



CLOSE-UP

Unsustainable Design

JEANNINE TANG ON MARTIN BECK'S *THE ENVIRONMENTAL WITCH-HUNT*, 2008

“**NOTHING BETTER** than a touch of ecology and catastrophe to unite, to unite the social classes—except perhaps a witch-hunt.’ I think that’s exactly where we start. Why don’t you take that line . . .” a woman suggests to her companion. He then begins reading to her from an essay that, we learn, was written by theorist Jean Baudrillard for distribution at the 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado (IDCA). Speaking on behalf of a French delegation, Baudrillard attacked the theme of the conference, “Environment by Design,” eviscerating the environmental movement for its complicity with state power, its fraudulent union of “ecology and catastrophe.” This polemical tract provides the context and title for Martin Beck’s *The Environmental Witch-Hunt*, 2008, a ten-minute film in which six unnamed people in contemporary dress wander through an aspen forest, clutching folding chairs, a table, and sheaves of paper. They rehearse and then

enact a panel discussion among the trees, quoting excerpts from Baudrillard’s text.

The IDCA was initiated in 1951 to bring designers, artists, and engineers together with business and industry leaders. In its first years the conference was considered a success, motivating innovative practices in commercial design while interacting with advanced art. John Cage, in 1966, offered a presentation titled “Design Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse).” The sardonic sentiment was a harbinger of more direct expressions of discontent. In 1970, Californian environmental activists and hippie attendees protested what they considered the IDCA’s allegiance to a narrow conception of modernist design as well as its pursuit of corporate profits, its racist and gendered exclusions, and its outmoded formats (plenary lectures, hierarchical seminars). The protesters countered what they saw as the twin failures of politics

and design with an “anticonference” of egalitarian workshops, performances, and “be-ins.” (Among the dissident groups was the collective Ant Farm, who camped in a geodesic dome tent.)

And yet, the radicalism of these interventions notwithstanding, Baudrillard’s essay denounced both the conference organizers and the counterculture for neglecting the ideological basis of the environmental movement. Baudrillard argued that the battle waged against pollution is always, in actuality, a battle on behalf of established power structures against “the pollution of the establishment itself.” An environmentalism disregarding war, imperialism, and the subaltern is merely acquiescence to the governmental instrumentalization and commodification of catastrophe, and functions as yet another excuse for the brutal coercion of populations—a corollary of what Naomi Klein calls disaster capitalism.

The Environmental Witch-Hunt approaches this

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Opposite page: Four stills from Martin Beck's *The Environmental Witch-Hunt*, 2008, HD digital video, color, sound, 10 minutes 2 seconds.

Right: View of "Martin Beck: Panel 2: 'Nothing better than a touch of ecology and catastrophe

to unite the social classes . . .,'" 2008, Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery, Columbia University, New York, 2009. Background: Panel (red, yellow, black), 2008. Foreground: *Sculpture*, 2008. On walls: *Aspen*, 2008. Photo: James Ewing.



political crux obliquely. Beck's camera pans across the aspen trees in tracking shots, moving against, rather than alongside, the characters. Baudrillard's essay emerges only in reenacted fragments, as the figures slip in and out of the frame, their wanderings intercut with static shots of quaking leaves whose rustling permeates the film as a kind of call-and-response to the speakers' voices, which themselves fade in and out. The use of recited quotation, ambient sound, tracking shots, and saturated color quotes the montage techniques of Jean-Luc Godard's *One Plus One* (1968), and more generally evokes Godard's twinned investigation of form and ideology. Beck's alternation between still shots and movement, spoken utterances and atmospheric noise, contemporary conversation and forty-year-old text foregrounds communication itself—a communication in perpetual relay between subjects and contexts, past and present—as the film's main subject.

