women's perception can be, can be, uh, seen through the lens of a video camera. And so, yes, there was a lot of women making video at CalArts. And there were two or three that were incredible, like, much better than I will—more interesting, both. And, again, they went to New York. And I went to New York and followed them, as, you know, friends do. And they quickly stopped because of what was going on in New York in the [19]70s, in the late [19]70s.

[01:44:38.34]

But, at the—you know, in the school at CalArts, there was no hierarchy between men and women. They were—the women were actually really, really supported by the men in, in the program because the men could see that these women were really doing groundbreaking work.

[01:45:00.55]

And so, I was around. Even though these women were highly discouraged, it propelled them to, like, really think about what they were doing and to try to make something very, very different. And some of them—like I said, it launched them out onto a different course when they moved to New York and realized that, that they were going to be overwrought with problems, making this kind of work. Um, I mean, somehow or another, I stuck it out because I found people in New York that I felt were doing—you know, I could align myself with, other women. Yeah.

[01:45:42.14]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. So, then, let's move to New York and talk about, kind of, the early years of your career, if that makes sense? Unless you want to take a break now.

[01:45:54.51]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay, let's take a break.

[01:45:55.74]

MARINA ISGRO: Take a break? Okay. Let's do it [laughs].

[01:45:58.05]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Two, two minutes?

[01:45:58.83]

MARINA ISGRO: Sure. I'll see you about 3:55.

[01:46:03.15]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay.

[01:46:04.20]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[01:50:01.83]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I have to put on this light that Ben gave—[cross talk] figure out how to put this light on that Ben gave me.

[01:50:09.17]

MARINA ISGRO: Oh, Okay. Yeah, I was going to say, Ericka, we can also—we can stop whenever you want and pick up again next time, whenever you feel like you're talked out [laughs].

[01:50:20.57]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah, I think, um—well, this light now—it doesn't—is not powering. I actually felt like I should say something else about CalArts. I don't think I ever was—

[01:50:33.03]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[01:50:33.29]

ERICKA BECKMAN: —finished with that. [Cross talk.]

[01:50:34.50]

MARINA ISGRO: Of course. And I actually realized I skipped a question, too, about your, your first show.

[01:50:40.17]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Oh, yeah. Okay. [Cross talk.]

[01:50:41.58]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[01:50:42.84]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, this light is not powering up. So, I'm not able to get better—let me see if I [audio cuts out].

[01:50:48.99]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay.

[01:51:05.81]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay. Yeah. Okay [laughs].

[01:51:25.99]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay. So, how much longer do you feel like you want to go? It's totally up to

you.

[01:51:32.27]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Maybe—let me just—I think—[cross talk.]

[01:51:34.07]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[01:51:34.82]

ERICKA BECKMAN: —15 more minutes?

[01:51:36.28]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay, let's do that. [Cross talk.] Yeah.

[01:51:38.18]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay.

[01:51:38.31]

MARINA ISGRO: So—

[01:51:38.63]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Because it'll put us close to two hours.

[01:51:41.45]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, that's perfect. [Cross talk.] So, you were saying you wanted to add some more about your experience at CalArts. [Cross talk.] Why don't we start there?

[01:51:48.20]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah. The, the question you mentioned to me that I wanted to think a little more about was this relationship between—the difference between CalArts—I mean, sorry, the difference between Los Angeles and New York because I was experiencing both. And, um, I have to say that, in Los Angeles, there were a lot of people that were in Los Angeles at the time because they didn't want to be in New York City. So, they were trying there. You know, there were a lot of people who were just looking for a free space to explore and to try things out.

[01:52:28.82]

Um, and that energy meant that there were people trying combinations of things that I found very exciting, such as performance and music combinations, standup performance work, and projection. There were these risks—and I call them adventures—that people were taking with their form, and, sort of, taking advantage of this loose environment that, that there was nothing very privileged. That, like, everything was okay, that, that, that it was a level playing field, that anything that you brought to the, quote, "performance situation" was viable, and that you weren't being judged, necessarily, or you weren't in competition with other people.

[01:53:28.59]

Maybe, that was happening behind the scenes, but it wasn't the feeling that exist—that actually existed in, in the—um, as, as an onlooker. You know? The, the feeling was that this was a very—this is a faraway place that you can bring ideas to, and delve into them without any time pressure or social pressure or ambition, and try to figure out if there's something in there that is relevant and will sustain your work. And so, that—so, even though I didn't take classes with Michael Asher, which, in a way, I wish I had—I think, I was still rebelling against a dominating male [they laughs] because he was a bit of—you know, he had, he had a reputation of being very forceful with the kind of conceptual problems he brought to his class.

[01:54:31.51]

Um, but, I had girl—I had girlfriends who were artists who just absolutely loved his rigor. But, when I was at CalArts, I was really self-directed. And so, I didn't want to have any—I just—I really—I think, I followed Acconci and Rainer only, and I barely participated with other faculty, at that time.

[01:55:01.40]

You also have to realize that, as a young—as a graduate student, as most graduate students are these days, that your community is really what is important to you. And at the time, at CalArts, my community was people like David Salle and Troy Brauntuch. Goldstein and Matt Mullican had already gone to New York. But, they were, kind of, little legends in the school. And all of these people that I'm talking about—David Salle included and Troy—were making performance work.

[01:55:34.84]

There was nobody actually doing anything on paper except, maybe a photographic poster. Baldessari was experimenting with film at the time. He was making 16-millimeter film with his students. Um, there was this idea that, uh, anything that is media-based is the only way to work. It's the only kind of work that you can do to break through the hierarchies that are in the art world. And so, Paul Brach promoted, um, experimentation. Baldessari promoted, you know, any kind of non-traditional painting or representation. And the culture at CalArts was don't follow your leader. Don't follow your teacher. Just, you know, find your own way of working.

[01:56:46.22]

Um, so, the, the, the—James Welling was there. David Salle was there, Troy Brauntuch. They were the, sort of, like—there was Ken Feingold. Um, I can name a number of people—Lari Pittman, who's very—a very well-established painter. A lot, lot of people stayed in LA—stayed there that were in the, quote, "painting" and "sculpture" world of the graduate program. Many of the graduate students also went on to work in the film industry. They also abandoned—um, there was a lot of new technology that was being developed in Los Angeles at the time through Caltech [California Institute of Technology]. And, um, NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] had a strong program at Caltech. There were people that were at—on the edges of experimental theater and music who were being, sort of, propelled into science and into research labs in Los Angeles.

[01:57:58.08]

These were very exciting things. This idea of creating new forms of media was very exciting. Um, whether it was electronic media or photographic media, it was—it seemed to be a place where you could try something out that, yeah, hadn't been done before.

[01:58:31.33]

MARINA ISGRO: Amazing. Um, and you had your first show in grad school in 1975 at the Fine Arts building, I think, which later became Artist Space.

[01:58:42.25]

ERICKA BECKMAN: It did.

[01:58:42.79]

MARINA ISGRO: What was that like?

[01:58:44.36]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, I have to say, probably, a lot of young artists get something like this that happens, where they get to be in a show with, like, the people that they really respect and admire. And it's a real bump up. And then, suddenly, you realize there's nothing really happening [they laugh]. I think, it was because of the Whitney program, and because of the nature of my work, and the fact that I had had Acconci as a teacher that I was invited by Acconci to show a little Super 8 film in a bathroom in the Fine Arts building with an

Acconci audio.

[01:59:19.81]

So, it was my image and Acconci's audio—so, his speaker, his voice, and my image, and that kind of juxtaposition. Uh, that—and I don't even—I, probably, would have to go back to my records to figure out other people., it was the work of Rene—Rene Ricard, I believe, who, like, designed this gigantic group show that took place all over the building before it was converted into Artist Space. [Cross talk.]

[01:59:53.65]

MARINA ISGRO: Does that video still exist?

[01:59:55.76]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah

[01:59:56.11]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah? The one in the bathroom?

[01:59:58.69]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah.

[01:59:58.96]

MARINA ISGRO: I'm curious about it [they laugh]. What were, what were the images? Do you remember?

[02:00:07.12]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Let's see. 1975? Um, I'd have to go back to find the exact one. But, I was making—like I said before, I was using the Super 8 camera. And I was, uh, doing these performance events on camera, meaning silent films with my body in leotard, doing—making what I call icons. They were these, like, broken body—women's body, broken up, reformulated through the camera to create these—I—probably, they could be defined as, like, futuristic performance pieces. You know? Remember the costumes that were made in the [19]30s with the, like, [Oskar] Schlemmer dances and so on?

[02:00:55.47]

I was trying to do that, in makeshift ways, with a Super 8 camera using props as body parts and taking—slicing, like, my head off and putting a, another object as my body, or taking my body and breaking it out with black and white fabric, and creating these kind of, sculptural things that would move. But, it was definitely performance-driven. And I called them icons. And I made one called *The Thunderbird*, which was based on the, the, the little model—figurative model at the front of the car that guides the car. You know what I'm saying?

[02:01:36.87]

So, I mean, I was just—I was just trying to use—I only—like women—like women of the [19]70s, we turned the camera on ourselves. And we made work with our bodies and with whatever we had, whatever was available. And I found it very exciting to be able to deconstruct myself and to make myself into something else, other than a human being, [cross talk] okay? :ike an object of some kind. And then—so, I think one of those experiments, the silent body, body icon pieces that I made, was in the bathroom with Acconci. So.

[02:02:16.95]

MARINA ISGRO: Amazing [they laugh]. All right. So, in [19]76, you [cross talk] moved to New York, although you considered—I mean, you continued to work bicoastally for a few years after that. So, maybe, you could talk about—

[02:02:31.11]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah.

[02:02:31.41]

MARINA ISGRO: —your artistic community in New York. [Cross talk.]

[02:02:34.23]

ERICKA BECKMAN: At that time?

[02:02:35.24]

MARINA ISGRO: So, who were your friends at the time?

[02:02:36.75]

ERICKA BECKMAN: okay, very good—[cross talk].

[02:02:37.68]

MARINA ISGRO: How did you all support each other? Yeah.

[02:02:39.30]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah, okay. So, um, I moved back. I moved to New York, and I asked Ron Clark if I could be in the Whitney program because I really wanted a studio [clears throat] to work out of. I didn't want to break any continuity with my work, from LA to New York. And [clears throat] he was gracious enough to bring me into the program because he liked what I was doing. And, even though I was in the Whitney program, I had to support myself.

[02:03:09.83]

So, um, I, I lived on Greene Street, 32 Greene, which was a loft that Jack Smith had been in. And there was a—it's where he made his famous film, uh, *Flaming Creatures*, where he filmed through the—a hole in the floor to a loft floor below. So, it was an overhead camera on bodies. And I lived on the floor that—where the camera was. And it had no heat. And so, it was a very—it was a really adventurous time where there was no money. And, um these lofts were available for nothing to live in. And they provided no services, like, you know, no heat.

[02:04:05.88]

But, I was hanging out with, mostly, at the time, Matt Mullican, who I got to know from CalArts. I went to visit him, and he and I became instant friends. And I was hanging out with him, plus another woman who was my roommate named Branca Milotinovic, who I shared the loft with. And the people in the Whitney program, at the time, were also my friends. And, uh, this, this was, like, a really great educational experience in that the, the music scene in New York was really strong. So, there was the Mudd Club across—the Mudd Club and CBGB's.

[02:04:53.85]

And a lot of the artists that I knew were also band people. So, people that they just, sort of—had trade jobs—they were maybe painters by day, meaning, like, house painters and construction workers by day, artists by night, and musicians by late night, you know? And so, there was a, kind of, mixture going on that was very fervent in New York in 1977—[19]76, [19]77, and [19]78, that was all based on a new scene of young people coming to New York and, kind of, establishing themselves within the music scene and performance scene in New York.

[02:05:35.25]

So, this, this is when Matt was doing his—um, I think, it's called—I forget the name of his figure. It's either Fred or Ron. He, he had a stick figure that he was drawing that was himself. And, and this was a performative figure that he would put into different situations. And he was—and then, he was experimenting, early on, with hypnotism and performance. So, basically, um, I hung out at Artist Space. And Paul McMahon was the assistant to Helene Winer at the time. And he collected a bunch of people together that would gather in Artist

Space, and then, go out and look at shows, and then, come back at Artist Space and talk about them, or go out and have drinks in the evening and talk about it.

[02:06:32.62]

So, we were all this, kind of, roving, young group that would hang out together and—for a couple of years until people were picked up in galleries. I have to say, there were different people in my life at the time. But, there was a group that was centered from CalArts that had moved to New York. That would be Goldstein, Matt Mullican, David Salle, and Troy Brauntuch—tight group. I was part of that tight group. That group hung out at Artist Space with Paul McMahon. That group brought in other people like Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine—I could go on, but what we, we commonly know as the Picture Generation.

[02:07:27.58]

Those—that group was really tight. We really influenced each other. When we saw each other's work. We critiqued each other's work. We went to shows together. We hung out together. It was—I saw the transition between my friends who were doing performance art and making art that was, now picture art and this, this lure of making something that could enter the art world. It was—the writing on the wall was that performance work and video was not going to, to, uh, be sustaining in—oneself in New York if you wanted to live, live as an artist.

[02:08:19.34]

So, that was one group that I was really tight with. But, also, kind of springing off that group, Matt Mullican and I were interested in other things. Um, and we, we ventured into a lot of experimental theater work. So, I, I went to Mabou Mines a lot, Public Theater a lot. I watched, David Warrilow do Beckett's *The Lost Ones* at the the Theatre for the New City in 1975. Uh, we went to Noh Theatre together. We went to Kabuki together. Matt and I saw *Einstein on the Beach* together. These were, like, extremely formative events for me and, and also for Matt. It influenced us in a really great way toward, you know, what we, what we decided to really do.

[02:09:19.46]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[02:09:19.90]

ERICKA BECKMAN: And, yeah.

[02:09:21.13]

MARINA ISGRO: And you were also going to see some films at places like Anthology and Bleecker Street Cinema and kind of—

[02:09:27.19]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah.

[02:09:27.55]

MARINA ISGRO: —learning about the European avant-garde.

[02:09:30.55]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, I—the experience of going to CalArts gave me an insight into experimental film [cross talk]. I, I'm going to—this is another, sort of, track, okay?

[02:09:47.26]

So, in the late [19]60s, there were two things that I saw that back up where my interest led to. And one was, probably, when I was at WashU—now, you know, again, this is campus time, ferver—ferver—very vibrant campus, campus life. Velvet Underground played at my college with the Warhol inflatables. Chelsea Girl played at my college in the campus church. There was a traveling exhibition in 19—I don't know when, [19]71, [19]72—of films that were

made from California from experimental filmmakers from California, like [Jordan] Belson, for instance.

[02:10:47.65]

And, somehow or another, these films traveled on a college circuit. They were packaged as, like, experimental theater and traveled. And so, these—there was in, in me this feeling that there's this alternative kind of cinema out there. And, um, a show that I saw while I was an undergraduate at WashU came to St. Louis Art Museum called *The Magic Theatre*. And that was a historic show that, um, mostly, had sound sculpture, for the first time, installation art, and a lot of, you know, kinetic installation work, and was, like, a precursor to the *Art and Technology* show.

[02:11:34.13]

But, this, this was—these are standalone experiences that don't relate. There's no continuity between seeing these things and what I was doing. And at CalArts, finally, things started to converge in this way in that they had a program running in the film school, in, in what was called the Bijou Cinema, where they would bring Surrealist films, and international cinema, and experimental work all into the same program. And I had my first little education in Surrealism and found that those—the filmmakers from the [19]20s really, really were important to me. And I was, like, starved, you know, to see more. And in New York, the Anthology program, you know, was, was the place to go if you wanted to really get educated.

[02:12:34.31]

And, even though, um, I wasn't interested in the American experimental movement because of what I had seen in Aspen with Ken Jacobs and Stan Brakhage and Ernie Gehr, and I just—I was not interested, but I found—and, and at that time, I was still trying to figure out, where are the women makers? Okay? And, yes, there were plenty from Germany and, yes, Europe—Dore.O. There were outstanding women filmmakers in places. And I was, I was, sort of, starved to see their work. And, um, because, again, at the time, I think, it was cultivated a lot by the Women's Movement that there was—even though, in the United States, um, the women making media were on the edge of the art world, and they were trying to get in via video and sculpture at that time, the women in—the women in Europe were—I—seemed to gravitate towards cinema. There were an awful lot of really strong women.

[02:13:49.55]

And it was, again, an economical thing because making 16-millimeter was quite expensive. And the support for it was more prevalent in Europe than in the United States. So, you had people like Baldessari dropping out of making films, 16-millimeter, due to cost. And a lot of, a lot of—and that was sort of a sad thing, actually, to realize that there's an economy here that is really determining a lot of the production. And, um—but, yeah, Anthology. I remember that was, sort of, fine-tuning my, kind of, identity. Like, where I was going to align myself within this media world came from a lot of that.

[02:14:40.16]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. Well, that's probably a good place to pause. [Cross talk.] And then, we'll pick up next time with the sort of late [19]70s Super 8 films. Does that sound okay? [Ericka nods.] All right. Cool. So this is the end of—[cross talk].

[02:14:54.15]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Are you going to be with—

[02:14:54.28]

MARINA ISGRO: —session one. [Laughs.]

[02:14:55.11]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Are you going to be with—[cross talk].

[02:14:57.58]

MARINA ISGRO: Am I going to be—[cross talk].

[02:14:58.38]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Are you going to be with—are you going to be with me next time?

[02:15:00.48]

MARINA ISGRO: I hope so [they laugh]. No, I will. It'll be fun.

[02:15:06.09]

ERICKA BECKMAN: No, if not, I'm always here. [Cross talk.]

[02:15:08.58]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay.

[02:15:08.76]

ERICKA BECKMAN: But, I just wish you the best until next week.

[02:15:13.06]

MARINA ISGRO: Thank you. Thank you. This is great. This is really [cross talk] fascinating. It was a lot of fun. So, okay, we'll talk soon.

[02:15:23.88]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay.

[02:15:24.21]

MARINA ISGRO: I'll let you know if anything happens before then [laughs].

[02:15:27.45]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay.

[02:15:28.20]

MARINA ISGRO: All right.

[02:15:28.64]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Ciao.

[02:15:29.25]

MARINA ISGRO: See you soon. Bye.

[END OF TRACK AAA_beckma22_1of3_digvid_m.]

[START OF TRACK AAA_beckma22_2of3_digvid_m.]

[00:00:04.39]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay. This is Marina Isgro interviewing Ericka Beckman at her studio in Housatonic, Massachusetts, on July 5, 2022, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is session two. Okay. Hi, Ericka. How are you doing?

[00:00:23.34]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Hi, there. Good morning. [They laugh.]

[00:00:25.57]

MARINA ISGRO: So, before we jump into your Super 8 films from the late [19]70s, I just wanted to follow up on one item that we didn't get to last time, which was your encounter with Jack Goldstein at CalArts, so, maybe, you could say a few words about that.

