Afterall

Contentious Utopias: Martin Beck's Avant-Garde Art and Design

David Everitt Howe

Tags: Michael Fried

Published 01.10.2012

Martin Beck, *Sculpture*, 2008, stainless steel, five elements, detail. Installation view, Gasworks, London, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Gasworks

On 19 June 1970 Jean Baudrillard penned a droll indictment of the International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado, which gathered together professionals that year to tackle the hot-button theme 'Environment by Design' – claiming that pollution and other environmental concerns were simply smoke screens for real problems of class inequality and capital. Coming on the heels of the failed May '68 revolutions and during the roiling Vietnam War, he argued that environmental advocacy had now replaced religion as the distracting opium of the people. Comparing pollution controls to Napalm bombing and the prestigious design conference to Disneyland, Baudrillard wrote that there was 'nothing better than a touch of ecology and catastrophe to unite the social classes, except perhaps a witch-hunt (the mystique of antipollution being nothing but a variation of it)'.1

That Martin Beck's 2008–09 exhibition title 'Panel 2 – "Nothing better than a touch of ecology and catastrophe to unite the social classes…"' quotes Baudrillard's pithy reproach is characteristic of the artist, whose sculpture, painting, video and writing works pinpoint the fraught ideological stakes of

Martin Beck, poster for the exhibition 'Panel 2 – "Nothing better than a touch of ecology and catastrophe to unite the social classes"', Arthur Ross Gallery, Columbia University, New York, 2009. Courtesy the artist

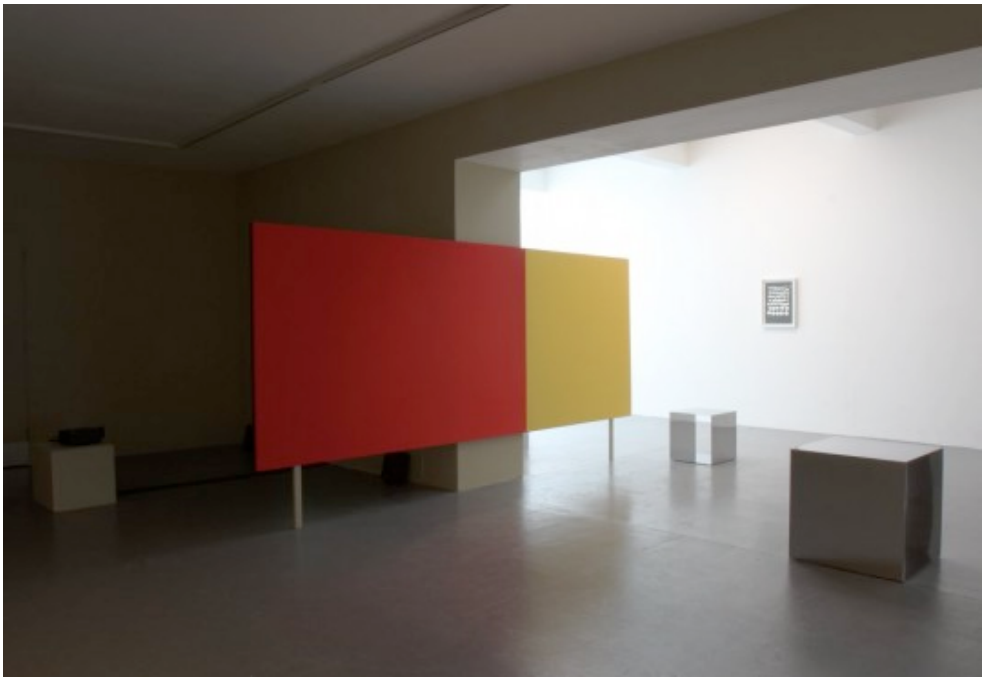
historical discourses on art, design and architecture, among other disciplines. Recycling modern movements, Beck hollows them out, so to speak, exhibiting the ways this is done by the market – a current trend identified by writer David Geers in an observation of neo-formalist work recently published in *October*.[2] In his writing, videos and most of all exhibition design, the artist illustrates the sublimation of avant-garde utopianism and ideology into design and décor, and at the same time makes this gesture legible through a discursive framework. For example, in 'Panel 2' Beck provides a discursive apparatus for the historical context of the work through supplementary documents and ephemera, while also shutting it down with overly formal displays that flatten and generalise their reference points.

