

In the 1980s, Beckman and Wachtel sought to examine pre-linguistic thinking and forms of non-narrative communication to great admiration of their peers with whom they often collaborated. Using larger culture contexts, both artists have continued to politically challenge status quo assumptions of our cultural symbolic order for over three decades. In a critical period of their early development, the reconsideration of their work in this exhibition welcomes a reflection of this period within its own context and also in terms of the forces within today's new cultural landscape. With such striking parallel, the themes of proximity, complicity and power in Beckman and Wachtel's practices enlighten our own understanding of these issues today.

Wachtel's paintings and Beckman's new media installations emerged in overlapping American generations of artists active in New York and Los Angeles in the 1980s whose contributions have increasingly become admired by new generations of artists and curators. The conversation in the American art world of the 1980s was demarcated by venue associations, schools and generations, informing a new popular culture beyond the formerly quotidian school of thought. This was the decade that yielded the first wave of the newly professionalized gallery system and a commercial market, limited to few artists who were symbols of the various representative trends. Politically independent, directly critical or experimental activity by artists, (often by women) were arguably of even greater historical significance. Beckman and Wachtel's concepts continue to be referenced in a number of artist's work of successive generations. Pertinent now, as we investigate another round of market dominance that is potentially more interconnected but equally blind to the integrity of creative influences, it is interesting to refer to works of the period that are extraordinarily relevant in today's context.

Ericka Beckman's work explores the performative possibilities of film and video through spatialized installations. She was termed a 'post punk structuralist' in the early 80s by J. Hoberman in response to the debut of *You the Better* (1983) at the New York Film Festival; where Beckman was co-billed with Jean Luc Goddard's *Passion* (1982) to verbal protest by the traditional avant-garde audience. She is a key figure in the Pictures Generation; yet early on her work was unclassifiable to art and culture venues. Beckman's innovations overlap two cultural spheres--neither completely in line with the vernacular of the American structural filmmakers in which it was exhibited cinematically in festivals--nor maximized to its full potential in contemporary art durational venues, where opportunities for installations focusing on projection, sculpture and sound were limited.

The gallery will exhibit one of Beckman's seminal works entitled *You the Better* (1983) in its original installation configuration. This is her first film involving Piaget's game theory as an artistic strategy to divert traditional narrative tactics. The film is fascinatingly dense with situations

involving both players and the audience; conflict and outcome, cooperation, competition, conquest of space and the mechanics of the game. Evidenced by Beckman's staging practices involving drawing, storyboarding, musical collaborations with composers and artists (Ashley Bickerton in this case, among others) this piece exemplifies film as a medium for performance. Resembling early video games, the work is a hybrid of early computer and handmade props and conceptual staging methods, with parameters of the game exposed.

Julia Wachtel's work remains prescient to political and social media evolutions that began forming in the 1980s and continue now, embracing the conflict that these digital forms often represent. Wachtel has actively pioneered works that address the impact of "society of the spectacle" in the complicit media saturated age of the 1980s. Incorporating political images and discomfiting cartoon figures, she pre-figured "reality" and celebrity culture's impact on representation as a potential form of critical and emotional dissent. Wachtel's work has often been credited as a notable precursor to similar artistic strategies by Jeff Koons and Richard Prince. Her work early on incorporated collaborations with artists and agitprop groups. A notable early public installation with Haim Steinbach and several projects with Group Material were fundamental to Wachtel's development in this decade.

The exhibition will contain several important works by Wachtel from the 1980s. *Free Speech* was first exhibited in the artist's first solo exhibition at Nature Morte in 1984. The juxtaposition of Wachtel's newly minted characters from popular pulp American greeting cards with folk art objects, in this case a preacher with a Bible, alluded to concepts around authority, history and iconography. This became a pre-cursor for later complex investigations of the American Landscape and Celebrity series that began in the same decade. *Encore* (1988) presents an appropriated image of Tim Conway, a second rate comedian of the era, reluctantly holding a giant banana as a prop from a sight gag. Another work, *A Dream of Symmetry* (1998) holds a special place in Wachtel's practice with regard to images of women. This was the first and only time Wachtel used a cinematic image from Philip Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988). *In A Dream...* a woman peers into her reflection on the mirror in a sexualized pose which is represented in mirror image and upended on the opposing side of the canvas in reverse, flanked by a series of identical overenthusiastic male cartoon figures.

Ericka Beckman and Julie Wachtel both attended the Whitney Independent Study Program in 1975 and 1979 respectively, following Wachtel's study at SVA and Beckman's program at Cal Arts. Beckman connected with the work of Julie Hayward, Jack Goldstein and collaborated with Guy de Cointet, Mike Kelley and many others in her films that were essential to the work's production.

Wachtel's early activities in New York with Group Material and Haim Steinbach, Nature Morte and Fashion Moda provided possibilities for understanding of her work in a variety of interconnected contexts. In addition, legendary Los Angeles institutional exhibitions figured prominently with both artists. Wachtel took part in Avant Garde in the 1980s at MOCA in 1987, and Beckman participated in A Forest of Signs, curated by Ann Goldstein at MOCA in 1989. Beckman's work was screened in three Whitney Biennials in the 1980s, concurrent with Wachtel's participation in the 1985 Whitney Biennial with Group Material.

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