[00:00:41.26]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah, for sure. Um, Jack was—Jack was working with an optical printer named Pat O'Neill who did effect work for [George] Lucas's films. And he was working on those single-image, uh, 16-millimeter films that often he looped. And, he was at CalArts, I don't know doing what. And I asked to meet him, and I asked to look at his work, and I asked to talk to him about his work. And he had a profound influence and impact on me because of the use of the black background, which I was using.

[00:01:22.59]

And, uh, I was—it sort of confirmed my use of that black as a way to get rid of the frame of the screen and have the film just seem to float in a black room. And, because I was using a lot of the same techniques as he, uh, isolating images on a black—on a black background, I felt very aligned and, yeah, really connected to Jack's early work. Yeah.

[00:01:53.52]

MARINA ISGRO: Great. I was going to ask you about the black background, so I'm glad that you answered that already [laughs].

[00:01:58.36]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Great.

[00:01:59.01]

MARINA ISGRO: So, um, let's get into the Super 8 films, then, from the late [19]70s. So, first, I wanted to start with these two films called *White Man Has Clean Hands* and *Hit and Run* from [19]77. [Cross talk.] And you have described these as something like test projects or test films, so tell us about those.

[00:02:19.21]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah, absolutely. Maybe, a little background about where I was in [19]76?

[00:02:23.97]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[00:02:24.93]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, um, I had finished the graduate program at CalArts, and I returned to New York. And very—I was very fortunate. The ISP [Independent Study Program], the Whitney ISP gave me a studio to work in. At the same time, I was—I had a job, which lasted those two years, up until [19]78, as a, um, black and white darkroom—I—or a photographic darkroom operator for advertising company in the Upper East Side of Manhattan [NY]. And so, I had a full-time job. And, at night, I was making my work.

[00:03:05.67]

Um, I was living in a loft on 32 Green Street, which was the same loft that Jack Smith filmed the *Flaming Creatures* in. My roommates, of course, were CalArtians. And, um, the—I was still pretty—I was, pretty much, learning about film at this period. I was going to the Anthology Film Archives at least once a week. I had the education in structural film through that experience. I was also attending, uh, screenings by the curator Jackie Raynal—sorry. at the, uh, Bleecker Street Cinema. And she was showing retrospectives of independent European films. So, notable were the retrospectives of [Jean-Luc] Godard, Raul Ruiz, and [Alain] Robbe-Grillet

[00:04:07.44]

So, these things informed—all these three things really informed *White Man Has Clean Hands*. Uh, I was interested in seeing the relationship of a moving image to a text. And that also came out of the work that I really liked that I had seen in Los Angeles, which was the photographic work of, uh, Alexis Smith. So, here, here, here, the situation was that I would take the advertising markup commands that I would get during the day, and I would use them in the film. So, there would be a rolling text with a command saying something like, "Make a mark on what you see first," which is a way to define where the emphasis in the photograph would be by an advertising director.

[00:05:02.43]

And I would follow that rolling text with a very ambiguous performance image, something like reading a book or putting your hands in a cup of water. And then, I'd—that was part one. And then, part two, I would take all those images that I filmed and edit them in reverse without, uh, the text, text commands, and I would put a drumroll on it. And I—this was a test for me to figure out, again, how to use text in a film. But, what happened was I became more interested in the second part, when the images were just a montage with the drumroll because they released a kind of emotional energy and seemed to be tied into some kind of psychology that our—that we were as viewers trying to put onto the work. In the first part, the image served as a way to answer the command and was very tight.

[00:06:02.16]

So, in this—that was a test, and then, that film was the first film I screened at Artist Space in 1976. And it brought the attention—it brought some attention to me. Amy Taubin reviewed it for the *Soho Weekly News*. Then, I went on to—in 1977, to make *Hit and Run*. Now, *Hit and Run* was, again, a test because we're, we're at a period in my life when I'm not even really certain that that I can make film. So, now I'm—uh—so, I'm looking—I'm looking for—I'm looking for my voice, okay?

[00:06:48.87]

And *Hit and Run* was a, kind of, breakthrough film because I decided—I, I tried everything out that I could, at that particular time. I tried everything that I thought I would want to use in making a film, at the time. I was particularly interested in the use of the screen. Um, I thought of the screen as a location for lots of information. Now, I would have never used the term "information" in 1977 to talk about a screen. But, um, because I was not using text, I wanted to see what would happen if you juxtaposed two images in a frame, and two images that have different timestamps, meaning something is running in real time, and then, something is running either slower or faster. And I was looking for these relationships that existed when they intersected, when something happened on the screen between the two images that released a relationship.

[00:07:56.37]

And what I discovered was that film is highly rational. It's not irrational, but it's a system of relations, and that we think of when there are two things that are happening on the screen, whether it's an animated graphic or a live action combined with another live action, that these things are in a relationship that's causal. And from causality, you have a kind of dominant to subordinate relationship. Now, I figured all these things out by making *Hit and Run*. Um, I also gravitated toward the—at this particular time, double exposure. That means taking a performance in one time, against one background, and then, rewinding the film and putting another performance over it. So, these were kind of—this was, sort of, a dance film. But, at the same time—meaning dance, meaning it was using physical actions.

[00:08:56.14]

And I, um—at the same time—[laughs] I mean, there's a lot to say about it, because, simply, it was a really important little film for me. Um, I was trying to figure out the relationship of an image to an action, as well as an image to a word. And, and so, I was trying—I was also thinking—trying to figure out how to create a continuity that changed, meaning an object that was—let's say, for an example, a circle that was a graphic image becoming a hand gesture, becoming a mask on a screen, becoming a sound, becoming a performed activity, becoming a 3D object. All of these sort of transformations, what did they do? How did they behave?

[00:09:44.39]

Um, I was interested in the relationship of action to language, and I wanted to create images that were based on action that felt like a concept, you know, as if we were building sentences or speaking through these, these objects. And I was—I was not interested in talking about objects. Like, not—it wasn't about the thing that was represented on the screen. It was really about what you did with the thing, with the object.

[00:10:16.08]

So, James Nares was my performer in this film. And James is—was a Super 8 filmmaker at the time and also a performance artist. He was in the band The Contortions. And he—after, you know—while making this film with him he said to me, "You—your ideas about film sound like they are from [Jean] Piaget." And I'd never heard of Piaget. And he said—well, James came from England. He had a really fantastic education. So, I hadn't heard of Piaget, so he gave me a book, a little book called *The Genetics of Epistemology.* And when I started reading it, I felt like I was hearing myself think [laughs].

[00:11:05.27]

MARINA ISGRO: Amazing. So, say more about Piaget and how he, uh, figured in here.

[00:11:09.47]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, okay. What happened was—this is, um, this is the end of 1977. Now, I have to say that—um, I—okay. I—Piaget was somebody that I wanted to learn from, okay? I had always used some, sort of, critical text. I wouldn't say like an analysis of film or—hmm. Um, I, I used, prior to finding Piaget, I was reading Ludwig Wittgenstein, and I was trying to make films that used the, sort of, uh, time—language games that Wittgenstein used, or puzzles.

[00:12:08.52]

But, when I stopped using text, um, that, that interest stopped. And I—like I said, I gravitated to Piaget, and, uh, the reason being that he—very simply, he based all of his experiments on observing children's action. And of course, creating models of play to prove his theorems. So, here was a very logical man who had a set of theorems that he wanted to prove through giving children very specific exercises with objects and, and what he called operations. So, I would say, okay, these are actions, but he would say operations.

[00:12:57.97]

So, I've read his work really poetically, in a way. I just knew that I had to use his logic in my own work. And I, I set out to make a film called *We Imitate: We Break Up* in 1978, which was, um, all based on image formation. Now, that—uh, I can say a lot about Piaget. Uh, I was particularly interested in the relationship—like I said, the relationship of action to language and the formation of a stable identity and, and a formation of a stable universe or world. So, the, the film *We Imitate* actually takes his writings, literally transposes them from the very earliest form of action that a child does, which is to imitate something. And you'll always see children with lots—doing lots of rhythmic things with their bodies, their mouths.

[00:14:05.72]

And so, the imitation, then, formed the relationship between the subject and the—and the object. In this case, it was myself and a pair of marionette legs. And we were, sort of, teaching each other how to do things. And eventually, we formed a relationship that, then, turned competitive. So, what happens is that these relationships that are formed, um, have—bring, bring in other attributes. The—as soon as it became a relationship that had—that turned a little more, say, psychological, I wanted to get back to the idea of image formation with that film, and so, I was—I, I moved to using objects. Instead of, um, myself as a character, I started to work with objects in the film. And I had these commands such—that really do sound a bit like choreography commands, such as, "break up the sets." S-E-T-S, like, break up what is forming and start over.

[00:15:20.09]

Um, eventually, in this film, just as Piaget, kind of, transgressed through, like, three-year-olds up until six- or seven-year-olds, actions, then, formed a memory. So, that also was parallel to what I had heard from Yvonne Rainer that the muscle is a memory. That's a very famous line of hers. And so, this was all very reinforcing, that, that, if you can build a series of actions, you can engage with the audience on a mimicry level in order to—in order to—in order to deliver a concept. And so, I was, ultimately, interested in preparing concepts in film that did not use autobiographical material, or use narrative structures, or even deal, in some way, with documentary form. I wanted simply to use the techniques of the camera, combine it with performance, and deal with these concepts that are, basically, how we, uh, learn from action and images.

[00:16:48.88]

Now, this was a very long period of incubation. And I, literally, went from my work into my studio at night, and I would work on these films, pretty much alone, and then, go back to work. And what, what happened in just the very beginning of making this film was that the loft that I had on Thames Street in Lower Manhattan burned down, and I was forced to leave. And, um, in the building, were very important artists at the time, William Wegman, the Philip Glass Ensemble people, Julia Heyward.

[00:17:27.49]

And we—uh, some of us banded together to get another building in Lower Manhattan. But, in order to convert a warehouse into a living space, I had to earn money. And I also didn't have—I, I didn't want to stay in New York, because I didn't have a place to work, and I was really, totally interested in starting this Piaget series. I had no idea where it was going to go. Um, so, in 1978, I left Manhattan. Oh, I should backtrack to say one thing, that I was very fortunate when the building burned down that the films that I had made prior, um, both *Hit and Run*, all my graduate work, all of, all of that stuff was in two places, one in, uh, a, a metal trunk, a military metal trunk, and the other was at CAPS, which was a NYSCA [New York State Council on the Arts] grant. They were reviewing me for a grant, um, a small grant.

[00:18:32.05]

And I—this was my first funding of a film from a production grant. And with that money, I left New York, both with my prior films intact and with a little money to, um, to make this film. So, I, um—I moved to Los Angeles to live in Laurie Anderson's studio that she had rented in Northeast Hollywood while teaching at CalArts. So, for a semester, I took over her lease, and I made *We Imitate*, both in that—in, in that studio, in, um, in Los Angeles., when the lease ran out, I moved—I was lucky enough to get a studio for the summer at CalArts. They gave me one of their, their rooms to finish my film in. It was there that I met Tony Oursler, who was coming to CalArts for work, for his graduate work. And, um, I was commuting—I was staying with a friend of mine in Los Angeles named Dorit Cypis, who was organizing a nonprofit called FAR, Foundation for Art Resources, with Megan Thomas.

[00:19:55.43]

And, uh, I stayed with her, in her apartment, on Ardmore Street. No, actually, I stayed with her, but then, I rented an apartment because the film took much longer to make. It was a very involved 30-minute film. And, in this apartment, I discovered how to use [laughs] another use of—another way to use a screen. So, in term—when you're working with small gauge cinema, you're really—it's, it's impossible to edit. There's no way to edit. So, I ended up projecting on a rear screen and moving the screen back and forth to create more movement in my sequences, and I filmed off the rear screen.

[00:20:45.01]

So, not only was the screen—the screen was so vital to me, in terms of being able to isolate images, create spaces for double exposure, um, create—silhouettes. So, sometimes I even backlit the screen in order to silhouette a figure on the screen to create an image that's like a vector art sign system. So, I was, like—I was very involved in, like, these multiple ways of using the film screen. So, I stayed on in the apartment to, uh, finish editing the film, and I gave—eventually, I gave that apartment to Mike Kelley. So, Mike Kelley moved into my Ardmore Street apartment, and that's where he started his work. And for many years, I would go back and visit him in that apartment [laughs].

[00:21:36.63]

MARINA ISGRO: Oh, wow. That's a great story. So, let me just ask you for a really practical example of your techniques. So, how did you create the marionette legs in that film?

[00:21:47.61]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay [cross talk]. Very—yeah, life-size marionette was very important to me. Everything had to be life-sized because I was interested in projecting in life-size. So, the aspect of four-three in Super 8 had to be—the screens had to be close to the ground, or the projection close to the ground. I had—I wanted—and the screen had to be large enough, or the image large enough so that you felt as if these were people in the room. Like, real substitutes for people in the room. And so, the marionette was made like every prop that I ever made at the time. It was made out of foam core and glue. And I puppeted it. So, there were no people helping me with that film. I had to, pretty much, make it all by myself, except for turning on the camera. I would have somebody come and turn on the camera while I performed. Yeah.

[00:22:35.95]

MARINA ISGRO: That's amazing. So—right. So, we've talked about *We Imitate: We Break Up*. And usually, that is considered the first in this series of three films called the *Super 8 Trilogy*, um, with *The Broken Rule*, and then, *Out of Hand*. So, were those latter two films also Piaget-inspired—

[00:22:52.72]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yes, absolutely. [Cross talk.]

[00:22:53.71]

MARINA ISGRO: —and could you explain how? Yeah.

[00:22:55.87]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Absolutely. Like I said, this was a real incubating period. I mean, I did—I very—I was very committed to making this work and seeing where it would go. And I figured, if I could—if I could work with all these ideas that Piaget had—and I, literally, went to the Strand Book Store and bought books, and I read them, and I made tons of notes and lots—filled up notebooks and notebooks of material. And, um, each film celebrated the writings of Piaget, in very different ways.

[00:23:37.68]

So, *The Broken Rule* was 1979, and *We Imitate* had already been screened a lot in New York. Uh, Artist Space, Kitchen, Collect—The Collective. And it was in 1978, I believe, at the very end, I was sort of heralded by Hoberman, Jim Hoberman, as a—a filmmaker, you know, to look out for in the coming year. And so, this, this was going on. But, I was, again, more focused on my work. And, in order—and I had to get out of the darkroom job experience. I had already done two years of total blackness [laughs]. So, I was able—luckily, luckily enough, I was able to, uh, go to California. I worked. I was able to take—take care and manage the Phillips House—that's the Phillips Collection home in Brentwood, California—um, while I was working under a CETA grant—that's C-E-T-A—working in the schools, teaching animation to grade 6–12 students.

[00:24:55.29]

And that was in Glendale [CA]. So, I was commuting from Brentwood to Glendale. And then, at—I was also, uh, using their equipment, their lighting, their cameras. And I put together a group of people that were CalArtians, mostly guys. Uh, James Casebere, Matt Mullican, his brother, Tom Radloff, Kirby Dick, and Mike Kelley. And I based *The Broken Rule* on a question of, what is rule formation? How is it—how are social rules different from personal rules, or rules that one uses for oneself that are personal?

[00:25:46.80]

And, of course, that led me to gaming, again, like sports. So, the film is a series of relay

races that get more and more complex as they go on. And, uh, we have two teams. One is learning the rules and playing by the rules, and we have another team that is failing at those rules. And then, we have Mike Kelley emerging from the failing team, doing what he wants with those rules. In other words, reinterp—misinterpreting but reinterpreting what, what those rules are, and, eventually, figuring out there's a new goal to the game that he's discovered through those rules that he broke that would assimilate the groups. In other words, they both end—he ends up trying to, um, merge his team with the winning team and play by the same rules, which splits off into two, two realities.

[00:26:48.39]

One is that he's now a ritual—he's performing a ritual. That's something very personal, using the object of the game, and taking the structure of the gameplay, but turning it into some very deep, personal experience. And the other—and the two teams have merged, and they're becoming businessmen. So, sim—they're, they're becoming the, uh, enactors of social roll—rule, of a social rule, or social behavior. And the film ends with a question. If you —um, let's see if I can remember it. "If everybody does it does it become a real rule or not?"

[00:27:37.66]

And so, that—it's a very playful film. It's using play, but it's not using as much double exposure as I had wanted to do, because I was interested—I was thinking about it as a performance that had to be documented and go through these transitions with lighting, and props, and things like that. Um, that film was completely composed with music, at the same time that we filmed it, and that's where my real collaboration with Brooke Halpin started. And we would get together with a reel-to-reel tape deck that recorded overdubbing and just do vocal overdubs, and then, bring in some other sounds.

[00:28:22.05]

And everything was recorded live. There was no, uh, mixing going on, no post-production in the audio. We simply recorded large tracks of audio. In, in, in, finishing the film, I would take that ¼-inch tape audio and just transfer it onto the magnetic stripe of the film strip. So, these were—it was a very direct recording and a very direct, kind of—sorry, a very direct sound recording. Even though—and, in some cases, I was able to do live mixing and vocal work for it right on the film itself through the projector.

[00:29:02.24]

So, um, again, these techniques with the sm—with the small gauge are very important to talk about because they are very different than theatrical—how theatrical film is made in the, kind of, stages. And there's a blending between pre-production, audio work, and production work that happens—at least, happened for me, and I know happened for other Super 8 filmmakers at the time. That—and many of them used the magnetic stripe on the film as a direct record mechanism for recording monologues and audio tracks, such as Vivienne Dick did that a lot. Okay.

[00:29:48.78]

MARINA ISGRO: Maybe—yeah, maybe, you could say a little bit about, um, just the nature of the sound and that sort of, like, characteristic chanting that is so much associated with your work. Where do you think that comes from? [They laugh.]

[00:29:59.94]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, I do say that it came, a lot, from music at the time and dance. So, this idea of repetition was really, really prevalent in the [19]70s, both in serial music and in the dance, dances, dance works I saw by Simone Forti, Lucinda Childs. Um, what, what attracted me to repetition was the fact that—and I noticed it, mostly, in other people's work —was that by rep—by repeating a phrase or a gesture, the meaning tends to break down. And, often, there's a kind of stasis where nothing happens at all. And then, there's the possibility, at that point, of creating a new meaning with that gesture or that sound.

[00:30:51.30]

And that's why I was interested in chanting. It's just, it's just to set up a kind of felt condition,

a kind of relaxed mental condition in order to absorb what you're seeing. And I, I really can't say anything more than that. But, it was about—you know, rhythm was very important to me. Going into CalArts, and working with, um, musicians, like I said earlier, especially percussionists, really helped me to understand the kind of conditioning that the body is able to feel with rhythmic structures. [Cross talk.] And, yeah.

[00:31:32.67]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. And, maybe, you want to say a little bit about, sort of, the collaborative process on this film in particular. Mike Kelley's great in it. [Cross talk.]

[00:31:41.20]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I love Mike Kelley.

[00:31:42.13]

MARINA ISGRO: [Laughs.] So, what was it like transitioning from, you know, working just by yourself in the previous film to a more collaborative process with actors?