Shown first at Gasworks, London in 2008 and in New York in 2009, 'Panel 2' displayed historical background material about the 'Environment by Design' conference, such as a mounted monitor playing Eli Noyes and Claudia Weill's *IDCA 1970* (1970), a documentary about its contentious debates between designers and environmental activists.[3] It also included Beck's 24-page takeaway brochure *June 14–19 1970* (2008), which reproduced ephemera from the event: Baudrillard's manifesto, a schedule, conference minutes, orientation guide, list of participants, sponsors, programme events and the director's diary and notes, among other items. These contextualised Beck's work in the rest of 'Panel 2', which put forward an almost redundant visual pastiche of modernisms in metal sculptures, fabric wall panels and works on paper.

This second part of 'Panel 2' included five large and variably sized mirrored stainless steel cubes, comprising *Sculpture* (2008). Spread across the gallery floor, they evoked both the mass and general appearance of a Donald Judd, though aside from their mathemathical sequence-derived dimensions, contained none of Judd's signatures – such as serial ordering, spatial play or the tight dialectical tension between a whole and its parts. *Sculpture* instead was the symbolic stand-in for the point when Minimalism pivoted awkwardly from transcendental autonomy, as defined by modernism's leading critics, to the gangly contingencies of the 'here and now' so typified by Judd and subsequent postmodern practitioners. In the size, placement and objecthood of *Sculpture* – which evoked the shiny ordered

Martin Beck, Sculpture, 2008, stainless steel, five elements, detail. Installation view, 'Panel 2', Gasworks, London, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Gasworks

plinths of Judd's *100 Untitled Works in Mill Aluminum* (1982–86) – it offered an almost textbook example of theatricality as theorised by Michael Fried,[4] or of 'presence' as defined before him by Clement Greenberg,[5] though in greatly reduced form. Whittled down to the basic building blocks of Minimalist sculpture – essentially, a group of large objects occupying a space, almost like people – *Sculpture*, even down to its generalised title, withdraws any specific discursive framework and offers, instead, smooth, shiny objects, lacking even screws.



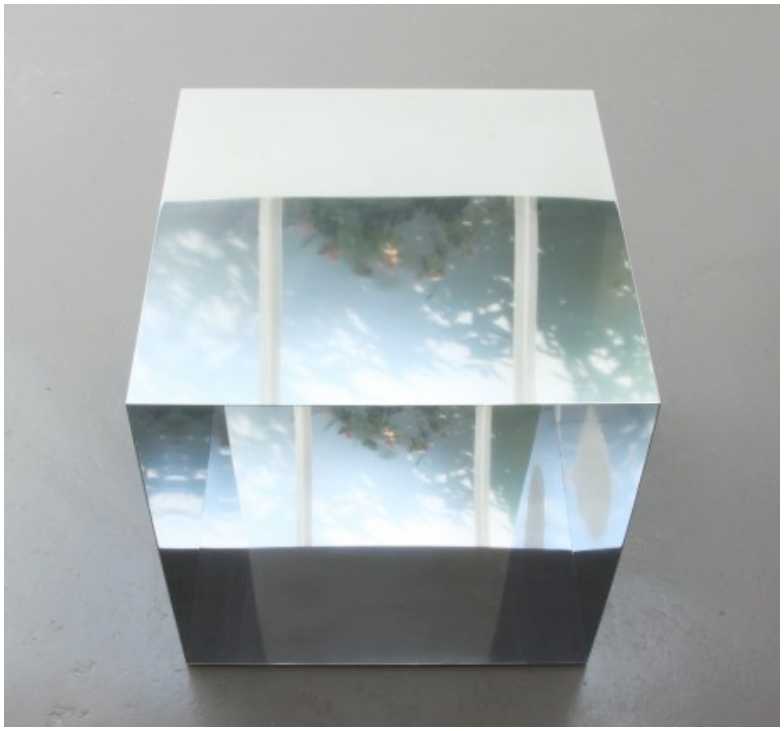
Martin Beck, Panel (red, yellow, black), 2008, stretched cloth, elevated from floor. Installation view, 'Panel 2', Gasworks, London, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Gasworks