The Environmental Witch-Hunt is often shown as part of Beck's installation *Panel 2: "Nothing better than a touch of ecology and catastrophe to unite the social classes . . .,"* 2008. Here, various works by the artist are mixed with archival documentation in an installation involving design, sculptures, and prints, along with *IDCA 1970*, a film by Eliot Noyes and Claudia Weill documenting the conference. In 2008, Beck also compiled a retrospective brochure of ephemera from the event, titled *June 14–19, 1970*. For the 2012 book *The Aspen Complex*, he followed this up with an edited selection of archival material and commissioned essays on art, architecture, and design, amplifying the IDCA's history through reproductions of primary sources while opening up scholarly debates on the intersection of culture and the ecological-industrial complex.

Writers on Beck's work have praised his historical rigor and the information he disseminates, commending him for his use of discursive material and billboards that bring to mind the strategies of Group Material, but they have also disparaged *The*

Environmental Witch-Hunt and its associated art objects as extraneous to his historiographical endeavor. These readings miss the dialectical construction of Beck's practice, however, in that such works and their installation relate directly to IDCA's context (framed silk screens reiterate a leaf motif by the IDCA-affiliated designers) and effectively expand that context, establishing connections to other neo-avant-garde projects (the typeface of the video magazine *Radical Software*, for example, is deployed across the project's publications). For Beck, design is not just design; it is literally the environment through which meaning is made sensible. Even the reflective chrome-steel cubes—collectively titled *Sculpture*, 2008—that Beck often shows alongside his film don't distract from his historically precise consideration of IDCA so much as extend it. *Sculpture*, adapting the Fibonacci sequence previously used by Donald Judd and Mario Merz, phenomenologically reworks Minimalism's durational subject, hollow objects, and post-Fordist production. The cubes' serialized sizes and two absent vertical sides render their vacant interior and reflective surfaces visible on the inside as well as the outside. The exhibition's topography of walls, floor, viewers, and objects is thus refracted in a mirrored *mise en abyme* in which partial views of elements offer contexts for others—drawing together histories of design, art, and film to posit a subject for our networked age.

Sculpture suggests that design's imbrication in ecology and politics is something that emerges perceptually, through techniques of production and display. It is fitting, then, that the cinematic communication of Beck's film is interdependent with its presentation. The work is typically shown on a screen mounted on a customized wall, with rectilinear panels of red and yellow fabric that appropriate spatialized abstractions by Blinky Palermo roughly contemporaneous with Baudrillard's screed—punning on the idea of the "panel" as both discursive and physical form. Beck's management of light and sight lines, meanwhile, produces a functional design system in which the white

cube and the black box converge, overcoming the architectural divisions that often hold films apart from object-based and graphic work—and, by extension, the separation of the fine arts from their commercial and industrial counterparts.

Since the late 1960s, critics of Minimalism and Conceptualism have pejoratively characterized art's relation to design as one of contamination and commodification. Beck's project, however, assumes this uneasy reciprocity as a productive ground. The final words audible in *The Environmental Witch-Hunt* decry "the designers, the architects, the sociologists who are acting like medicine men toward this ill society" as, in fact, "accomplices in this interpretation of the question in terms of illness, which is another form of hoax." The conclusion of the sentence fades into silence, giving way once more to the sound of murmuring leaves.

Even as Beck's project contributes to a broader historical record, its target isn't the confrontation of power by truth. Rather, it investigates the more abstract and fundamental difficulties of perception and communication (always granulated by contextual contingencies) that are themselves the ground of social antagonisms. If Naomi Klein proposed mobilizing historical consciousness and local movements against disaster capitalism's apocalyptic erasure, starting not "from scratch but rather from scrap," *The Environmental Witch-Hunt* seems to ponder how such scraps might be found, remade, and assembled, both affectively and pragmatically. Beck's practice aggregates—rather than compounds—an array of functions, including those of editor (commissioning historical texts), designer (innovating and renting out exhibition systems), and artist (authoring and labeling works and projects). Such a materialist, hybrid formalism renders design more pliable, more capable of negotiating the present complex of disaster. □

JEANNINE TANG IS AN ART HISTORIAN AND SENIOR ACADEMIC ADVISOR AT THE CENTER FOR CURATORIAL STUDIES AT BARD COLLEGE IN ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, NY.