[00:31:50.25]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, I was learning how to direct, and Mike Kelley was a great performer. In fact, we did a lot of studies before making this film, and he was—he was just like, pfft so—made himself so available while he was still in grad school, to do that. And honestly, the, the, the discussions that Mike Kelley and I had about performance, um, really helped—I think, really helped each, each other out. And, um, I was formulating the film with Mike Kelley in mind. In other words, there was not an ending to the film that I knew when I started the film. Often, this was the case in these early works. I'm just working through a set of ideas that I feel are, you know, progressive, and they will—they will lead me to something. And it was through, through Mike's performance that I created the ending, because it was a real—for me, a real portrait of his personality, uh, because—[laughs]. So, I was learning as much about Mike Kelley as I was figuring out how I was going to show the difference between a ritual, a personal rule formation, and a social rule assimilation.

[00:33:13.36]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. Well, maybe, that takes us then to the third film, *Out of Hand*. Anything else you want to say about that one?

[00:33:20.08]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay. Okay. Well, this film—Okay. So, the, the—a little context, a little bit about time and the time of making it. Um, I was back in New York, at the end of teaching in the C.E.T.A school program. Uh, the—I returned the Phillips House to another artist to take care of while I went back to New York. And I had enough money to—uh, during that time, I was paying contractors, meeting friends to build out the loft, so that I could work in it. And this was the first time I was able to shoot in my studio in New York City, which was on Broadway and Franklin.

[00:34:09.63]

And, um, this, this was going to be my last Piaget film. And it had to deal with memory—memory, because at the end—you know, the—the beginning of, um, my, my studies of Piaget with genetic epistemology, kind of, led me through image formation and up to memory, meaning, like, how an image lasts in one's mind and is representative of an action or something learned. I wanted to, to really make a film that was just about memory.

[00:34:56.80]

I started to do a lot of drawings for that film. I started by—um, okay, well, I wanted to—let's see how this will go here. Um, I, I—it—I find it a little hard to talk about *Out of Hand* because it's one of my most favorite films. It's so—to me, it's unique and, um, it's one of the most misunderstood films, I think, I've ever made. But, it is also so—it's a valuable piece to me. Okay. I was really ensconced in New York, at this point. I had many, many friends. Had established really strong relationships with, um, James Welling, James Casebere, Matt Mullican. What can I say? There's an awful lot to talk about with just those friendships.

[00:36:06.57]

But, I drew from—I drew my friends into this production, and that, most importantly, was Paul McMahon. And Paul McMahon was working at Artist Space. And, by the time that *Out of Hand* was, uh, created, he was no longer working at Artist Space. But, he was performing all the time at The Kitchen with his music and his songs, his songs about paintings. And I knew he was a great performer. I was, you know—I needed a follow-up to Mike Kelley [laughs].

[00:36:43.35]

And so, I asked him to be my performer. And, uh, what this film, in fact, was kind of based on was my childhood experience of leaving a home often, and, uh—from time to time, because, like, moving away from the home, and packing up one's belongings, and using the transition from one place to another to determine what you were going to do in the next location and who you would become. So, I would—I had a toy box, and the toy box was always edited at the end of one place and going to another.

[00:37:20.20]

So, here, we have the condition for the film is that a child is leaving, uh, a home and has to find an object that will represent what he has lived through and will be his memory going forward to the new location. So, it was a search film, but there were two unknowns, what it is that he's looking for and where it is in the house. And I set up, uh, a, a room in my black studio that had a toy box on one side, a furnace on the—in the center. It was sort of a three—three—like a horseshoe set, and a tool box or tool bench on the opposite—the, uh, the toy. So, this conflict between tool—tool and toy is part of the film.

[00:38:12.18]

And what I was trying to do was to show the psychology or the inner workings of a struggle in finding some, some important object. And just—you know, if we lose something in our physical life, we have all these landmarks to go back to. You know, space time landmarks, like, oh, I was doing this then, and I can retrace my steps. But, if you don't know what the object is, you are led into a deeper kind of search, and that was what I was trying to portray with this film.

[00:38:44.85]

And so, Paul McMahon, um, is bifurcated as two characters in the film as it moves on. And he becomes—he's still the child, but he's also what I call the "stop and go officer," which is the, the character—his personification of a, of a, of a military officer or a policeman who's guiding him in his search away from this object that he is—wants to always return to, which is the rocking horse, the little, yellow rocking horse.

[00:39:20.82]

And, eventually, through this going back and forth between trying to hold on to the rocking horse, and then, trying to let go, he's led into the furnace. And, of course, we're [laughs] dealing a lot with very abstract images here. But, in the furnace, he confronts, uh, these, kind of, horrific female majorettes who are carrying propellers over their waistline, which is a, kind of, trauma image of the house disappearing in my mind because I always use—I always had a model house on a set of propellers that were moving away from him in this film.

[00:40:08.70]

And so, he's, he's confronting this, kind of, horrific female image, and he's holding on to a shield, and he's protecting himself. And he—by, by, by the end of the film, in sort of a surprise moment, he discovers that the shield is what he's been looking for. And so, what I mean by that—not the shield, but the handle or the aid, the thing that's closest to him that is protecting him from this image. And so, what I actually did—and, you know, this was a very intuitive film. Again, I didn't know what—I kind of knew that it had to be the furnace, but I really didn't know how.

[00:40:49.90]

And I constructed this pathway that allowed me to say that what he needed at the time was something to take with him that would protect him going into adolescence, and that he needed—he no longer needed this, uh, toy that represented his past, but he needed something to aid him in moving forward. And that's how that ended. So, that, that film was funded, primarily, through a, a donation from Fujifilm because I had bought a very high-end Fuji camera that allows very, very—had very good lenses and allows superimpositions, more control than I had previously. And, uh, the US distributor ended up giving me a whole batch of film and processing, which I used to, to make this film.

[00:41:52.92]

MARINA ISGRO: Hmm. Wow. And so, it was included in the Whitney Biennial in [19]83. So, maybe, you could just say a little bit about how it fit into that show, um, and then, more broadly, how your work was fitting into the museum context or not at that time.

[00:42:12.29]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Museum context or not. [They laugh.] Well, um, of course, it was an honor to be chosen by John Hanhardt for the Whitney Biennial. But, I have to say, I was relegated to the screening room at the time, which was a closed off, you know, seated, black box screening room at the Whitney on—I forget what floor. Maybe, the third. I can't remember.

[00:42:42.44]

But, it was, it was a program that ran in parallel to what was in, in the galleries. And also, the films were printed in black and white at the end of the catalog, as, sort of, side notes to the main show. And this was the reception I was, pretty much, getting everywhere, except for alternative spaces in New York, Los Angeles, Canada, and around the country where I, I traveled quite a bit. You know, with the—once the trilogy was finished, between [19]81 and [19]83, I traveled pretty extensively to show that the trilogy works. And it was never in a museum, except for the Whitney. And, you know—and that taught me a lot about my relationship to the art world, that it was never going to be, at that time, accepted into the art world.

[00:43:41.44]

Now, I have to say, at the same time in 1980, Soho was getting populated with all of these galleries. And, um, these were all my friends. I mean, we're really talking about a group of people that supported each other's work, talked about each other's work, were friends. And, um, I, I, I had—really, I guess I had hopes that I would be taken in by Metro Pictures because I had shown so much at Artist Space. But, I did have a conversation with Helene [Winer] at the time, [clears throat] and she reluctantly told me that, um, one, I can't show—they can't sell a film. They can't work with film, actually.

[00:44:30.68]

And two, that the photographs that I was making at the time—because I was also engaged in, in a lot of photography—that the photographs were documents of the film and not really artwork. And so, that pretty put—[clears throat] pretty much put the closure for me in, in expecting that anything would happen with me in the art world, although that was my prime focus, and I wanted to be, be in, in those shows and having a gallery career.

[00:45:07.04]

Um, prior to 19—I don't know if this was [19]80 or [19]81, when all the galleries were, were picking up their people and having the first shows, I was visited, in my studio, by a lot of really important people. And those curators—a lot of curators from Europe, um, a lot—all the galleries—all the gallerists that were starting up came numerous times to watch films, sit in my studio and watch films. Annina Nosei, Mary Boone came, at least three, times. PPOW at the end, 303 Gallery. I was visited by—this was, probably, my most important one was the cameraman for [Jean] Cocteau came over. And Isabella Rossellini came. There was just a lot of activity going on in the formation—at the time, that these galleries were forming, and everybody was looking at everything that they could look at.

[00:46:13.98]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. So, it's interesting, though, that you remained steadfast in your commitment to celluloid, um, despite all of this, sort of, pushback from the more commercial forces of the art world. Talk about that decision.

[00:46:29.80]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, again, that decision was based on the fact that I was inherently tied to performance. And, um, I really didn't like the television as an object, and I didn't like the scale of it, and I didn't like it as an object sitting on a pedestal. And, at the time, there was plenty of work being done that way. Mary Lucier, Dara Birnbaum shows both at The Kitchen and at PS1. There was a lot of monitor work and people trying to exhibit video as sculpture and moving image also.

[00:47:09.77]

But, it, it just—I did not like the object. And, uh, to work in celluloid was not a difficult thing for me because the cost, at that particular time, was so inexpensive. It was much—in fact, a lot cheaper to work in Super 8 than to work in video because video meant that you had to pay for editing time in production houses. And there was a program in New York called Standby that really set up to address this in, about, 1981whereby they took of, of—a group—two, two really brilliant guys from Princeton decided to form a company to—called “185 Corporation” to set up “Standby” as a program that would take hours at night away from production houses, when they're not working, and supply artists with production facilities at very low cost.

[00:48:11.71]

Um, there were a lot of alternative ways to make media, at that particular time, and I, I gravitated toward a production house that I actually worked at in post-production called—it was called Young Filmmakers, at the time, and it was on Rivington Street. And it, eventually became AIVF, American Video and Independent Film, or something like that. But, it, it was, initially, a funded program for underprivileged kids to learn, uh, media. And it had a facility that included a stage where they, uh, created a, a cable show, post-production facilities that I worked in, and equipment access. And this was, this was a way for film—not just video, but film to be produced at a lower cost.

[00:49:12.36]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. Neat. Well, um, do you feel ready to move on to *You the Better*, or is there anything else you want to say about those earlier films?

[00:49:22.34]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Do you mind if I take a look at my notes?

[00:49:23.94]

MARINA ISGRO: Oh, please. Go ahead. [They laugh.]

[00:49:27.81]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Oh, yeah. I forgot to say that—this is something that may tie in a little later, but, um, when I was showing my work, really early on, I went to Europe. I was invited to show at the London Filmmakers Co-Op. Uh, so, I was learning about collectives, film collectives.

[00:49:49.14]

And I was interest—I was invited by Julian Schnabel, actually, to go to Hamburg [Germany], to present my work to a, a co-op, a collective there at the school of art. That was the Herzog Collective, meaning [Werner] Herzog created a, I guess, a facility, much like AIVF in New York, where young filmmakers could live cheaply and could work together, show their work, and, kind of, support each other. And so, I, I went there. I went there to show my work and to talk with other Super 8 filmmakers. I mean, there was a, a big push all over the world for small gauge filmmaking. South America, Europe, Japan. And, um, of course, this was an alternative form of filmmaking to, sort of, you know, put an alternative position to distributed theatrical film production.

[00:50:58.99]

So, while I—on my—between going from London to Germany, I stayed over in Rotterdam [Netherlands] and showed my work there. And I met—uh, I stayed—because it was Christmas, I stayed over with a collective in Rotterdam that consisted both of the record distributor Rough Trade people, meaning the, the, the record company, and VPRO television, which is Dutch TV. And we talked about the music scene in New York.

[00:51:28.23]

And based on that, in 1979, uh, VPRO came to New York, and I worked with them and Paul McMahon to create a full evening—like, you know, sundown to sunrise—of, uh, bands performing for a television show. And so, the only requirement that VPRO asked of me—I mean, there, there was a request and an exchange. And they requested that I produce the show or assemble all the bands with Paul, light it, shoot it with them, and that I requested that we use Fuji cameras, and—[laughs] which really meant that I was free to do whatever I wanted to do while they did the master shot.

[00:52:17.16]

And, um, [clears throat] we recorded, and they recorded on a Nagra ¼-inch full coat tape deck, so the audio was really good. And they returned the film to me after they aired it on television, and I kept it in a box for many, many years. But, uh, later in 2008 it was, I decided, when digitizing was starting to happen, that I would bring it out, and digitize it, and edit it. Um, that became a document—that was screened by Dan Graham and Branca, Glenn Branca, who—Branca was featured quite a bit in this film. And, uh, Branca brought it to the attention of Soul Jazz Records in London [England], and they distributed it. So, I—at that particular time, I made a 60-minute documentary, which was really a gift to culture. It had nothing to do with my own work, but I wanted to make something to represent what was going on in the music scene in downtown New York.

[00:53:23.40]

MARINA ISGRO: How cool. I didn't know about that.

[00:53:24.37]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, that's a side story. [They laugh.]

[00:53:26.50]

MARINA ISGRO: Great.

[00:53:27.28]

ERICKA BECKMAN: But, kind of, important, I think.

[00:53:28.87]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, absolutely. All right. So, now I think we can, maybe, transition to *You the Better*, which is, generally, seen as sort of the first work of your mature career in 1983. [Cross talk.] Maybe, you want to just start by talking about the general concept behind the film and, sort of, how it related to the political context of that moment.

[00:53:53.92]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Righty. Well, we're now—we're, um, we're in the [sighs] [Ronald] Reagan era. Um, 1982 was a period for me where I was doing all the research for *You the Better*. Okay? And that, that was a year of, of intense research. There was something going on, politically, with the funding for the arts as well as, um, Reaganomics, which was a shift, I think, in both cases, toward a more consolidated financial world. But, you know, later, I learned much more about it.

[00:54:52.45]

But, right now, in, in 1982, I was—there—I was really thinking about the idea of deterrence, because it was also very political, political, at the time, that there was a use of deterrence to,

uh, show—to direct the public in one—on one topic while something was really happening elsewhere and never made it into the news, directly, because of the way they were directing this deterrence. So, um, that's Love Canal [crisis] and that's the Iran/Contra Arms Crisis.

[00:55:43.91]

Um, so, I, I was thinking about deterrence. I was thinking—but, more importantly, I think, at the time, I was interested in this conflict between determinism and chance because there was—uh, because I was committed to making a film that uses the game structure that I found myself in research studying games from the anthropological point of view, meaning studying how they—looking at games at the, um—in the Anthropology division of the New York Public Library when you could actually take out books, sit on tables and read books.

[00:56:32.06]

And so, I studied, like, the formation of games both in childhood, and also, culturally and historical. And there seemed to be these—there was always games of chance where—and games of mixture, chance meaning like—uh, we know what that means. Dice throwing and processes of elimination, uh, through action. And so, I was fascinated by why—what is chance? Well, of course, you know, [John] Cage was a proponent of using chance structures. And that was, also, very important to me early on because I was—the superimpositions that I made in production. Um, I wanted to make a film that was heavily involved in superimposition and game structure.

[00:57:33.01]

And so, I was—I was, I was—um, so, this also, kind of, led into the politics because there was—there's a, there's a conflict between self-determination, and determinism, and chance. And chance always seemed to be the moment the chaos breaks a system down, and you have to start over. And so, uh, gambling games were what I ended up using as the basis for *You the Better*.

[00:58:11.03]

It didn't happen right away. I was going to be totally involved in sports. Um, but, a few experiences firmed up gambling for me, um, and one is that I, I actually did study gambling, meaning I went to Monte Carlo [Monaco] and I went to [Las] Vegas, and I, I, um, I put a hidden microphone in a dress, and I recorded, and I watched, and I, I learned as much as I could from observation. And I was, also, doing as much reading as I can about this, the, the use of chaos theory in mathematics and in science.

[00:59:01.50]

So, one thing that led to—I would say this is somewhat political, but one thing that really firmed up using gambling for me in *You the Better* was that I observed a jai alai game in California, in the desert. Now, this jai alai game was a sport that's very active and very, very, uh, dangerous. Very fast. And Indigenous players were in this, you know, bunker, and there was a net over them, so that the balls wouldn't fly into the stadium seating. And white people were betting and gambling on Indigenous people in a very violent sport.

[00:59:43.61]

And I thought that this was also something I really needed to work with. I needed to work with what is this power relation between, um, determinism? And what's going on in the minds of the players? Who are they playing? Why are they playing? Who are they playing for? Why are they playing? And what are they focused on when they play? And how does that affect an outcome? So, I thought of it as a conflict.

[01:00:15.53]

And, in my film, um, it's, it's sort of a faux interactive game. Yes, interactivity was formulating at the time, and there were very simple, little, uh, console—like, CD-ROM console games that people were using. But, I, I was thinking about how to make that jai alai experience that I saw an interactive game and where the audience would fit in. So, this—the audience was the bettor, B-E-T-T-O-R, and the players were playing for the bettor. And then, the bettor was never seen, was never a person that waged a bet. It was to be the audience. I

wanted the audience to feel as if they were sitting in the seat of the bettor, and they're dropping coins onto—like, instigating the game.

[01:01:06.50]

So, the games would start with a ball being ejected from somewhere to the players, and they would do these simple games. And the games then built up to, kind of, a strategic basketball game—basketball game. The filming started in—at Media Study in Buffalo [NY], where Tony Conrad, who was a real fan of my work, invited me to work with the students. And we, we started the film there. Um, I was able to film in my studio in New York, for the most of it, and then, I was given the PS1 location to do the basketball sequence.

[01:01:46.50]

You the Better was funded by an NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grant. So, I had one of those artist productions grants, which were ending. This was, like, the last one, um, before NEA folded into providing funding for, for, mostly, documentary film through ITVS in Minneapolis [MN]. So, production money for artists were on the way out. Especially, production money for individual artists was on the way out. So, I don't know if you wanted me to talk more about *You the Better* the film, or—

[01:02:25.87]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, um, maybe. Okay. So, let's talk a little bit about the format of the film, because that's another change here. You previously talked about the challenges of working with small gauge. Maybe, you could talk about your shift to a larger format with this one.

[01:02:40.63]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay. Very good question because you're right. I mean, I split—I would—even though I love my Super 8 films and the way I produced them, I—because I was not going to get into the art world at all, it meant that if I was going to keep making film—and by this point, I was completely committed to making film, um—although, I have to say, I was also thinking outside the frame at the same time, and I'll talk about that in a second.

[01:03:18.23]

But, the, the, the transition to 16-millimeter meant that I was going to be using a format that could record reality very well. So, Super 8 film being the nature of, of its scale, one quarter of the frame of 16-millimeter meant that the images were softer, more diffused, and blended. And in, uh, in 16-millimeter, they were acute [laughs]. And, um, so, yes, I did teach myself how to use 16-millimeter, but I knew that I had to have some rules going forward that were my rules for making that kind of film. And one was that I had to put more people into the film, and I had to build larger locations—work in larger locations. And I had to really think about capturing live sound, direct sound in production. So, that meant dialogue and it also meant, you know, recording audio via live situations.