The Minimalists' use of industrial, non-traditional media nodded to Constructivism and the historical avant-garde's conjoining of art and ideology to radical, revolutionary purpose; Beck gestures to this legacy with the other dominant visual flourish in the exhibition, *Panel (red, yellow, black)* (2008), a wide, freestanding fabric panel stretching across much of the space in vivid red, yellow where it overlapped an adjoining wall, and black on the reverse. Like *Sculpture*, its dimensions were dictated by a mathematical rule – here based on the structure and size of the Aspen leaf, something akin to the golden ratio employed by many Minimalist artists, including Judd and Sol LeWitt. The Aspen leaf also makes a gridded appearance in five framed wall prints, and in the video *The Environmental Witch-Hunt* (2008), in which sections of Baudrillard's manifesto are rehearsed and recited in the almost still, rustling lushness of a Colorado Aspen forest. Beck at once highlights and obscures the theorist's text, emphasising not only the actors – who read the writing haltingly – but also, and more prominently, the Aspen forest, as if the trees themselves had been forgotten in the ideological fray.

Martin Beck, *Untitled Square*, 2008, wall painting, and Eliot Noyes and Claudia Weill, *IDCA 70*, 1970, 16mm film transferred to DVD. Installation view, 'Panel 2', Gasworks, London, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Gasworks

Similarly, *Panel (red, yellow, black)* refers to its historical legacy – this time, of painting – while also confusing it. To some commentators in the recently published exhibition catalogue (*The Aspen Complex*, Sternberg Press, 2012) the work's large, blocky swathes of flat colour, in combination with a wide blue square painted on the wall behind the *IDCA 1970* monitor (*Untitled Square*, 2008), evoked Blinky Palermo's fabric paintings.6 Palermo's practice, in particular his fabric panels-as-space dividers and paint-covered walls, resuscitates Constructivist architectural work such as El Lissitzky's moving wall panels while denying the work any utopian aims; Palermo's incursions into public space evoke not collective action but a pictorial dead end. Beck's fabric panel evokes yet another avant-garde forebear: Aleksandr Rodchenko, whose triptych *Pure Red Colour*, *Pure Yellow Colour* and *Pure Blue Colour* (1921), with its tri-partite colour scheme and monochrome flatness, signalled to Rodchenko the end of painting. Although as we know painting never, in fact, ever actually ended; rather, if Palermo is any indication, it just went spatial – a tactic here reiterated by Beck's fabric panel, another ambiguous formal device. Through his exhibition design, it operates visually like a painting though functionally more like a wall, which cuts

Similarly, *Panel (red, yellow, black)* refers to its historical legacy – this time, of painting – while also confusing it. To some commentators in the recently published exhibition catalogue (*The Aspen Complex*, Sternberg Press, 2012) the work's large, blocky swathes of flat colour, in combination with a wide blue square painted on the wall behind the *IDCA 1970* monitor (*Untitled Square*, 2008), evoked Blinky Palermo's fabric paintings.[6] Palermo's practice, in particular his fabric panels-as-space dividers and paint-covered walls, resuscitates Constructivist architectural work such as El Lissitzky's moving wall panels while denying the work any utopian aims; Palermo's incursions into public space evoke not collective action but a pictorial dead end. Beck's fabric panel evokes yet another avant-garde forebear: Aleksandr Rodchenko, whose triptych *Pure Red Colour*, *Pure Yellow Colour* and *Pure Blue Colour* (1921), with its tri-partite colour scheme and monochrome flatness, signalled to Rodchenko the end of painting. Although as we know painting never, in fact, ever actually ended; rather, if Palermo is any indication, it just went spatial – a tactic here reiterated by Beck's fabric panel, another ambiguous formal device. Through his exhibition design, it operates visually like a painting though functionally more like a wall, which cuts off a dark space for the projection of *The Environmental Witch-Hunt*; its flat colours are so saturated they almost seem to float immaterially, transcending their own painterly associations.