[01:04:16.12]

So, how was I going to make a live situation into one of these, um, sort of, conceptual films? So, again, performance was at the basis of it. But, more importantly, because I wanted to use—I, I wanted to critique capitalism while using a game structure, which meant that—and I was committed to working in a black space. And so, what that meant was I had to design a map that would be the game playing area. Like, what the, what the world was like inside that game. And I used that game, and I, I designed the game as a gigantic world, sort of worldview, and then, I would frame it with my camera. And I would take a part of that frame, and that would be what you would see on the screen.

[01:05:10.42]

So, the drawings that I made at the time explored that the—everything. Instead of scripting this film, I just drew and drew and drew. I drew, like, different types of costumes, different locations. Eventually, all these motifs solidified, and what happened through the drawing would be an editing process where I would later—where something could be developed, where something was going to last as long as it would las—need to last in a production.

[01:05:44.56]

So, the spinning character, which is a rotating set of hoops on a, on a turntable—Okay. So, I ended up, through drawing, deciding a lot of the, the game space and the motifs of the film, and I built a rotating table, something that could hold a, a car, uh, like a showroom rotating table to display new cars. And I built that in my studio. I used it as, sort of, the core of the film, which was based on the fact that I was going to, eventually, describe a kind of roulette game. And, um, what that meant was that the players in the center—in the middle of the film are always standing on the periphery, facing the center of the stage. And it's the center of the stage where the ball is ejected from and going to the players. And it would pass through a set of superpositions of these Monopoly houses.

[01:06:46.42]

And this became—this, this activity in the middle of the film where the, the players are told to hit a target that they don't see, because it's a superimposition, led to all of these sort of chance-like, um, intersections and events because they were, they were baffled by what they were doing. Sometimes, they were focused. Sometimes, they were just playing, and it—a lot of it was random. But, that kind of play really interested me, and I wanted to keep it on that level of we're not engaging with anything real here. We are playing a game that only, only the bettor has access to. So, the players will never see what the results are.

[01:07:32.70]

And so, they were focused on the rules of the game and what I told them were rules, and they just played it the way they wanted to play it. And I had very little acting prompts in there. I just told them where they were supposed to land and where they were supposed to hit. You know, like, how far away from their body were they supposed to hit the target? Um, that film was also developed at the same time with audio that Brooke [Halpin] and I recorded simultaneously. So, it was built in these little compartments of doing audio work, and then, filming. But, never did I play the audio for the players. In other words, um, I used the audio much later in my editing to base a lot of the, the decisions for sequence, timing, and choices.

[01:08:29.27]

So, because chance was incorporated, both as a subject matter in the film and also the way the film was made through these juxtapositions, I knew, eventually, I was going to bring the dichotomy between chance and determinism, uh, front and forward. And that's when Ashley Bickerton, who's the main character in the film, goes to the center of the roulette wheel, and stands where the ball ejects from, and looks out over the game field, and tries to tell his teammates what's happening in the periphery or what's behind.

[01:09:10.09]

And, through this thing that I call the "first-person song," he begins to realize that there—it's all determined by the house, that there are a number of balls that are being ejected from this position, and, most of the time, they return to the house. So, the players don't hear him because of the distance in the field. And they hear his echo, and they misinterpret what he's saying, and, maybe, they just eject—they, they—they—simultaneously, the house changes the rules on them, and puts them into a new gameplay, and eliminates Bickerton, who's just shown them a way to stop playing. And they continue through the basketball court playing for the house and playing for the bettor, and they think that they're succeeding by moving in this linear fashion because we're now moving away from the circular form into a propagation of houses on courts, which is returning us to the beginning of the film, which is a subdivision song.

[01:10:18.63]

And these houses, which are now, like, scoreboards propagating, [clears throat] as soon as they make a, a ball—get the ball through the hoop, the, the wall lifts, and they're shown another court to advance to, and they're supposed to do the same thing. Now, they are performing pretty well. This is the—this is how I directed them because they all know how to play basketball. And some of these people were dancers, and so, they also brought that to the performance.

[01:10:51.21]

But, they are really engaged in what they're doing, and I am, simply, just filming it. And, um, at one point, I tell them that there's going to be—they're going to have to stop, and there's going to be a superimposition of a one-armed bandit on the screen. And they're supposed to—you know, instead of making a hoop there, they're supposed to roll the ball into that court, [clears throat] the bandit's court.

[01:11:20.46]

So, the one-armed bandit is the physical—you know, the anthropomorphic image of chance, because in casino play, that's the only, only game you can play that really is, mostly, chance-based. And so, by doing so, they end up [clears throat] staying in one court. The house is delivering balls to them to play, and they're not advancing. And they defeat the house by, basically, um, turning everything over to the bandit. And the, the—I love the ending of, of this film because [clears throat] the players seem to be, um, thinking that they won, that they did the right thing. But, it's really not for the bettor or for the house, but it was for this, like, one-armed bandit, chance character that stopped the game.

[01:12:20.20]

Now, this film—[clears throat] this film played at the New York Film Festival and had its New York premiere against—as a short, um, when Ri—when Richard Roud was programming shorts before features. And so, in 19—I believe it was [19]84, it played against *Passion*, Godard's *Passion*, and there was a riot at the filmhouse, at, at, at Louis—at Alice Tully Hall when my film played. First of all, it's long. It's long. It's 30 minutes, not a five or 10-minute short. And people were throwing paper bills and standing up and saying, "This is—why have sports on the screen? Go back to television. You know? We're not here to watch TV."

[01:13:10.62]

And I was sitting in the box with Paul, Paul Schrader and Hoberman, and I was really pretty upset. And, um, that was, that was very scary. It was a scary moment because nobody understood the film. And that's okay [laughs]. But it was, it was really hard as a 32-year-old. Like, eee. I'm trying to break in here. I'm given this position, and now, I've caused a riot. Nobody likes the film [laughs]. So, that was reviewed by Carrie Rickey in the *Artforum* in her December issue. And I—and even though—like, everyone that I saw—everyone I knew said that's a triumphant thing that you caused a riot at this Film Festival. But, I mean, it didn't feel that way [they laugh].

[01:14:03.45]

MARINA ISGRO: I can imagine. So, you think the reaction was, sort of, a combination of the length, and then, you talked about people comparing it to television, did you say? Like, in what sense—[cross talk].

[01:14:13.42]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Because sports—sports. You watch—you know, you turn on TV to watch NBA and all that. You don't expect to see it in a movie.

[01:14:20.35]

MARINA ISGRO: This is not exactly your typical sport, though [laughs].

[01:14:24.93]

ERICKA BECKMAN: True, but in—it just rubbed them the wrong way. But, also, people explained it to me that [clears throat] Godard had not shown his work for many years in New York, and he had a thing against the New York Film Festival, and, um, I guess, from previous work. And so he never—he, um—the audience I think was really primed just to go see a Godard film.

[01:14:52.65]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. Okay.

[01:14:53.52]

ERICKA BECKMAN: They didn't want to sit through mine.

[01:14:54.90]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay [laughs].

[01:14:55.53]

ERICKA BECKMAN: And I think that was a good 50–80 percent of the reason.

[01:15:01.56]

MARINA ISGRO: That's so interesting. All right.

[01:15:02.80]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I'm going to take a drink of water.

[01:15:04.08]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. Do you want to take a break, or should we keep going into *Cinderella* after you—

[01:15:13.59]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Um, well, I think we can go a little further [cross talk] before a break.

[01:15:17.28]

MARINA ISGRO: Great. Sounds good. All right. So, three years later, we're in 1986, and you completed *Cinderella*, which is probably your most famous film. Um, and, in that film, gender really becomes an overt theme. Not that it wasn't there in previous films, but it really comes to the forefront. [Cross talk.] Talk a little bit about where the idea for *Cinderella* came from.

[01:15:44.72]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay. Well, um, [clears throat] so, I think, you know, when—[laughs] when—you know, this is a typical response. When you, you know, when you get batted down, you figure out a way to come back up. And I, uh, I still wanted to make interactive games. I mean, films that used interactive gaming as the subject. And, um, I knew that I had—I was very drawn to fairy tales because there were very interesting feminist writers revising fairy tales at the time. And I'm thinking of Angela Carter, for one.

[01:16:36.10]

I had moved from reading about games, to anthropology, to reading games analyzed by [Carl] Jungian and, um, [Sigmund] Freud analysis. And I also took a Jungian workshop in fairy tale analysis in Boston [MA]. And all of these things, kind of, like, helped me to think about how to use a fairy tale in a game. Um, more—very important to that film and to the research for that film were two writers. One was Vladimir Propp, who wrote a book called, oh, golly, I think, *Morphology of a Folktale*. I think that's the name of it.

[01:17:26.23]

And, um, the other one was a, a, a collection of *Cinderella* stories by Marian Roalfe Cox in 1893 who created a book called the *Three Hundred and Forty-five Variants of Cinderella*, which is really an ethnographic book based on culture, time—location, and time, uh, of, of it. And I, I learned, through reading the *Three Hundred and, and Forty-five Variants*, that the *Cinderella* story was not what I had grown up with, which I hated. I mean, many people hate, you know, Walt Disney's *Cinderella*.

[01:18:05.50]

So, I was—this, this attraction—negative—negativity and attraction was really at play here. Reading the *Three Hundred and Forty-five Variants* really set me off on a commitment to work with *Cinderella* because most of the stories were hand downs, like, from women to women. I'm—and I'm not saying mother to daughter, but just woman to woman. And, in a lot

of cases, the Cinderella character was portrayed as somebody who didn't have a father, and lived in the home with hysterical women, um, and had to find a way to find self-respect, and, um, and to earn a living. And so, that was in line with, you know, feminism.

[01:18:54.35]

And I—so, I set out to make a, kind of, feminist reworking of the *Cinderella* story as a game. And the game was the [Charles] Perrault story that we know, which is the girl going to the ball, being seen by the prince, being selected by the prince, and then, eventually, marrying and going—and being in union and in harmony with this patriarchal system. Um, I wanted to do something different. I wanted to use those areas to inform the film. And I also wanted to put this relationship of this female finding her identity against—in parallel and against industrial production. Because I also thought that this manufactured *Cinderella* story that Perrault made from all the variants that were floating, um, that, you know, that he made for the court—secretary of the court of Louis XIV that—um, oh, I lost my thought.

[01:20:10.47]

[They laugh.] So, I thought that there was—I thought that this was a manufactured story that eliminated and edited all kinds of very interesting things from, from the oral history available, and that it was manufactured for the court. And so, I thought, industrial production, which also was happening at the same time, because the forge, the site of industrial production was where the first copy was made. So, intrinsic in this film is the idea of the copy, the copy that is sent into the world, either as a false copy, a decoy, or that has a different behavior than the real. So, industrial production was where I started the film and where I ended the film. So, she starts in a forge as a worker, and she ends up in a recording, uh, company that's making—both that's making—manufacturing *Cinderella* dolls, okay, and she's a worker there.

[01:21:21.18]

Her dress is a motif that is the story of the film. So, what she wears, and how she rejects the *Cinderella* outfit, and becomes entwined in these knots—K-N-O-T-S—that are binding to her from her mistakes in playing the game, how that knot—those knots form a dress. And the dress, then, takes her forward into the future, okay? That knot dress is with her for the rest of the film. There's a lot of, there's a lot of physical action in this film, a lot of cause and effect that's holding it together. One thing leads to another through physical action.

[01:22:13.38]

But, the, the way that I wan—the way I was thinking about this film was based on an interactive game, so that, when I read Vladimir Propp, when I beg—I saw the relationship between how he was taking—breaking this fairy tale down into motifs, and how those motifs were, then, uh, carried forward in other stories and used again, but that, that the motif itself was valuable, like a symbol that's very valuable to the progression of—or a lineage of a folktale.

[01:22:52.02]

And so, how cultures and when people would use these motifs and apply them to, kind of, um, learn from them but also integrate them into their, their own personal stories and make their stories valuable to them because fairy tales are teaching stories, for the most part. So, this idea of hyperlinking, and Vladimir Propp, and the, the variants all were the what—the kind of architecture or structure for the film.

[01:23:28.85]

And, uh, I also at the same time, I—it was very important for me to work with a woman to, uh, to do—to do—to deal with everything. I was very aware that up until that point, I had just used men in my films, for the most part. And so, I—in order to make this film, which had to be done, um, at a school in Minneapolis called Minneapolis College of Art and Design, for a semester, with students, I, I had to be ready for that experience, to go, and cast, and make a film in one semester. So, I, um, I built the props while I was teaching at CalArts in 1985, in the spring of [19]85. I was doing all the drawing for *Cinderella* at that time.

[01:24:23.44]

I was very much involved with Mike Kelley. As a friend, he would come and look at my work. And Mike Kelley, at that time, uh, liked my drawings and wanted me to prepare them for a show that he did at LAICA [Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art]. So, I, again, I'm bicoastal still, in 1985.

[01:24:43.45]

And, um, the, the, the core to the film [laughs], the design of the film happened in that period when I was in a studio in Los Angeles, Uh, a rented studio while I was teaching. And I had to make a computerized doll because I was—I knew that it was going to, eventually, be a digital sort of production that would end the film somewhere in the future. Um, and that—so, so I created a wireframe drawing that was very, very—the very beginnings of 3D animation. And CalArts had just, uh, instigated their first 3D animation department. And so, I worked with a couple of grad students on making a wireframe female figure, and then, uh, covering it with a skin that would be the costume. From that, I based her hair design and her costume design around the doll, so that she would be unified with that doll towards the end of the film.

[01:25:56.83]

And so, that instigated the whole dress, the whole code—decoding of that dress that she wears and transports herself. The dress transports her through the film. Not—and the dress is always the same *Cinderella* dress when she's in the game, but when she's not in the game, she is wearing her knot dress. And that starts as a series of X's that are laid on her body from being X'd out of the game, to being a knot dress that reminds her of what she's not. And—[cross talk.]

[01:26:35.31]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay.

[01:26:36.24]

ERICKA BECKMAN: And a cage becomes a spiderweb and a cage. So, all the time, there's a conflict going on between who she's supposed to be via the game world of *Cinderella* and who she is discovering herself to be through the negation of that gameplay. And, eventually, she sort of seizes the microphone, let's say, in this digital, uh, factory and records her voice singing about what she's learned through this process. And that, that ends the film.

[01:27:06.87]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. It's striking me how much weight the costumes are carrying here. I hadn't really thought about that before. And I—now, I'm thinking about the, the sort of costumes and dress in your earlier and later films, as well, which are just so deliberate. How do you—how do you design those? How do you produce those?

[01:27:24.73]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, there's really no production. It's just this idea of a uniform, in a way. I mean, coming from military, I'd always seen my father in a uniform, [cross talk] and those women on the tarmac of a base in their gray outfits. This was familiar to me [laughs].

[01:27:43.29]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. That's so interesting.

[01:27:45.21]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Having to wear a uniform in, uh—on my last year in high school—I mean, come on. It's just uniforms [laughs].

[01:27:52.38]

MARINA ISGRO: There you go. [They laugh.] Is there anything else you want to say about the, the performers, um, how you ended up selecting the performer for *Cinderella*, ultimately?

[01:28:01.52]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay. Yeah. That, that also leads me into the—little bit about the production.

[01:28:07.92]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[01:28:08.52]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, um, because I was going to Minneapolis to cast and to make this film in one semester, I—of course, I had to have everything produced, ready, and shipped to Minneapolis from California. Um, I also was working with Brooke Halpin on the music. Now, Brooke is a very sort of pop guy—pop, pop music songwriter, but he has this experimental bent, and I seemed to really engaged with him on it. And so, he—in all the work up to this point, both *Out of Hand*, *You the Better*, we are working very improvisationally, sketching things on his piano, doing things live on tape.

[01:29:01.46]

Um, but, in *Cinderella*, because I had to produce this without knowing who I was going to cast—and I knew it had to be a musical—I decided that I would—and I got a grant from Harvestworks as an artist in residence. I decided to bring Brooke from California, and we would record the entire—um, all the tracks before I shot—I shoot. So, this is, kind of, like the way a music video is produced. The music is recorded first, and then, you lip sync to it and perform to it. So, I—in my casting, I, I didn't bring the music track in my casting. I just really tried to find the right Cinderella character. And it was very difficult, because I wasn't a very good casting director. But, I asked, I asked around if there was anyone that knew a young girl who was acrobatic because this person was going to have to hang from, you know, the stuff—from ropes and do all kinds of falling, and tumbling tricks, and things like that.

[01:30:07.72]

And I found, uh, Georgeanne Kalweit as, like, the young art student, not at this college but another one, Minneapolis Institute of Art. And she became my performer. And Mike Kelley also appears in this film. Um, I had been—I actually had long conversations with Kelley before making *Cinderella* about his, his involvement with media, meaning, like, I always said, "Why are you not taping your performances? Why aren't they video?"

[01:30:45.11]

And he was very clear that he—at the time, he was not interested in making video, and he had to figure out how to make video. And then, he didn't have any real solid ideas for how to work in video. And, I believe, that I was helping him think about that because, um, because he invited me in [19]83 to perform with him at Hallwalls, and *You the Better* was screening with his performance. It was, like, the two of us on their bill. And I had this conversation with him about how I really wanted to work with him in another way, besides using him as a character in my films. And he, he was very open to that. And, um, at that particular time—and we're still talking pre-*Cinderella*—he invited me to work with him on a script for Ajax—*The Sublime*, a performance he was going to do.

[01:31:53.82]

And I was working on *Cinderella*, so I was already trying to visualize how to make sets. And I was working in 16-millimeter, so it meant that I was, I was very, very concerned with location, and construction, and lighting, and things like that. And so, I put his text—we, we collaborated, like over three weeks, I think, in Los Angeles some of that time, and then, on the telephone. And I delivered him a scenario, like a, like a breakdown of his monologue with scene construction. And he rejected it, which was great, because he knew that this was not the kind of interpretation he wanted for his own work, filmic interpretation. And, um, it was—it was—so, it just was, you know, one of these things that happened.

[01:32:47.14]

And so, I asked him if he would come and be on my set in *Cinderella*. And he was a visiting

artist at the time, doing a lecture. And so, he stayed over one night, and we filmed those scenes with him on the set.

[01:33:03.44]

MARINA ISGRO: So, would you describe this film as a feminist film? And could you talk about the reception of it? Was it seen as a feminist film? How did women critics react to it? [They laugh.]

[01:33:15.77]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, I had a—I had a lot of—at the time, there was not the internet, as you know. And so, you would hear things. People would tell you things on the telephone, or, you know, you'd hear it in conversation, but there was a real, kind of—this film had a little—I wouldn't say the same kind of controversy as *You the Better*. Um, there were two sides of the—of a feminist response to the film. One was more didactic. It was like, "Ericka, why are you making a musical? That's a Hollywood form. It's not—you know, what can you say when you're dominated by the musical?"

[01:33:58.64]

And then, the other one was that I had a lot of gay friends, both male and female, who absolutely loved the film. And, um, they loved the playfulness in it, and the use of costuming, and the, kind of, you know, made up character. The stereotyping, I guess, I guess you would say. So, there were these two different reactions, I think, to the film. But, it—but, to call it a feminist film was rightly so because I was—a very deep, deep part of it was this—um, I mean, I was reading French theory, of course, at the time in the [19]80s like all artists. And there was this argument about—again, because I had made *You the Better*, I, I really can't—I really have a hard time remembering the article I read.