Martin Beck, Sculpture, 2008, stainless steel, five elements, detail. Installation view, 'Panel 2', Gasworks, London, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Gasworks, London

Key to all of this is Beck's longstanding research interest in the way post-War exhibition design was influenced by advertising, product design and other commercial aims. In his essay 'Sovereignty and Control' (2007), published for his solo exhibition at Orchard gallery in New York, the Museum of Modern Art's 'Road to Victory' (1942) and 'Family of Man' (1955), two landmark exhibitions in exhibition design produced under the New York museum's director Alfred Barr, are unnamed yet seem to hang in the background of his theorisations. 'Road to Victory' was a propagandistic treatment of the US's role in World War II and its cultural superiority, and the latter an infamous, humanist treatment of the human race and its interconnectedness. 'Road to Victory' featured a highly manipulative narrative organised by Edward Steichen and designed by Herbert Bayer that featured dramatically different scales of photography, graphic foregrounding of didactic wall texts and a cohesive architectural design. 'Family of Man', meanwhile, touted a custom display system allowing for different levels, layers and scales of suspended photographs and wall partitions. Beck claims they both liberated the viewer's field of vision and administered it. The essay is prefaced by a quote from critical theorist Sheldon Wolin in which Wolin asserts that 'design is a professional euphemism for control over people and things, a euphemism that is, for power'.[7] Presenting historical movements and contexts as clean, coordinated, even graphic design cues, Beck's formalist designs illustrate – through multipurpose objects and architecture – how art, ideology and spectatorship are linked to the machinations of capital.

Writing on the neo-formalist trend characterising much of the work seen in Chelsea, the Lower East Side and US MFA programs, Geers wrote recently that 'neo-formalism exhumes and recombines formerly revolutionary models – Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Arte Povera, Minimalism, etc. – but in so doing fails to grasp new social and cultural configurations that call for different strategies altogether'.8 Geers speaks mainly of artists such as Gedi Sibony or Jacob Kassey, whom he claims recapitulate formalism for entirely commercial aims – the former a builder of delicate assemblages with debris and everyday materials, the latter a more painterly example who dips his canvases in reflective silver, an almost patrician recasting of the Minimalist monochrome, ready-made for the wall.

Reducing utopian art historical moments into a kind of flat, kitschy, almost corporate style, Beck's practice can be seen to mimic the after-effects of the neo-formalist commercialism denounced by Geers. Laying bare the appropriation and re-articulation of the avant-garde as a design language, infinitely reproducible – like stock photos of painting and sculpture, or endless versions of the monochrome tailor-made to complement the couch – he invokes impassioned political debates around art historical movements and their larger cultural contexts only to relegate them to a kind of modernist décor. Historical baggage is both evoked and buried in surface sheen, complementary to his exhibition design and somehow mutually at odds with it.

Martin Beck's work will up at 47 Canal in New York from 19 October to 18 November 2012.

Footnotes

1. Jean Baudrillard, 'The Environmental Witch-Hunt. Statement by the French Group. 1970' in *The Aspen Papers: Twenty Years of Design Theory from the International Design Conference in Aspen*, edited by Reyner Banham, New York: Praeger, 1974, pp.208–210, also available at http://pipeline.gasworks.org.uk/2008/07/02/the-environmental-witch-hunt/.↑

2. See David Geers, 'Neo-Modern', *October*, vol. 139, 2012, p.12. For another critical reading of contemporary trends in painting and sculpture, see David Joselit's essay on 'networked' painting, in D. Joselit, 'Painting Beside Itself', *October*, vol. 130, 2009, pp.125–134.↑

3. The exhibition was also shown the following year, in slightly different form, at the Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery at New York's Columbia University.↑

4. See M. Beck, *Aspen, op. cit.*, pp.8–44.↑

5. See Clement Greenberg, 'Recentness of Sculpture', in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (ed. Gregory Battcock), Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965, pp.183–185. Michael Fried develops the idea of sculptural presence further through the concept of 'theatricality' in M. Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp.148–172.↑

6. See M. Beck, *ibid*.↑

7. M. Beck, B. Horrigan and E. Pethick, *About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe* (Utrecht and London: Casco – Office for Art, Design and Theory and Four Corners Books, 2007), pp.45–55.↑

8. David Geers, 'Neo-Modern', *October*, vol. 139, 2012, p.12. For another critical reading of contemporary trends in painting and sculpture, see David Joselit's essay on 'networked' painting, in D. Joselit, 'Painting Beside Itself', *October*, vol. 130, 2009, pp.125–134.↑