[01:34:53.92]

But, Hal Foster gave me some kind of Xerox about a, um, this, this patriarchal structure that's inherent in Greek mythology, which is that a, a woman is an object that is traded between two men, from the father to the, to the son-in-law, and that her value is just a commodity value in this exchange. And so, that, that rubbed me really the wrong way. And I—and, of course, to find a way to work with that, to get that—to move that sys—that power of system away from my work, I had to—I had to find a story that was a patriarchal story, but I also had to find its opposite, you know, and that was what I found in the oral history of *Cinderella*.

[01:35:52.40]

MARINA ISGRO: That's great. Do you mind if we take a two-minute break? I just—

[01:35:55.76]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yes, let's take a break.

[01:35:56.83]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay [laughs]. Be right back.

[01:35:59.12]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Be right back. So, um, you know, I've got a feeling we're not going to get through this.

[01:38:35.55]

MARINA ISGRO: I know [laughs]. So—yeah, I was thinking that.

[01:38:39.06]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Oh, good.

[01:38:39.72]

MARINA ISGRO: What is your schedule like, um, over the next couple days?

[01:38:44.94]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay, good point.

[01:38:46.90]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[01:38:47.58]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I have to deliver something to MoMA [Museum of Modern Art] tomorrow, [clears throat] so I'm going into the city. They bought *You the Better*.

[01:38:55.26]

MARINA ISGRO: Oh, my god! That's amazing. That's awesome.

[01:38:58.50]

ERICKA BECKMAN: They bought the installation, and I renovated it so that it's, like, really high-quality components. [Cross talk.] Like, all digital everything. Yeah. Okay. So, I have to deliver something tomorrow, and then, I'm, I'm, uh, back up here on the seventh, but later in the day, so that's not a good day. It's a travel day. Eighth, I'm fine.

[01:39:23.08]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay. So—[cross talk.]

[01:39:24.87]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Are you going to be okay?

[01:39:25.88]

MARINA ISGRO: [Sighs.] I think so, but, I honestly—I don't know, because, now, I'm between 38 and 39 weeks. So—Okay. What about the rest of today? How are you? Like, later this afternoon?

[01:39:42.18]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Uh, I could do something later, but I actually have to make this thing—like, [cross talk] I'm making something for MoMA, which won't—which—yeah. I mean, what I could do is I could do something tomorrow morning before I leave in my car to go down to MoMA.

[01:40:01.18]

MARINA ISGRO: Or we could schedule the eighth, [cross talk] and worst case scenario, we'll just have to reschedule it, and I'll figure it out. Why don't we do that so you're not stressed?

[01:40:13.30]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay.

[01:40:13.88]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay. What time—[cross talk.]

[01:40:17.20]

ERICKA BECKMAN: You—you, you determine.

[01:40:19.36]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay. Let's see.

[01:40:20.89]

ERICKA BECKMAN: You've got the schedule.

[01:40:23.14]

MARINA ISGRO: I could do 11:30 [AM].

[01:40:26.62]

ERICKA BECKMAN: On the eighth?

[01:40:27.31]

MARINA ISGRO: On the eighth.

[01:40:28.48]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay.

[01:40:30.02]

MARINA ISGRO: Going as long as, as you feel comfortable going. I'm free that afternoon.

[01:40:34.14]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, I think we can finish with one more day.

[01:40:36.23]

MARINA ISGRO: I think so, too.

[01:40:37.46]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I mean, I'm [cross talk] on page 16 of 26.

[01:40:41.87]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay.

[01:40:43.43]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, I mean, I'm—luckily, I have these notes, but I'm not really referring to them. It's just, kind of, like keeping me on track.

[01:40:51.38]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. Do you want to do any more today, or do you want to stop here? What do you—what are you feeling?

[01:41:01.91]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Uh, well, I think—I don't know. I'm, I'm game.

[01:41:08.93]

MARINA ISGRO: Why don't we—[cross talk] yeah, we could just do—I think I had two more questions in this section ending with *Hiatus*, and then, stop there.

[01:41:18.44]

ERICKA BECKMAN: We could end there.

[01:41:19.60]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay. All right. Let's do that.

[01:41:22.64]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay.

[01:41:23.38]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay. Cool. So, let's get back into it. [They laugh.] So, now I wanted to talk a little more, generally, about your life and your work in the [19]80s. And you have talked about this a little bit with individual films, but, maybe, more generally, you could just talk about how you were funding the production of your work at the time, and then, also whether it was being acquired and distributed. And if so, by whom?

[01:41:51.17]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Oh, okay. Very good. Um, okay [clears throat]. Well, nothing happened with the Super 8 film until they were digitized by Anthology Film Archives in 2010. So, that's —nothing's happening there. However, again, you know, *Out of Hand* was something that somebody wanted to try to distribute. So, they had me make a video copy, an NTSC video copy, and they tried to market it. That didn't work out either. Um, the—there was a real fallout in the art world in 1982 where the Sonnabend Gallery, who had been make—producing, actually producing artist films and had a very strong collection, um, dismantled their collection. And, and those artists that were making film also stopped, stopped producing them.

[01:43:00.31]

In my case, *You the Better*, which was 16-millimeter, at that time was acquired by BFI [British Film Institute] in London. Um, Nigel Algar, who works at the BFI, bought it, instantly, for the cost that, uh, one would pay for television rights and distribution rights. *You the Better* was also acquired by an organization that doesn't exist anymore called AFA, or American Federation of the Arts, which was initiative funded. *Cinderella* was acquired by the Donnell Library Media Collection in New York City, opposite of MoMA. They had a very fine collection of works, mostly 16-millimeter films, for research.

[01:43:59.63]

So, there wasn't much going on in terms of purchasing it. It was only, you know, libraries. And very few libraries would actually come to purchase my work. But, but, I did show extensively. I mean, the, the amount of, of screenings I had at that time of these two films publicly was, was pretty impressive in that I traveled quite a bit and would show them, often to film audiences, often in school programs, college programs, often in media art centers that were still getting funding.

[01:44:38.56]

In 1985, I was invited—very happy—very excited about this. I was invited by Chris Dercon to, uh, showed *Cinderella* in Brussels [Belgium, at the Palais des Beaux Arts, -EB] at a show called *The Eye of the Storm* in French, which is *Au Cœur de Maelstrom*. And it was great because these were all my friends. This was like Tony Oursler and Mike Kelley. I mean, all my friends were in the show.

[01:45:09.73]

And, but, *Cinderella*, again, was delegated to the auditorium. And I—they basically said, okay. This is really what is going—you know, this is what I'm up against, and so, I, kind of, just sort of accepted it.

[01:45:26.51]

MARINA ISGRO: Right.

[01:45:28.15]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Now, that leads me into 1987, [19]88, [19]89, which is when I did the Hirshhorn show.

[01:45:38.27]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. Yes. And I'm very excited to hear—[cross talk].

[01:45:41.36]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Before *Hiatus*, okay? Before we did *Hiatus*.

[01:45:45.62]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[01:45:46.61]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, let me explain a little bit. There's a lot going on at this particular time. I think, about [19]87, I'm—the, the, the wave of the art world and the—my friends, like, everyone is in position. Everyone is—their careers are accelerating. And I'm, uh, I'm thinking, "Okay. There's got to be something I can do to affect—get into the—get into position here. Like, do something that would get into the art world."

[01:46:19.15]

So, I—but, I'm still extremely committed to making my work. So, there were leftover props from *You the Better* that I built a set of, um, photographs, five, that were called the *Nanotech Players*, and they featured this, this figure that was the, the, um, the instigator of the roulette game. And I made an animated sequence using sound in a room with these photographs, um, with the intention that they would, somehow, be in a gallery. There seemed to be no reason why you can't put sound and image together in a gallery.

[01:47:05.02]

At the same time, I wanted to do installation work. And so, I, kind of, backed up on a project that I did early on in Artist Space in the [19]80s called the *Grand Galop*, which was a—um, Valerie Smith was the curator of Artist Space at the time, and she had James Casebere collect a bunch of artists that could do their first black box installation work. And I had done something at that time which was a way to make a visible, physical edit, film edit as a, as an installation. So, that was, like, early [19]80. And then, by [19]88, I was really thinking about installation, and sound, and projected image. And the Hirshhorn, at the time, invited me in their new *Directions* series to make something, which I constructed—a—I was, I was involved really at that time with, uh, three—like, the, the research for *Hiatus*. So, I was writing stories, short stories, about living inside a computer. Um, I knew that I wanted to deal with VR [virtual reality] and interactivity.

[01:48:35.30]

So, when the Hirshhorn invited me to do the show, I had finished those photographs that I talked about called *Nanotech*, and I already had an idea for a film set for my next film. But, I wanted to make some unique content for the set, and I created a, a model of a room out of, um, PVC pipe and created a, a wireframe basement location. And I had an audio track that was me singing, but, sort of, tuned, tuned up, so that I sounded like a child, playing a ball game, a game that's called Seven Up, in the basement against the wall where the washer and dryer is. And the repetition of the sound of the washing machine infiltrates the little chant that the girl is saying, and it opens the set into fan—like a fantasy of a garden. And then, it closes when the machine timer goes off on the washing machine, and reality returns, and the game plays again.

[01:49:44.96]

So, that, that, uh, that, that was a set constructed with a lot of lighting. Lighting cues, audio cues, and lights moving on objects in the space to be directed—directing the audience toward close-up and wide-shot, kind of, reality. You know what I'm saying? Like, there's a background, and then, there's the foreground. There's the close audio of the girl singing, and then, there's the background music of the garden. Um, there's—there were also—I was trying to make a physical cut, a 3D physical film cut.

[01:50:18.77]

Now, this was also done by other people. I'm not the first to do it. There was Richard Foreman, who was interested in the relationship of cinema to theater, and actually did introduce this idea of seeing changes as blocking as to how, how you would block a scene change in a film. Also, Michael Snow made this movie called Presents in 1981 that used the flatbed of a truck as a, as a stage. And the truck moved into close-ups and wide shots and

performed this—people, people performed on the flatbed of a truck, and the truck was, like, the stage that mimicked the movie camera lens.

[01:51:06.55]

MARINA ISGRO: Wow. So—okay.

[01:51:08.26]

ERICKA BECKMAN: [Cross talk.] [They laugh.]

[01:51:10.15]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. So interesting., At the Hirshhorn, I'm just curious. Like, was there an area for the audience to stand? Or how did you envision the audience [cross talk] sort of interacting?

[01:51:18.52]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah. Well, again, this was the first installation, so there was no idea of how—for me, it wasn't about—I didn't think as far as where the audience would be, but I did have a place where people could stand and watch. And it was a very short loop. I think, there might be a five or six-minute loop [cross talk] that started over. And so, they didn't really have to have benches, and they could just sort of walk into this dark room, and catch it, and stay as long as they want because it was a short loop. But it involved quite a lot of mechanics, you know, and things at the time that had to be built, electronics that had to be built.

[01:51:57.46]

MARINA ISGRO: I bet. [Cross talk.] Was the museum doing that, or did you do that? Or how did—

[01:52:00.49]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I did that. [Cross talk.] I brought the whole thing in. The museum gave me the lighting and the electricity. They had to, they had to power up the room. Um, but, then, there was a smaller room where *Nanotech* was in a dark, enclosed room with the sound on five speakers. Each photograph had its own speaker, and so, they animated those images with sound.

[01:52:28.25]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. Okay. Um, are there any other works from that period that you want to talk about here? There was something at MOCA [The Museum of Contemporary Art], I think.

[01:52:37.09]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah. At the same time, um, I, I guess, after making *Nanotech*, I worked on the same scale photography, which had been 40-by-60 inches, and I made what's called the *Boundary Figures*. And, again, this—again, these are—this is all material for the development of *Hiatus*. Okay? Um, so, I created a scarecrow figure, a geisha figure, and, um, a cave that had a large tongue. And I was working with a different composer at the time, and I was creating music—well, I worked with Brooke on one, on one of the pieces, but Brooke was involved heavily in his, his business in California, I asked Bruce Darby, another composer in New York City to work with me.

[01:53:37.99]

But, anyway, I created what's called the *Boundary Figures*. And this was also another photographic installation. That was three, three starkly lit photographs with their own accompanying soundtrack.

[01:53:51.81]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay. So—right. So, at that time, you're really thinking about shifting from

purely linear film to thinking more about physical space, literal audience interaction, three-dimensionality, and so on.

[01:54:05.16]

ERICKA BECKMAN: That's right. And, also, at the same time, I worked with Mike Kelley on *Blind Country*.

[01:54:12.87]

MARINA ISGRO: Oh, do you want to say anything about that?

[01:54:15.36]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah. I mean, I was really happy that Mike finally said to me, "Okay, Ericka."

[01:54:21.66]

MARINA ISGRO: [Laughs.]

[01:54:24.00]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Uh, "I did one video with Paul McCartney, and I'm now ready to work with you." And so, he sent me his text, his monologue. And, I created the scenario, and he was happy with the scenario, meaning everything that—how we were going to film it. He let me do it. He just said, "Okay, Ericka. I'm ready to work with you. Just do whatever you want to do. I'll come up to Boston, and we'll make this, this thing together with all your students."

[01:54:59.24]

And it was great. All, all I can say is it was a lot of fun. The, the, the freedom that he gave me was very important. Very important, because he had rejected, you know, my work with him on *Sublime*, and then, he was now ready to accept it. And it, and it was a true collaboration, you know, meaning, like, we talked about his—we talked about certain things that had to be done, um, regarding his body, and how he was going to be portrayed, what he was comfortable with, what he was not comfortable with. But, there was a scenario—there was a little thing at the end, uh, because he liked my musical *Cinderella* a lot, that he allowed me to create any kind of montage that I wanted for his final monologue in the film. And so, I used Super 8 film for that.

[01:55:57.53]

I mean, at the same time, I was working with Dan Graham. And Dan Graham had asked me to—uh, see, I was thinking—I was just trying to think what I would—how I would keep sustaining myself as an artist making film. Because—uh, yeah. And so, Dan Graham asked me to work with him on the Atrium project that was the beginning of what he ended up doing as a performance, uh, with Tony Oursler, the puppet theater piece in, like, in 2005 [*Don't Trust Anyone over Thirty*, -EB]. But, we worked, pretty much, through the year of 1987 together, just brainstorming ideas for a possible film that would be a Dan Graham film.

[01:56:49.50]

MARINA ISGRO: Hmm. Interesting. All right. Well, you've spoken a little bit about *Hiatus*, um, but let's get into it.

[01:56:59.10]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay.

[01:56:59.46]

MARINA ISGRO: So, maybe, you can tell us a little bit about the research process for *Hiatus*. I know you were doing some work at NASA, attending a bunch of, kind of, [San Francisco] Bay Area conferences on tech. Tell us more about what that process was like.

[01:57:16.41]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Um, in 1989, I was teaching in Boston. And SIGGRAPH [Special Interest Group on Computer Graphics and Interactive Techniques] came to Boston in the spring of [19]89. I believe it was spring. Right on the cusp of spring and summer. And I—um, because I was—had made these faux interactive games, I wanted to attend the conference, which was all about the beginnings of the internet and VR. And so, I listened to a lot of papers that were delivered, um, and I found that I knew my next step of production, that I had to work with this idea of interactivity. Now, at this early formulation of what interactivity was, there were a lot of very, very, very optimistic ideas. And, um, and then, the scientists were—maybe, I'll just say a little bit about where I went and what I did.

[01:58:19.27]

So, first of all, it was SIGGRAPH [19]89, and that was followed by going to—um, in 1990, right after that, I teamed up with a reporter and went to NASA Ames in Mountain View, California. And I interviewed Scott Fisher. Um, I interviewed Jaron Lanier. I interviewed a scientist named Ron Reisman who was working with flight simulators. And these were all people that had come—had gone to the [19]89 SIGGRAPH conference.

[01:58:57.95]

Um, I went with a specific mission of trying to understand, like, the physiological, psychological, perceptual problems that the scientists were dealing with, with VR because I had this initial idea that choreographers would be, like, some of the best people to engage with scientists to figure out a sign language of the movement in the VR world. So, I found, at that time, there was a real schism between these scientists. One thought—on one hand, you had people think that VR was really going to help men dominate nature and, also, provide a tool for, for more control in science. Better, better statistics, better visualizations, better data. And, of course, that's represented in, like, surgery, our use of, of VR for surgery, and, also, Mars—the Mars landing that NASA was preparing for.

[02:00:03.61]

Then, there was the other side, which was Scott Fisher and, also, Jaron Lanier who believed that it was a communication tool that would enhance, um, interpersonal communication and would, somehow, like, allow for more collaborative projects and building of models that you could really see rather than just talk about. And Jaron Lanier even went as far as saying that it would replace the telephone as a means of communication. None of these—really—there were—yes, there were very practical things which were game—game platforms and simulation platforms. And that was a very interesting time to hear these argu—two arguments on both sides of the debate about what the future of both the internet and both VR because they were coming up at the same time.

[02:00:58.20]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. Yeah. [Cross talk.]

[02:01:00.21]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah.

[02:01:01.62]

MARINA ISGRO: Do you want to say something about how that research fed into the film and informed the characters and the plotting?

[02:01:10.95]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah. Well, I was very interested in the softer approach to VR, okay, and also the modeling. Not the modeling of the computer model, but this idea of modeling the universe. I mean, I had that pretty well established in my prior world, of model—being able to model a universe. But, I was interested in this idea of the universe model changing, depending on who is controlling the information and what the—where the information flow is. Now, this is also informed by E.F.F. [Electronic Frontier Foundation], John Barlow's—is that his name? John Barlow's group that was concerned, at the time, with issues of privacy, data privacy in this world of VR.

[02:02:04.99]

So, like, the VR—my, my film *Hiatus* was based on this concept. Like, who has the information? Who has the power? And what are you going to do with it? So, it was very easy to, kind of, script it. Now, I had been writing, like I said, short stories, which meant that I was grappling with narrative, okay? And I wanted—I knew I wanted to have a female protagonist, and I knew I wanted to have a female and a male in conflict with each other because I wanted this, sort of, conflict of gendered bodies in the film.

[02:02:41.60]

And so the film had to start with a young girl who is excellent at math, working in a lab. Created her own private identity game that she would log into at times when she's bored with her work or her free time. So, she was creating a game, like a Game Girl. You know, Game Boy, Game Girl. And she was creating this game, and she was testing it out. And she had an avatar called The Geisha. And, uh, she created a community of Native American Indians that would inhabit the world with her, and teach her how to farm, and also, share the products of the farm with the community. So, they were teaching her about power as a kind of collective power, a community-based power.

[02:03:31.54]

And she was doing all this play and playing this inner game, this, this interactive game. I had a girl in a costume that was designed for me in Paris, in a wireframe outfit, um, with her corset being the main computer. So, she would wear a corset, and the corset was a grid. And each—each—all the, all the programs were in her corset, so her power was in the corset. And she would take something from her corset and turn it into a flower in the garden or take a flower from the garden and put it into her corset. So, it was a two-way, kind of, exchange between the world and her costume.

[02:04:21.19]

She was also, um, an avatar in this world. And so, I, I designed her to be a, kind of, cowgirl. And I designed her very importantly as a doll, as a stereotypical female, blonde doll and—playing in this world, this cowgirl playing in this world, Native Indians, and, um—because I wanted it to be about stereotypes.

[02:04:51.86]

Because, often in, in the VR world, at the time—[laughs] this is very, very true. There were an awful lot of women who were hiding themselves behind other avatars, so that they wouldn't be shoved off the platforms in the game world. Mmm-hmm [affirmative]. So, then, again, I brought on Wang, who's the male character, who drops in to the conversation, drops into her VR game, and plays with her but also takes over her, her game and makes it his own.

[02:05:31.15]

This film had to have, again, a game board designed for it because it's operating in a black box. It also was featured, unlike *You the Better*, a different type of time, a different idea of progression. It was more a narrative idea of time. But, something is happening linearly, and then, there's something that's also happening in parallel with that linear narrative. So, he's overtaking—he overtakes her garden and tries to convince her to use her plants as a, kind of, um, pharma—pharmacological adventure. And she is realizing this is a threat and wants to get back to her game. But she's in his world, and his world is overtaking her world. And so, she has to go back in time to the starting point where he met her, but he's in his progression going forward.

[02:06:34.59]

So, I actually had to, like, figure out how to build a game world that was moving and developing from—using computer technology as a sort of core. Like, you start with wireframe, and then, you, you put the walls on, and then, you've got the facade, and then, you've got this, you know, this building of his corporation, which was fabric—being fabricated by workers. And she's tunneling and moving through this landscape, trying to figure out, like, where did all this start? And how could she find something and, and return it to her, to

her corset? So, that's like a synopsis of the structure of the film, basically.

[02:07:15.38]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. Could you say something more about the, sort of, cowboy, cowgirl imagery and those references to the American West?

[02:07:26.45]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Again, it's a, it's—I'm really playing with the prevalent icons that are in culture and game developing at the time, which are very, very, very stereotypical. Okay. So, he's featured as a cowboy. [Cross talk.] He's in blue. She's featured as a cowgirl in pink. So, you've got the pink and the blue thing going. And that's, that's—you know? He's big and she's small.

[02:07:59.84]

In making this film, I loved working with the choreography of my main actress. You know, I had her do identically matched moves, both in the VR world and in the room—in the room she's performing in. Um, because Wang is portrayed as a capitalist, and also, kind of, a carryover from [19]80s—the twist in capitalism in the [19]80s, um, the, the loss of individual freedom, I think, in the arts being supported by NEA and government agencies. The loss of that freedom, this move toward corporatization, the, the fact of Google, as a research company on all VR research, at that time—I wanted to portray him as stereotypically a bad capitalist. And, therefore, he employed Asian workers.

[02:09:02.67]

MARINA ISGRO: I was going to ask you that next. Yeah. The representation—[cross talk].

[02:09:05.34]

ERICKA BECKMAN: He employed Asian workers. Now, that becomes a real problem when screening the film 10 years later.

[02:09:10.71]

MARINA ISGRO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[02:09:11.19]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. But at the time, it—my argument for—and some people have seen it, is simply that this is his world. This is what he's doing. This is what he's building. And I wasn't trying to—I was trying to build—I was trying to set up a conflict [cross talk] between his world and her world. And so, that's where the, that's where the lines were drawn.

[02:09:34.50]

MARINA ISGRO: Mmm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. That makes sense. Okay. I think, maybe, we should pause there, unless there's anything else you want to say on *Hiatus*.

[02:09:46.80]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Uh, yeah, I could say one other thing if you want.

[02:09:48.60]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, please. Yes.

[02:09:50.16]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I mean, this, this might lead into, like, what we're going to talk about later. But, the fact that it was my—when I made—when I released—first of all, I was, um—I was now tenured, and I was in Boston a, a lot. And, of course, I was very close to Jaron Lanier and MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] people, and so, my, you know, my research was still kind of going on at that particular time. But, I released the film in 1999, and I

released it as a 16-millimeter print. And it was, it was, like, my first narrative film, and it really didn't play well. And that was okay, because I realized that, um, that narrative was not exactly my cup of tea.

[02:10:41.77]

MARINA ISGRO: Interesting. [They laugh.]

[02:10:43.84]

ERICKA BECKMAN: And so, I put the film away, and I, I did cut it back. I really, literally, took out a huge amount of game material and stripped it down to its narrative, which is about 25 minutes, which is just dialogue and interaction between characters. And I stripped it way down, and then, I let it sit there for a while.

[02:11:05.56]

And, later, later on, much later on, I would say ten—almost, uh, 10 years later, I had some graduate students that I was working with in my studio on digitizing work, and I told them about this film, and they asked to see it. So, I played them the 16-millimeter, 30-minute film. And they said, "Oh my god. This is exactly what we're talking about. This is so relevant. This is something that means something to people right now. You need to show this film." So, I showed it to my—I brought it to MassArt and showed it to my grad students, and that gave me, sort of, confirmation that it was really the right time to release the film.

[02:11:55.60]

But, I wanted—I did—I wasn't happy with the structure of just the tight, tight narrative, and I wanted all this other material to show with it. So, I created a double screen version of the film, which had the gameplay on the second—on the second, second screen. So, in other words, there was a four—I didn't touch the editing, at all, of the narrative, but I put that on a screen that would be close to the audience. And then, I put the gameplay behind it, and it was running in parallel.

[02:12:28.33]

But, you would see—because we're shifting between points of view. His point of view, her point of view. So, the, the background also was her point of view. So, it's a way of developing her point of view and making her presence very, very visible to the audience who's watching what he sees and what she sees.

[02:12:48.04]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. Great. Yeah. [Cross talk.]

[02:12:49.65]

ERICKA BECKMAN: And so that was the final making of *Hiatus*. When I did that, that was what I wanted to show. [Cross talk.]

[02:12:57.10]

MARINA ISGRO: Did you say what year that was?

[02:13:00.52]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, let's see.

[02:13:01.48]

MARINA ISGRO: Or approximately?

[02:13:08.94]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I, I, um, showed it in Berlin in 2014, [cross talk] with the double screen, and that was my first projection of it.

[02:13:19.27]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. Okay. So, next time we will absolutely talk about, sort of, revisiting the earlier films as installations.

[02:13:25.96]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay.

[02:13:26.83]

MARINA ISGRO: But, I think we'll stop here and then pick up on Friday.

[02:13:30.91]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay.

[02:13:31.72]

MARINA ISGRO: So, great.

[02:13:32.50]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, Friday the 8th eighth, at 11:30.

[02:13:34.57]

MARINA ISGRO: Yes, perfect. I will send you a Zoom invitation. [Cross talk.]

[02:13:37.63]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Perfect. Thank you.

[02:13:38.71]

MARINA ISGRO: All right.

[02:13:39.10]

ERICKA BECKMAN: All right.

[02:13:39.32]

MARINA ISGRO: Thanks again, Ericka.

[02:13:40.09]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Have a really good couple of days. [Cross talk.]

[02:13:41.92]

MARINA ISGRO: Thanks. You, too. Good luck with everything at MoMA.

[02:13:44.59]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay. Ciao.

[02:13:45.79]

MARINA ISGRO: Bye bye.

[END OF TRACK AAA_beckma22_2of3_digvid_m.]

[START OF TRACK AAA_beckma22_3of3_digvid_m.]

[00:00:00.18]

MARINA ISGRO: There we go. Okay. This is Marina Isgro interviewing Ericka Beckman at her studio in Housatonic, Massachusetts, on July 8, 2022 for the Archives of American Art,

Smithsonian Institution. This is session three. Hi, Ericka.

[00:00:20.88]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Hi [laughs].

[00:00:22.35]

MARINA ISGRO: So, last time we ended with *Hiatus*, and we're, now, heading into the 2000s. So, I want to ask you about your film, *Switch Center* from 2002, which, I believe, is the first film you made entirely outside of a black box studio. So, maybe, we can start with your decision to work with the Béla Belázs Studio in Budapest [Hungary]. What was the collaboration like with them?

[00:00:50.05]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay, well, um, I got a phone call from the director of the Béla Belázs Studio who was in New York, and he, his—his name is János Sugar—and he saw a picture of mine in the Whitney Biennial catalog of *You The Better* and was interested in, um, discussing the option of me coming to the studio for a residency. The Béla Belázs Studio—this was in 2001, actually, that we started communicating, and I went there in January.

[00:01:26.61]

Well, first of all, I got a, um, grant from CEC ArtsLink, a production grant, which, in terms of Hungarian florin, you know, the dollar was expanded, threefold. So, I started by looking at locations. I knew that I wanted to film in a, a factory, and, uh, I was interested in, in bringing a folktale idea to Hungary because it seemed very compatible. And, um, the studio showed me some—a great location in January of 2001—no, actually, 2002—and it was a gas factory. A set of circular rooms that were adjoining. Um, very, very beautiful architecture, and it was abandoned, and I figured that would be the place that I would film.

[00:02:27.51]

However, when I came back in June to film, that location was gone. So, I gave up the idea of a folktale and just decided that I would work very improvisational with whatever location they could provide. And, at, at that particular time, um, Budapest, and Hungary, itself was—mostly Budapest, I would say, was in great transition politically, and the studio was being managed by students at the un—from the university. And, um, there was a little bit of conflict going on, some tension going on with the, the guys in my, my team, and this tension was ideological, and it was very deep. And what that was, was that the—the, um—there was a poet who was in charge of me in terms of communication and translation, and then, there was my cameraman who wanted to use my film as a way to connect with the national television.

[00:03:42.24]

And he—this was because, you know, um, Hungary was, was democratic, at this moment. They had lost all the Soviet funding. The, the studio had lost its governmental funding, and so, they were looking for a way to survive and to keep—and to keep, keep, keep working. And the cameramen wanted to, actually, align the archive with television, and then, my poet was much more interested in keeping the alignment with the avant garde and with Anthology Film Archives in New York.

[00:04:18.64]

So, in spite of that going on in the background, it was an incredibly positive experience because I, I really learned about the Soviet work ethic, and the, the labor, and the fact that we had to make do with very little equipment. Um, no lighting to speak of. Great technicians, which is what I expected, and I wanted to learn from them.

[00:04:46.18]

And, I was put up in a Soviet workers housing complex that had an artist's studio in it, so that was also a great experience. And lastly, um, the, the making of the film was a really unusual experience for me because I had no idea, before each day, where I was going to be driven and to what location. So, I kind of gave the specifics of what I wanted to do, what I

was trying to do. They would take me to a location. Somehow, some barter was created—was made in order to get that location. And then, overnight, I would—I took—at this time there, was no iPhone, so I had a paper 35-millimeter camera, meaning, like, basically, self-processing paper, 35-millimeter camera.

[00:05:54.14]

And I take photos of the location that I was going to shoot in the next day, take the, take the photos out at night, do storyboards, drawing in figures, and, basically, improvising the entire thing on the fly. Um, so, in the last five days—well, I was there for, like, two months, but actually the filming took, practically, 13 days, so there's a lot of downtime. And I—at the very end, I was given this wonderful location, which is featured highly in the film called the water processing plant on the Danube [River]. And it was a factory that was left intact from the [19]60s but nonoperative. And, um, I was there for five days, alone, with my Bolex camera, and I shot most of the film using stop motion.

[00:06:47.87]

The day the—of the Pokémon sequence, um, it was the day that my cameraman wanted to work with the television crew. And it was the day for the jib arm and the, um, dolly shots, and we were not allowed into the location until later in the afternoon because they were filming a Pokémon commercial there. And so, therefore, because it was improvisational, I wanted to use the Pokémon commercial in my film. So, I was looking for a way to, uh, [phone rings] develop an idea in the film around nostalgia and, and, and the future. So, my worker, who was a, a female worker in this, this plant, whatever they were manufacturing, was, was wearing, as costume, her grandmother's Soviet outfit, like, the one that she wore as a worker.

[00:07:52.93]

So, this this Soviet, uh, mentality towards work and production was deeply ingrained in my crew and the people I worked with. And they were facing the future, the future being the transition from Soviet rule to a democratic society. And so, the film, actually, became a lot about that transition. And so, the, the woman in the film, kind of, represents someone who's trying to get back to the past, and won't—can't, can't face the future and, actually, can't face either of them very well.

[00:08:34.42]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. How did you cast that, that person?

[00:08:39.43]

ERICKA BECKMAN: The people were all the factory workers that were still in the water, uh, purification plant, and they were, also, the members of the Béla Belázs Studio.

[00:08:50.70]

MARINA ISGRO: Oh, okay.

[00:08:51.49]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, it, it was just a handful of people that we could corral together.

[00:08:56.89]

MARINA ISGRO: Right, and were you—to what extent were you directing their, their actions, their, sort of—the way they were—

[00:09:03.52]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, you see, the idea here was to animate a factory that wasn't working, so to reanimate a factory. So, I, basically, came with—I mean, I, basically, relied on all of my past experience with directing choreography and directing for rhythm. So, we didn't have any soundtrack at all. It was just, basically, getting the right tempo established, and, and then, just working from that.

[00:09:32.89]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, great. Okay, I was going to ask you about Pokémon. I think you've answered that already, unless you want to add anything else on Pokémon [laughs].

[00:09:41.74]

ERICKA BECKMAN: No, it's just—[cross talk] anyway, so the film, the film screened at The New York Film Festival and was purchased by MoMA Film Department. So.

[00:09:57.60]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. So, um, let's see, so the building, obviously, is such a big character in that film, and architecture also, kind of, plays a central role in your next two films, Frame Up, which was commissioned by the Walker [Art Museum], and then, *Tension Building*. So, I'd love you to speak about both of those, kind of, within this framework of, of architecture and how that drives your film.

[00:10:25.27]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay, um, being in this water purification plant was, like, an eight-hour workday and only having a camera and only having one assistant who would help me position the camera. I got very interested in what was happening with light, the natural light coming through these filtered windows and, also, above, in a kind of cupola window at the top, which is overhead diffused lighting.

[00:11:01.66]

And so, I watched and was a bit transformed by the color that I was seeing on this monochromatic concrete structure. So, I—this was a fascination that continued through my next film, um, [clears throat] which was *Frame Up*, but it really, in fact, affected *Tension Building* even more because *Tension Building*, I am filming concrete. That sounds kind of weird to say. I'm filming concrete [they laugh]. Okay, so in between those two films, the Walker commissioned me, the Film and Media Department headed by the chief—direct—chief curator of that department, Sheryl Mousley, um, asked me to be a resident artist while they were in reconstruction of the new museum at the Walker. And I said, "Okay, this is great because I'm—you know, play and work is a—they're parallel, deep interests of mine."

[00:12:19.03]

And I decided the best way to handle this—uh, because there were so many restrictions, you know, I couldn't walk on a construction site without a helmet and without somebody from the crew being with me. So, I positioned cameras all over the place, uh, Super 8 cameras on intervalometers, time lapse recorders, and then, I shot two or three times that year with my 16 [millimeter Bolex camera]. And the idea was to create—again, completely improvisational—create a pinball game using the construction site as a back plate. And, um, what was great about this piece, for me, was the fact that it was the first time for a couple of new things. One was that I was receiving material remotely. The second was that I was editing digitally for the first time. And thirdly was I was working with a compositor, which is something I hadn't done.

[00:13:24.58]

And [clears throat] I—it was a, it was a process of making a film and editing, which most people these days consider that's where films are made. But, in my sort of rule book, that wasn't where films were made. So, I took it upon myself to make it a very interesting sound piece. And what, what I had, because it was a du—dual screen video—meaning two screens—I would use the four tracks available and build a soundscape with four speakers, sort of, like, a f—a surround sound. And what I did was I wanted to cut each screen independent of each other. Um, I built the soundtrack independent. So, I'm not watching screen two when I'm making the soundtrack for screen one, and vice versa. And then, I opened it up to see what I had, meaning I listened to all, all of them, I found out there—this was a chance experiment, because there were things that were happening just by chance, and some beautiful things happened audio-wise. And I just had to do a little bit of editing for sync and level problems, but, uh, for me, I thought it was a very effective sound piece, and that was a surprise.

[00:14:48.86]

So, that was, uh, I think, that was finished in 2007. I think it premiered at the Walker when the museum—it did premiere at the Walker when the museum opened in 2007.

[00:15:01.82]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. Before you move on, do you want to say anything about editing digitally and what that was like for you?

[00:15:08.84]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, you see, I'm [laughs]—I'm considered—where I was teaching, I was, kind of, considered very technical. And I was teaching production, and I took it upon myself to learn the Avid editing system and be trained as an Avid editor so that I could teach properly. And this was way back, you know, like—I was trained in 1997. So, um, in spite of that early training, this was the only film that I, like, really cut 100 percent in digital because I knew I was releasing it in video.

[00:15:48.62]

MARINA ISGRO: Right, right, right. [Cross talk.]

[00:15:50.12]

ERICKA BECKMAN: At that time, there wasn't—the technology for multiscreen was, in 2007, was, really, these big, massive media players that were very expensive. The museum had that, and we had to play DVDs. So, they were two DVDs that were interlocked by these media players connected to two projectors. Um, so, the quality, you know, was DVD quality. It wasn't really—it didn't really—[laughs]. Didn't, didn't—[they laugh].

[00:16:32.51]

MARINA ISGRO: Not quite as sharp. Yeah.

[00:16:34.13]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah, not quite as sharp. Um, also interlaced. So, *Tension Building*, now, this is, this is a self-funded film. Okay? And it's, like, 2008, I think, I started it, as an experiment. I was, again, I was teaching in Boston, but now, after being, like, tenured for a while, I was now the chair of my department, so I was spending a lot more time in Boston. And I had to have something to do besides teach, so I took my camera over to the Harvard stadium, and I started—I wanted to do this experiment. And the experiment came out of my experience on *Switch Center*, because that was also a film that was primarily animated. And the idea here—this was a serious experiment. I wanted—uh, let me back up a little bit.

[00:17:35.97]

So, when—right at this time, computer modeling is gigantic. Okay? Everyone's doing virtual architecture. And the walk through in an architectural set, uh, 3D architectural—3D modeled architecture is to have the view plane parallel with the floor plane. So, you're walking within a parallel—the eyes and the floor are at a consistent level and relationship to each other, and it's just a motion vector path through the architecture.

[00:18:11.34]

But, I wanted to disrupt that parallelism, and I wanted to—I wanted to see what would happen if I animated along the lines of the design of the architecture, meaning what the architect planned, not what the viewer, but how the architect envisioned the design of that space. And so, I chose the stadium for a number of reasons. One was that it was a completely mathematical structure. Everything is a unit. Everything is equally spaced. Um, it's also a very well-preserved stadium—just concrete with stenciled numbers. No banners, no advertising. So, very pure, kind of, [19]30s, [19]30s architecture.

[00:19:02.25]

And, um, I put the scope—I used my registration in the eyepiece, which is a cross bar, as a,

kind of, engineering scope. So, I fixed it on a place in the stadium, and then, I walked all the way around the stadium periphery, the circumference of the stadium, and shot single frame. What happened was—and I was thrilled by it—was that the architecture did become a machine, and that was my goal was to create an architectural machine. In that I found, like, the seats, the stadium seats were sliding up and down the walls of the stadium.

[00:19:47.25]

And what happened was something that I was interested in seeing, which was a, kind of, telescoping action, that the stadium seating would expand and then collapse, expand and collapse like a folding cup. And this telescoping was in was also in my journals as an idea of, of how to record a spectacle. Meaning, like, what is the difference between what a spectacle is when you're close to it and what a spectacle is when you're very far away? So, the mediated view, at the top of the stadium seats, combines colors, sound, lifting from the crowd, as well as the music and the stadium, and blending due to reverb against all these walls. So, there's a blending and a, kind of, mediated viewpoint high in the stadium. And, at the base of the stadium, you're right in line with the players, and it's a very physical, different experience. So, knowing that I could make the stadium actually move, I, um, decided that I would start to film what goes on in the stadium floor.

[00:21:05.73]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, before [cross talk] you get there, really quickly, just the way you're talking about the architecture just reminds me of Le Corbusier, like, the, the architectural promenade, you know, walking through the space, the building as a machine. Was that in your head at all, or were you thinking about—[cross talk].

[00:21:21.60]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, yes, it was in my—because architecture was always something that I was fascinated with and would read about. I mean, all the way back to SCI-ARC in Los Angeles in the [19]70s. Um, there—the—the idea was to really break into the architectural design to, to get to the concept level of an architectural design, and work just with that, and not work with like, um, how it functions, you know, as a place.

[00:21:59.90]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[00:22:04.62]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, I had notes. I collected a lot of writings and, and some architecture books that, really, uh, set me up, I think, to do this film. Now, in my undergraduate years, I fell in love with an architect in Italy in the [19]30s named Luigi Nervi—[cross talk.]

[00:22:30.26]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Engineer turned architect for very colossal structures. He did airport hangars, stadiums, uh, roadway. And, and, and, um, I wouldn't call them amusement halls, but they're, they're show rooms, and they're all—he's known for his, uh, concrete forms. And I had a picture that fascinated me of a stadium in Florence [Italy] that he designed that had exterior, um, circular staircases. A few years later, I got permission to film in that stadium, and I went there with my camera and did concentrate on the exterior architecture of the staircase and the seating.

[00:23:25.42]

And, um, these, these—the stadium was still intact, at that point, from the [19]30s. It had a beautiful cantilevered, uh, concrete ceiling over some, some part of the viewing area. It also had a, a spear, a Nazi spear in the center of it, where the stadium seating was, and a circular exterior staircase, which I filmed below and tried to move up and around through it, always seemed to capture, like, in one position. It captured the spear, because I would get to the top, and the spear would be there. And another time, I would do the same move on another exterior staircase, and the spear wasn't there.

[00:24:16.55]

So, in my film, when I finished filming in Florence, I had the same staircase with and without the spear, and I also had a spear as a sundial in time lapse going towards the end of the day, so, kind of, like, yeah, a sundown shot. And I was really wondering how I was going to work with that spear because I didn't ever see that in the pictures I had.

[00:24:45.79]

Um, so, that was—that harked back to a spectacle era, the way, the way that stadium was constructed. And I decided that I would start to shoot—I would start to film the, um, the UMass [University of Massachusetts] football team in their stadium and, um, work with the sounds of the band that is warming up. So, so, instead of playing—having these tunes that happened in halftime, which I, which I did film high speed halftime sequence. I often worked with just these strange tunings that you would hear in—under the bleachers and, kind of, echoing through the concrete under the bleachers of various instruments, you know, getting, getting ready. Very, very dissonant sort of sounds.

[00:25:48.61]

And I was very lucky. At one point, I was—I happened to schedule a shoot during the Thanksgiving Day UMass game, and here, in half—in halftime, was all the regalia of the [American] Revolution and, like, the flag salutations. And now, I had something, in parallel, to complement the Nazi spear. So, I went ahead and, and worked on this film towards its completion. Right at that moment, as soon as I had that footage, I said, "okay."

[00:26:26.02]

And then, uh, in 2016, [Donald] Trump was elected, and I wanted to do something—um, I just felt it was important to do something, at that moment, with this with this film. And I happened—I mean, I didn't, didn't know what I was going to do, but I happened to research, um, the Harvard stadium history, and there was a photograph from 1910 that had a capital construction on the stadium floor, and that solidified it for me. So, what I—because this is documentary footage, you see? There's is—there's intervention, but it's mostly—the intervention is really just animating it and seeing what happens with events that are sped up and, and, and juxtaposed in editing.

[00:27:26.35]

The construction of the last shot, which is these, uh, volumes created, which, which, which I should explain, this is a replica of that photograph. So, for me, the documentary side, actually, kind of, won out. Like, I didn't impose anything. I simply copied something that was historically there, and I shot from the same angle and built it at the same scale. So, um, I should mention what these—the way I shoot, which is, is seen in all the films that we're talking about, all, all three of these architectural films, is that I—there was a term that [László] Moholy-Nagy used in the [19]20s called "virtual volume." And that was the ability to create a volume that doesn't exist physically but is created through a long photographic exposure and light. And it first showed up in the flowers of the geisha in *Hiatus* and really took full form, um, in *Tension Building* and in, in, also, *Switch Center*, to some extent.

[00:28:53.56]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. Going back to your—[cross talk].

[00:28:56.03]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Anyways, the, the Capitol is made out of sticks, rotating sticks under long exposures.

[00:29:04.06]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[00:29:04.90]

ERICKA BECKMAN: And that, actually—the technique has stayed with me. I built equipment for it, and I'm still working with it.

[00:29:12.89]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. Yeah, it's like that—is it Naum Gabo? Now, I'm trying to remember, there's a really famous kinetic sculpture that produces a virtual volume, but it's escaping me at the moment.

[00:29:22.30]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Have to look it up.

[00:29:23.20]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. So, okay, now, I have a very complicated question for you, um, so get ready. So, the first time I encountered your work was at the List [Visual Arts Center] at MIT, and—yeah, and so, it was, I think, three or four films, but they were shown with, with props as installations, so I wanted to ask you about that mode of showing your work.

[00:29:49.39]

So, um, I don't know what the best way to ask this is. Starting in the 2010s, you increasingly began to incorporate installation components. As best I can make out, in 2013 and 2014 were the first times that you did that. Um, perhaps, at Kunsthalle Bern, and at the Whitney and in Grenoble, and then, you, sort of, expanded on that in 2015 at Mary Boone with these DMX-controlled light boxes that you showed with *You the Better*. And then, from there, you went back and remade, sort of, props for the early videos as well. So, I wonder if you could walk us through that process. Sort of, what drove you to do this, and how did you go about rethinking these videos as fully three-dimensional installations?

[00:30:44.70]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Um, okay. Yeah, I think you're, you're right about the chronology, in terms of where it started. It started in, uh—at the Kunsthalle Bern in 2013 with my retrospective there. I worked with the props that I had, um, for the trilogy, the *Super-8 Trilogy*. I still had them.

[00:31:13.23]

MARINA ISGRO: You had the exact—?

[00:31:14.76]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Pardon?

[00:31:15.30]

MARINA ISGRO: You had the original props. They were not reconstructed, yeah.

[00:31:18.21]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah, but they were, they were, they were miniaturized. Meaning they were the hand props. The hand—[cross talk] props. I didn't keep the large ones, but I kept the rocking horse and the furnace.

[00:31:30.51]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[00:31:32.73]

ERICKA BECKMAN: But, in this case—you know, in, in—that was the first film that I—uh, oh, there's, there's so much to say about this, actually. Okay, so I want to say two things before we dive into, like, the sequence of the work. The first is that, in my, in my notebooks, drawing notebooks for the films that I made, I—like I said earlier, the frame was only a partial capture of what the world, the game world was. And so, outside the frame were elements that were going to either move into frame or just be there in case I needed to use —to film them. So, I always devised a, kind of, worldview for the film frame itself.

[00:32:25.48]

So, it was very easy for me to go back, especially in *You the Better*, to be able to draw from the notebook drawings and build elements that were completely contiguous with the filming at that time. So, we're not talking about reediting work, and we're not talking about making new things to contextualize the work. We're talking about developing ideas that were from the time of those films.

[00:32:57.30]

So, um, second to that, I—the, the period that you're talking about was a pretty—was a very important period in my work, in that, uh, when Douglas Eklund invited me to be in the Picture Generation Show at the Met, I had already started to digitize my work. So, the, the trilogy was the first one digitized, and it was done through the Anthology Film Archives with a grant from the Warhol Foundation in 2010. So, when Eklund invited me, 2009, I hadn't gotten the quality digitizing that I needed, but I, at least, was able to, to work with a production place in New York to get something really good for that show.

[00:33:50.58]

Now, that show opened up the gateway for things to follow. And one, one person in particular—um, there were a lot of things happening, simultaneously, right after that show, but one, one thing in particular that, I think, is very important to talk about is a person named Lionel Bovier, who was the editor in chief of JRP Publishing in France. And he saw the work at the, uh, show at the Met and, instantly, thought that there was a relationship between my work and [Jack] Goldstein. He had organized a show in Lyon [France], a Goldstein retrospective that was supposed to come to MoMA PS1 but didn't. And they—he produced a catalog, and so, he was keen on the work of the [19]80s.

[00:34:47.00]

And he, um, he—Lionel, wanted to take me under his wing, in a way, to bring attention to my work, and the way he did it was really interesting. Although we never talked about a strategy, in retrospect, I can see what he was doing.

[00:35:06.89]

So, he wanted to see if young people would be interested in my work. Okay? And he arranged for two shows in Lausanne [Switzerland]. One was an experimental film screening where he would interview me, and I would show the *Super-8 Trilogy*. And the second one was in IM3, an experiment, like an, an independent art—uh, art house, I guess, in Lausanne, I guess you would call it. A city-supported project run by a couple of young curators. In that space, I did *Switch Center*, and I also designed the space with lighting and color for that film. It turned out that the attention on Switch Center was better, had more people, got more enthusiastic response to the installation at the IM3. And from there, Lionel introduced me to Fabrice Stroun, who, then, gave me a retrospective at the Kunsthalle [Bern].

[00:36:16.46]

Lionel published the *Super-8 Trilogy* that was, then, digitized by the AFA and the Warhol Foundation. Um, he published a DVD of it for museum distribution. He did my first monograph. Um, he sold a couple of works, and so, he really launched that—a, kind of, a pathway in Europe for my work. Simultaneously, there was a young woman named Isobel Harbison, who, um, came to my studio to study my work. And, after that, I was—she invited me to do the Tate [Britain]. So, I did a three-day retrospective at the Tate in 2013. That also opened up doorways for me in Europe, as well.

[00:37:17.02]

And so, by the time 2014—I mean, it was 2013 for Kunsthalle, and, um, I sequenced the trilogy with three screens running the films, independent of each other, in one room with loopers, meaning there were always things on the screen and lighting on props. And this created a great excitement for me to be able to see how to bring the film into the space, and how to animate the space, and have these, works, which I wanted, always, to be seen together, occupy space, and also, have, have, um, things happen in—at different sequences. So, if one film played, you always saw something on the other screen that, kind of, related to that film but was, really, an outtake from the next film. So, it, it placed the films in a really good arrangement as a sequence. As a long sequence.

[00:38:35.56]

Um, so, again, it was just a matter of thinking about not necessarily how to dress a room for a film screen, but how to take sculptural elements into a room that would activate the screen material. And so, in *You the Better*, the monopoly houses, which are DMX-controlled, plexiglass houses, are programmed in very different ways in the film, in the seq—sequence of the film. I mean, it—they are a motif that is strong and very developed in the film, but they—it changes from being a beautiful little model home sequence to being a sculptural instigator of the targets that are flying across the film frames. And then, eventually, they become a kind of scoreboard. They fill the space with the same color that is on the film. Um, so this film was, really, the heart of that transition from, like, it—the film just being a single channel or a screened presentation to a film installation.

[00:40:14.93]

And, yeah, as things developed, I kept thinking about how to do that to all the films. Since the ideal spot for my work was always—I always wanted it to be in a gallery or a museum. You know? That was the reason, and I had the opportunity, now, with digital technology to be able to do that. And so, I really spent a good amount of time, uh, going backwards, in order to reconstitute the film as installations without changing the film at all.

[00:40:49.56]

MARINA ISGRO: Right.

[00:40:49.92]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Without—[cross talk].

[00:40:50.31]

MARINA ISGRO: Do you think, in the meantime, museums had, sort of, become more comfortable with that format, as well? With the, sort of, combined sculptural and media installation? Is that part of it, do you think?

[00:41:06.53]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Um, it was—I don't think I had to become comfortable with it. It was because I worked in a process-oriented, oriented way as a filmmaker making all these props. I mean, it's not like I had people make them for me. I always built all the props. And so, this process of having my studio filled with props, and making a film, and then, oftentimes, projecting the film in the studio with the prop still there, you know, it's all very comfortable.

[00:41:35.81]

MARINA ISGRO: Right, sorry. I don't know if you misheard. I said, like, the museum, perhaps, became more comfortable with that format. You know, you had talked about early on having this division between the cinema program and the, the Whitney Biennial, for example. But, at this point, we're seeing, you know, other artists working with, with sculpture and video directly in the, the gallery is pretty widespread.

[00:41:59.67]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah, I mean, I was—I just felt it was—I, I felt very lucky that I had the opportunity to do that. And Jay Sanders saw that, immediately, when he saw *You the Better*, and he asked me to do two films for the *Rented Island* show in 2010 [at the Whitney Museum of American Art, -EB], I believe—no, [20]13 actually, [20]13. [Cross talk.] And, again, like in, in *Rented Island*, I took a door that I had built as a prop, a small door that I had built as a prop, put it on a motor, and brought that into the space. I also resurrected, at the same scale, the blockhouse for *We Imitate*. And so, these things—um, you, you know, I was—I was playing catch up, but I was following what the, what the museum world had as technology.

[00:42:57.33]

MARINA ISGRO: Right. [Cross talk.] Absolutely. Okay, do you want to take a quick break there before we get to *Reach Capacity*, or do you want to keep going?

[00:43:08.26]

ERICKA BECKMAN: One little break.

[00:43:09.52]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay, great. [Laughs.] I'll be right back. I'm going to get a glass of water.

[00:44:09.95]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay.

[00:44:10.93]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay, great. So, yeah, so now we've reached 2018, um, and your next major film, *Reach Capacity*. Which, in some ways, relates to *You the Better*, which we talked about, I think, last time, which has, [laughs] among other things, a focus on this idea of real estate, and subdivisions, and so on. So, I wonder if you could talk about how you were thinking about real estate differently in 2018 than you were in 1983.

[00:44:47.38]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yes. Do you mind if we go back one step and—[cross talk].

[00:44:53.08]

MARINA ISGRO: Oh, please. Yeah, yeah.

[00:44:54.40]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Jump into this question and, maybe, we can—

[00:44:58.77]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. Yeah, sure. Where would you like to go [laughs]?

[00:45:02.43]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I wanted to talk about the Pompidou Kanal Show of *The Super-8 Trilogy*.

[00:45:06.45]

MARINA ISGRO: Oh, [cross talk] yeah, okay.

[00:45:12.69]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Um, so, that was, that was, actually, the last work that I completed in this sequence of, of going backwards in order to go forward—forwards. And it was a really great show. I had a curator from the Pompidou [Jonathan Pouthier, -EB] who was in the film department, and then, there was another curator for the floor below. That, I designed the space, keeping in mind what I had done at the Kunsthalle Bern. showing the films in—consecutively with loopers. But, I had the ability to work with a sculptor to produce the sculptural elements, and they did the most beautiful job. And they, actually, did many, many more props than I had had before.

[00:46:03.30]

And, um, I also did theatrical lighting behind each screen, and I also did, sort of, graphic, cul—I would say like, graphic lines on the floors that were motifs, graphic motifs in those three films in the style of, like, sports graphics. Meaning, like, tennis court lines, a circle, the shape of a, a house in a basketball court. This kind of design was really, I felt, really effective in that super large space of, uh, showrooms for automobiles, which is what the building was used for before. But, more, more interesting than that and came as a real surprise, was to get to my floor, you had to—you walked through—you know, it's a—it's a car ramp and a showroom floor.

[00:47:10.89]

So, on the floor below me was Francis Alys and his 30 children's games. And so, you went from physical children's play to my floor, which was dark and was a, kind of, mental construction of play, children's play. And it was just that relationship that was so absolutely accidental.

[00:47:33.66]

MARINA ISGRO: I love that. I just saw a version of that at the Venice Biennial. He showed another version of the kids play, yeah. It's great.

[00:47:41.33]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah. Okay.

[00:47:43.90]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay.

[00:47:44.46]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, your question [laughs] was?

[00:47:47.01]

MARINA ISGRO: Back to *Reach Capacity* and this question of, of your thinking about real estate differently in 2018 versus in the [19]80s.

[00:47:58.44]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, really, in the [19]80s, um, I was in a rent-controlled—I had just started living in my rent-controlled loft in lower Manhattan. And this, actually, is—kind of a—it's a protected situation where my rent isn't increasing. And I'm off-market, and I'm able to sustain my work through teaching, because I have this low rent, and I have this big studio. It's sort of, like, a social plan, Socialist plan, in a way, to provide artists with housing and studio space at a low cost in order to keep the neighborhood intact and so on. That was the [19]80s. Now in 2018, my building is being threatened with a demolition permit from [Michael] Bloomberg. And [clears throat] we were trying to fight it in court, but we're not going—not in court, but we're trying to, to defend our positions with a lawyer, and it's not really working out. So, the, the end is in sight there for that.

[00:49:16.70]

The neighborhood radically changed over that period in Tribeca [NY] to become, um, what it is now. And I couldn't help but feel that I needed to make some kind of statement, because it was so personal to me, this idea that, um, that the, the, the way the pattern of development was going in lower Manhattan after 9/11 was that developers were being given a lot of opportunity and tax breaks to, to bring more people to live in Lower Manhattan—so, to build high rise and condo units.

[00:50:02.15]

But, these were very exclusive units, and people were not necessarily living there full-time. And so, therefore, that meant that taxes were not being returned to the city at the same rate as people who live permanently. So, a lot of pockets were being fed with this plan for lower Manhattan without providing any affordable housing. So, simultaneously now, this, this was happening, and this was the change in the architecture, the feeling about living in lower Manhattan in the, in the—in that architecture. Um, at the same time, I was returning to St. Louis, where my family was living, and I went to visit an old neighborhood that I had lived in as a child, and it was next to a site that was being demolished. Again, using eminent domain as the ruling to allow this to happen.

[00:51:06.77]

It was a Black neighborhood who had also been pushed out of North St. Louis into this place, and then, this place had a couple of generations of family-occupied and owned housing. And it was a strong neighborhood with lots of churches, a lot of community centers. It was very intact, and the city decided to demolish it, and move the residents out, and build, in its

place, a military—uh, a military—it's not a base, but it's an NG—it's called National Geophysical Agency. And it's a complex that would've—would be, kind of, walled in and occupy this downtown North St. Louis—an inherently Black neighborhood.

[00:52:05.29]

The people that moved out were bought out, and that's okay, but they weren't given enough money to buy houses, and so they had to be—um, they had to—they had to take out mortgages. So now they're in debt to the bank. So, these, these, these are two things that to me really [dog barking] related, what was happening in lower Manhattan, and then, this neighborhood being demolished and bought out by an—by the government and the city.

[00:52:37.86]

Thirdly—and these are all happening at the same time, and this is not—this is before I decide to make *Reach Capacity*, I discovered the precursor to Monopoly game, which was a, um, game called the Landlord's Game developed by a woman, game designer, in the [19]20s. Called the Landlord's Game, and she had developed this game to be played locally, throughout the Northeast, mostly in Quaker communities, and then, some of the progressive communes in Northeast, like in Massachusetts.

[00:53:14.88]

And, um, this game would be adapted by the players, so it did look like Monopoly. It was Monopoly, but it featured the local towns, streets, and, and arch—and known monuments and things. And so, people would learn how to play this capitalistic game. And then, once a monopolist was created, the game board was flipped over, and yes, the same structure existed on the other side, but they played with different rules. And the rules allowed for the money to be redistributed back into a community chest through taxation in order to develop property. Okay? And it was an idea of commons, this idea that there's a way to protect property that, that, uh, yes, is owned and rented, but the money comes back to the community itself, and the community can decide what to do with it.

[00:54:17.26]

So, anyway, this was a teach—kind of a teaching game. And I was fascinated with the idea that there was an anti-Monopoly out there, because I hated Monopoly, just like most people I know [laughs]. And, um, so, those three things came together, and I decided that I would make *Reach Capacity* right before COVID, um, shooting it all, right before COVID. And I used the original iPhone photography that I did in St. Louis in the film, because by the time I was making it, it was already gone. The buildings were gone, so I caught the demolition right on the cusp. And I also used a location in St. Louis that my family did have a suburban home that is also a demolished suburb, meaning, like, it was taken down by the city to expand the airport in St. Louis, but then, they rezoned the area, and then, the houses were gone, but the landscaping is still there.

[00:55:21.37]

So, I built a suburban home [inaudible] for *Reach Capacity*, that's the worker housing. And I call it, like, "the ghost houses" because they're not really there. They're virtual houses. They're dream houses for workers that can afford them [laughs].

[00:55:39.42]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. Do you want to talk about the, the, sort of, physical structure of the film with the rotating screens and how that relates to all of this?

[00:55:47.35]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah, it was important to me to—at this point, I wanted to do a film installation was integral to the making of the film. And so, the flipping screen was the idea I had at the very beginning. I had to turn the screen over to—in order to bring—um, to change the dynamics of the film, and so, it does do that. We actually rotate a screen 180 degrees. 360 goes to 180, and then, the second part plays, and then, it reverses back to the beginning, and the loop starts up again.

[00:56:30.44]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay. so unless there's anything else you want to say on *Reach Capacity*, I would love to move to *STALK*, which, I think, is going to be the final work that we'll discuss.

[00:56:42.10]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay. [Cross talk.]

[00:56:42.88]

MARINA ISGRO: And that I was very lucky to see at the Performa Biennial [laughs] last year. Was that last year?

[00:56:49.48]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah.

[00:56:50.80]

MARINA ISGRO: Or was it earlier this year?

[00:56:51.37]

ERICKA BECKMAN: 2021.

[00:56:52.45]

MARINA ISGRO: It was 2021, yeah. So, okay, so, maybe, you could talk about the origins of *STALK*. And I know that you've talked about, um, first, sort of, coming to Jack and the Beanstalk in the 1980s, before you returned to it in 2021.

[00:57:13.00]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Okay, well, [dog barking] I did a little book with Hallwalls in 1989, where I worked with a writer to revamp it as a, um, story about industrialization, agricultural industrialization. Just a little pamphlet book. But, it was in the back of my mind as a possible ending for *Reach Capacity* that, actually—you know, I was—it was COVID, and I couldn't film what I wanted to film for the ending of *Reach Capacity*. I had to, like, pretty much make it from what I had available in the studio, which was animation, and, of course, my vocal work and working with a composer on lyrics. And, actually, just figuring out how to do what I wanted to do for the ending, without being able to film farmers in a field and do all of that.

[00:58:18.16]

I had recorded the music for *STALK* during my preproduction of *Reach Capacity*, so it was all the vocal—most of the vocal work was done. But, um, again, it was—it was—it was right there. I felt it—you know, since it wasn't [dog barking] the ending of *Reach Capacity*, I felt like it was the material that was—that I had the most access to build a performance from in, like, the three months I had to build that performance. And so, yes, it's a real companion piece to *Reach Capacity*.

[00:58:58.71]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[00:58:59.05]

ERICKA BECKMAN: And, um—

[00:59:01.63]

MARINA ISGRO: So, how did Performa—how did you connect with Performa, initially?

[00:59:06.61]

ERICKA BECKMAN: The producer, Kathy Noble, was friends with Catherine Wood at the Tate, and I believe that she either saw my retrospective or heard about it, and got to know my

work, and proposed as one of her three people, because they had three different curators, that I would be—you know, she would work with me. Now, this was a really great, great event because I was able to—um, I was able to do a live performance, which I've never done.

[00:59:37.52]

I was able to work with a choreographer. So, I worked with Yvonne Rainer's choreographer named Emily Coates, who was fantastic to work with. And the process was, was really bringing these separate things together that, that, really—until we got on to site the week before the performance or, um, a few days before the performance, none of—nothing—you know, it's typical of performance. It all sort of comes together at the end because the things were in disparate places.

[01:00:12.31]

The aerialist was here in Massachusetts, so I rehearsed her and, and did some filming of her here. I had a studio in Brooklyn that Helene Winer gave me. It was her project room before she sold it, um, in Bed-Stuy [NY], and that's where most—all the animation took place. I had another place do the Jack in the Box box on electronics. Um, all these—and then, Emily was rehearsing in downtown New York with the dancers. So, we were lucky that we were able to perform it in spite of the rain, yeah, and in spite of the fact that we didn't have a dress rehearsal.

[01:00:57.87]

MARINA ISGRO: Oh, I didn't know that. Why? [Cross talk].

[01:01:00.45]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Proper dress rehearsal.

[01:01:02.28]

MARINA ISGRO: Because of timing or was it the—

[01:01:05.87]

ERICKA BECKMAN: It was, it was the fact that the night before was rained out. The—like, we, we appeared on the 30th, and they put two shows, last minute, on the same day instead of spreading it out. Because we were rained out on Friday night, so we couldn't do a dress rehearsal with lighting. And, most of the day of the performance, leading up to the first show, was just getting cues established with the soundboard and, uh, the stage manager. So, it was actually by our cuff that we got the thing off the ground [laughs].

[01:01:37.18]

MARINA ISGRO: Well, it looked great. [Cross talk]. I saw the first—I saw the first one.

[01:01:42.78]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah, it was much better, the second one. And so, the documentation that I have is worthy of the second performance.

[01:01:49.82]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. What was it like for you to—I mean, were you very nervous that evening, or how were you feeling that day?

[01:01:55.93]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yes.

[01:01:56.24]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. [Laughs.]

[01:01:58.94]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Nervous. I could barely—I could barely—I could barely behave [laughs].

[01:02:05.15]

MARINA ISGRO: Oh my gosh. Well, the set was [cross talk] stunning.

[01:02:08.71]

ERICKA BECKMAN: The thing was, that is so different than making film with actors because when they turn on for the audience. There's this moment where everything just lifts off the ground, and there's all this excitement that you see everywhere. And that I've never experienced, and I just got so—I was swept up by that. So, I felt like I was in the crowd myself.

[01:02:33.01]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, would you do it again? [Cross talk.] Is that—[cross talk].

[01:02:35.90]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Huh?

[01:02:36.70]

MARINA ISGRO: Would you do it again, or is that it [laughs]?

[01:02:39.19]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I would love to do it again. I think the piece needs some development. Um, there's a lot of things that were—I would do differently, and spend more time in sections, and develop a few more lyrics and things. I mean, my hope is to, to turn it into a proper video and redevelop it.

[01:02:58.52]

MARINA ISGRO: Great. Very cool.

[01:02:59.83]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Yeah.

[01:03:01.41]

MARINA ISGRO: Okay, so, the next thing I want to ask you about is your teaching. Um, you taught at MassArt [Massachusetts College of Art and Design], as you mentioned, until, I think, last year, you retired. So, how did teaching shape your artistic practice, first of all, would you say?

[01:03:19.15]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, in, in the most practical way, it paid for a lot of it.

[01:03:22.74]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, absolutely [they laugh].

[01:03:26.37]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Teaching at MassArt, MassArt is a public—the only public art school in the country. So, the students were older, in most cases, and very motivated, until the last few years when it, sort of, decided that it would, um, really take in a large freshman class and try to raise an endowment, et cetera, et cetera. So, how it shaped my career was that I—um, really, just it's a very practical thing. I just wanted to—I wanted to let [laughs] the women in the program understand that technology is nothing to be afraid of and to really get into it. And so, you know, I chose, in my career, to teach production, and so, you know. I chose to teach a collaborative type of production and to involve everyone sort of equally in all aspects of it. And we would go from the very beginning all the way through to the editing of a production. And I did that along with teaching other things, but that was, sort of, the

core of my work.

[01:04:40.17]

And as things change, as digital became very prevalent, and a lot of—this 16-millimeter production, which I had done, shifted to the side of digital. And most students were learning how to do the, the technique on their own. You know? They learned through the YouTubes, et cetera.

[01:05:01.89]

So, the collaborative part of working together was the most—like, is where the, the—I got the most feedback, in terms of positive feedback from teaching, is that they really didn't know how to work with each other. They didn't understand how to behave on a set with other people, you know, and the kind of roles that people would take, and how to bring all this great creativity that a young, a young student has into production and, work it out with other people and without, you know, power relations.

[01:05:44.37]

And so, it was constantly a, kind of, development of a, of a way to work together that focused on the creative element because I was always pushing that and getting them to do things that were not scripted and outside the box but working together.

[01:06:03.33]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah. Are there—you mentioned, sort of, the increasing comfort with digital, but are there other shifts that you've seen among young artists over the years that you taught?

[01:06:15.66]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Um, not necessarily in the artists that I've taught. The—I mean, in the shows that I've been in where I've been with other young artists, I mean, a certain amount of the shows that I've been in have been with women who were, like, in their thirties. So, um, what I'm finding very interesting is that, as media becomes much more prevalent in our culture, especially within the art world, you've got more people seeing it, more people giving feedback. And, as a result, more risks are being taken with media. And so, this move away from narrative to me is, like, the most exciting thing I've seen. You know?

[01:07:03.11]

And it's—it, it, it was at a certain point where artists were making video, and it wasn't, necessarily, as interesting as it is now when you have people that are, um, educated in multiple ways that are making media. And, you know, they are—they're formed—they're formed as an artist, but then, they are also bringing in so much else into the material. You know? It's not just performance on video, but it is, like, more conceptual, so I'm—I love—I just think—I think it's really interesting what's going on.

[01:07:50.32]

MARINA ISGRO: Great. Okay, so, now, I have a bunch of big zoomed out questions for you about your career as a whole and your legacy. Um, so, I guess, very basic question, what is it about the moving image that initially pulled you in and that has continued to attract you over the years?

[01:08:14.03]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, um, I have to say, one, that it—that it's not an object. Two, that I really value the collaborative experience. I do believe that, when you're working with somebody creativity—creatively, that there's more power in that communication than you have all by yourself. That, that, in fact, if you're building something from a collaborative exchange, that you're, you're already extending the work into an audience, like, the, the work then is, is received. It's received, and then, it is developed from that reception.

[01:08:55.04]

And that, that, that is a very rare thing, and it's a very special thing. Um, it means that I carefully choose who I work with because it has to be that pre—it has to be focused on the creative exchange. That has to be understood. A lot of my work is abstract, so there is the interest in the abstract film that, I feel, um, existed in pockets of art history, but I'm committed to making an abstract film that—an abstract film that an audience can understand. And so, I'm very conscious of using music and the images that I work with as being consumable and very easily understood, but they represent deeper philosophical and psychological meaning.

[01:09:57.77]

And if that—If I—since I'm committed to making an abstract film, then, my collaborations also have to be able to understand it and to know why we're working with, you know, common imagery, I would say. In the case of *STALK*, it's the performers are doing movements of work, just labor movements. But, this is a, kind of, representation that stands for something deeper, you know, like what labor really means. And, um—so, I, I see, I see that the film allows me the time to work out these problems. If I'm working with an abstract film—idea, and the film is a way to solve it, then, the time of a film is important to me, in terms of I give it the amount of time it takes to solve that problem, at least to resolve it in a way. And most of the films resolve in an abstract way. You know? You're not walking away with a story ending of any kind.

[01:11:11.28]

MARINA ISGRO: Great. Um, so we've touched on this one a couple of times now, but I'm sure you have more to say about this. Media art has just become so deeply a part of the contemporary art landscape. It's really one of the most dominant, if not the most dominant format now. What has it been like to watch that happen? Because things were so, so different in the [19]70s.

[01:11:34.36]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, the idea was that it was something that I always wanted, you know, to see happen. And so, to, to actually—not only to—like, okay, so, I reemerged after there's a lot of activity in the art world with media, as you say. And so, to be able to jump right in, because I didn't have to develop anything, because it was already there conceptually, was a great feeling. And then, to be able to join in with people that are doing it and, and to feel like I'm part of the art world. I mean, this is—for me, you know, I felt like the work that I did in the [19]80s, um, which was, pretty much, the work that I showed in the last 10 years, opened a lot of curtains for younger women, too, because of the, um, the, the ideas were relatable. Okay?

[01:12:43.34]

They were—and, and, somehow, they didn't know me, and I didn't know them, but we always, like, questioned, like, how did this happen that the stuff that I did in the [19]80s actually fits in really well with what a lot of performance artists and media makers are doing right now? Where—how did that happen? So, it was always, like, these great speculative talks about how that happened [they laugh].

[01:13:09.99]

MARINA ISGRO: That's a great question. So, this came up, I think, when we spoke about your installation work, but in 2009, you were in Douglas Eklund's show, *The Pictures Generation, 1974 to 1984* at the Met. Um, and that was a show that revisited Douglas Crimp's initial formulation of *The Pictures Generation* in 1977 and, obviously, expanded the group of artists quite a bit. So, how did you feel about your inclusion as part of that group, as part of this, sort of, expanded version of *The Pictures Generation*? And do you see yourself as part of a movement? Does that make sense to you?

[01:13:52.02]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, um, it only makes sense in that these were friends of mine.

[01:13:59.72]

MARINA ISGRO: Right.

[01:14:00.08]

ERICKA BECKMAN: I—in a larg—in a historical sense, I guess you could say that we were all raised in—because we're all of a similar gen—generation, we were all raised on unfretted play—outdoors and television. And so, those two things, that—those two things, I think, influenced the way we work and also formed a kind of trust that we had in each other as friends to show our work to each other and to, to trust the kind of critiques that we were getting from each other. So, the idea of being part of Douglas Crimp's initial show didn't bother me because, um, that was what was happening at the time. It seemed as if curators in the [19]80s were designing shows, you know, based on concepts. And this happened to just be a, a, a group of people that spent a lot of time together at, at, mostly—either in bars, or at Artist Space, or at Paul McMahon's house.

[01:15:10.19]

He would do every Sunday a gathering called Battle of the Bands, and people would, like, play music together. So, it's—I felt it was—I was, you know—I have to say being included in that show was a wonderful break for me because it brought other people to my work that hadn't seen it and a new generation of curators who hadn't seen it.

[01:15:35.36]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah, absolutely. Okay, this is a question for the conservators of the future [laughs].

[01:15:42.51]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Oh, yeah.

[01:15:43.51]

MARINA ISGRO: How do you feel about migrating your work to new formats as technologies change?

[01:15:49.45]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, this is easy to talk about because it already has happened. And so, we've, we've migrated to recent off-the-shelf equipment. Um, I used to have—I worked with somebody since 1989 on electronic engineering. He's an electronics engineer, and he's jerry-rigged everything from the control box for the Hirshhorn, um, installation to programming for bright signs and DMX control. And so, we just migrated all the way through. Now, we're working with Black Magic [dog barking] off-the-shelf. And he's also building a new animation machine that is also robotic off-the-shelf components.

[01:16:34.27]

So, we're, we're—this is something that I've learned through the institutional sales to really document in, like, you know, questionnaires about the technology. And, uh, and I understand the detail that's needed to be covered in that, like, what you want to preserve, and what you're not supposed to, you know, touch.

[01:16:56.36]

MARINA ISGRO: Yep [they laugh].

[01:16:58.51]

ERICKA BECKMAN: So, I feel okay.

[01:17:01.06]

MARINA ISGRO: Great. Okay, um, last question. So, I think a lot of contemporary critics have, have commented on the fact that so much work from the [19]80s has kind of a dated look at this point, but yours does not and just feels so fresh, uh, and contemporary. And I wonder if you have any thoughts about why that might be.

[01:17:25.57]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, um, I think that my friend Matt Mullican summed it up really nicely in a talk that we did at The Broad in 2017. He pulled out his iPhone, and he said, "Ericka's screens are like what everyone does these days with these iPhones. The sliding icons, this pattern of touching, and things going—embedded in one another, and shifting, and you can place images where you want on the iPhone. The experience of the screen is similar." And so, I think, I think I'm working with—I think, because I developed ideas about the use of the screen, that that is what's making it feel contemporary.

[01:18:13.18]

MARINA ISGRO: So interesting. I think that's absolutely right. Okay, [laughs] well, is there anything that you wish I had asked you that I haven't asked? Anything else you want to throw in as, as the last, last word?

[01:18:29.72]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Well, I think that, um, as my, you know, work has really shifted away from Piaget quite a lot, I feel like that, that what I learned from him, in terms of the formation of an image, has stayed with me all the way through. And that's this idea of, uh, imitation, deferred imitation. The, the—my emphasis on symbols and signs as being the kinds of representations that one has in memory. And developing work, I think, from those foundational conceptual ideas, I think, is, is with me, even though I'm, like, thinking about other things to do. It's just that I feel like that's a, that's sort of like a bedrock to my work.

[01:19:23.23]

MARINA ISGRO: That's interesting. Yeah. Wonderful. Okay, well, thank you, Ericka. This has been such a pleasure.

[01:19:29.29]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Thank you.

[01:19:30.42]

MARINA ISGRO: Yeah.

[01:19:31.78]

ERICKA BECKMAN: Good luck with everything in your future.

[01:19:33.89]

MARINA ISGRO: Thank you. I'm going to stop recording. Hang on, one second. Okay.

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