

Left: Martin Beck, *An Organized System of Instructions*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 48 minutes 50 seconds.

Right: View of “Martin Beck: rumors and murmurs,” 2017. Photo: Hannes Böck.

BEST OF 2017

MARTIN BECK

Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna

BRANDEN W. JOSEPH

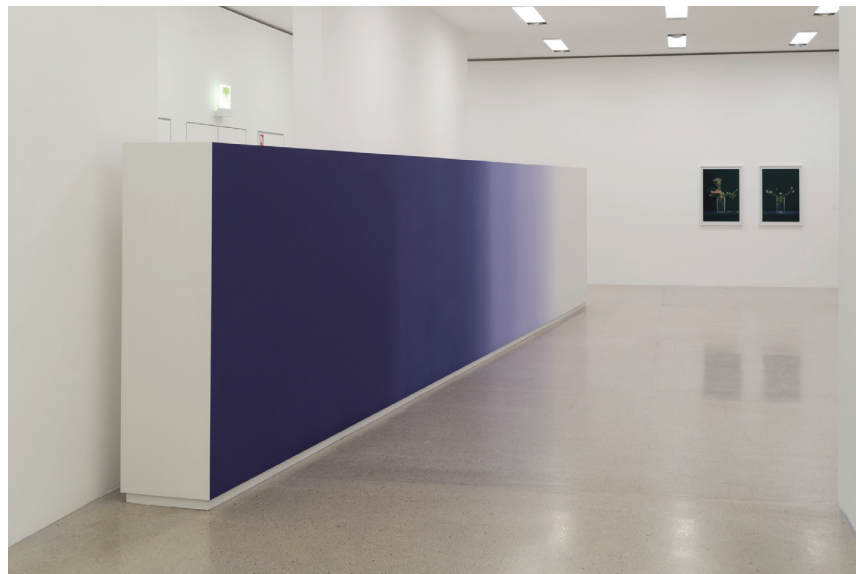
ENTERING MARTIN BECK'S EXHIBITION “rumors and murmurs,” curated by Matthias Michalka at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, you were implicitly presented with two routes. Taking a swift right before the almost imperceptibly subtle fabric wall *rumors and murmurs (Polygon)*, 2012/2017, and continuing into the smaller galleries behind the stairwell, one came upon what almost appeared to be a conventional midcareer retrospective. From there, one proceeded past *An Organized System of Instructions*, 2016, a videotaped lecture from Beck's project at Harvard University's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts in Cambridge, Massachusetts; toward *all that is left*, 2015/2017, a freestanding wall painted with a graduated color “fade,” first exhibited at 47 Canal in New York; and on to *About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe*, 2007, a video installation revolving around designer George Nelson's “Struc-Tube” display system. This trajectory highlighted the past decade of Beck's production, as well as his interest in (and skill with) techniques and technologies of display that relate his practice to the historical move, as Craig Owens put it, “from work to frame.”¹ Frequent visitors to the museum, which had recently highlighted the genealogy of institutional critique in the exhibition “to expose, to show, to demonstrate, to inform, to offer” (the title derives from Beck), would have been well prepared to assess and understand this aspect of the artist's development.

Visitors who traveled around the fabric wall in the other direction, by contrast,

encountered a more nobly proportioned gallery with a less linear or historically guideposted array of works that seemed to reflect and/or refract one another. Sometimes the effect was literal, as in the two stainless-steel floor pieces, both titled *183 x 113*, 2014, which mirrored their environments. “Folding reflected space into their surfaces,” as Julie Ault perceptively described a related series, “they disappear, reappear, and vanish, messing with spatial perception.”² More prevalent, however, were what might be called the temporal refractions produced by Beck's canny palimpsests of present and past. Image sequences glimpsed throughout the room—moon shot . . . geodesic dome . . . countercultural handbook . . . Canova sculpture—drew one's attention fitfully to years gone by, while a large vitrine displaying the boxed, loose-leaf catalogue of the show *as a work* forced one's notion of “retrospective” to encompass the smallest wrinkle in time.

A similar type of refraction, or deflection, befell the idea of the artist. This occurred not merely because Beck's work can sometimes appear almost authorless in its self-effacement behind the mask of graphic design (although his sensibility is always palpable), but also because the exhibition included a number of pieces by artistic peers, both historical and contemporary, from Sol LeWitt and Robert Rauschenberg to Ault, Danh Vo, James Benning, Louise Lawler, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Benning's contribution proved particularly apt: Attempting, but failing, to replicate one of Beck's early paintings, Benning's *After Beck 11 x 15 3/4*, 2013, took



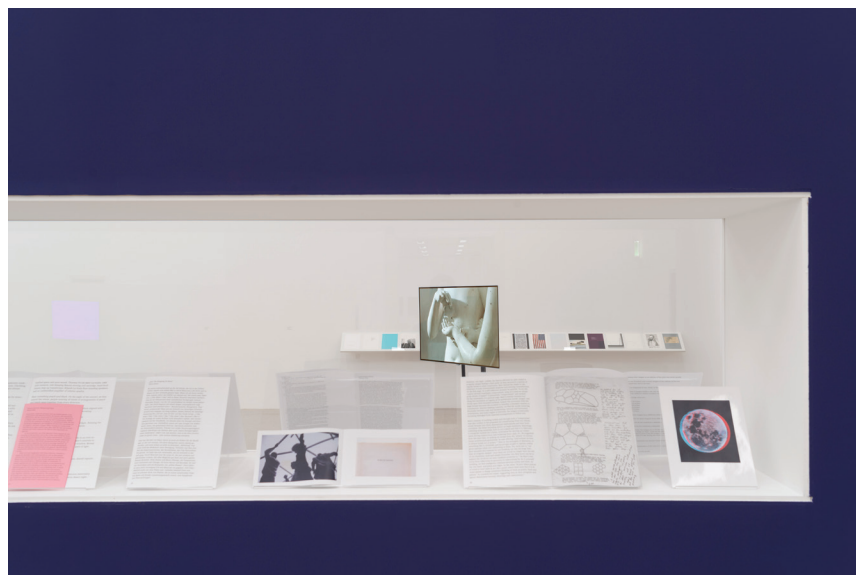


Above, left: Martin Beck, *all that is left*, 2015/2017, freestanding wall, paint. Installation view, 2017. Photo: Hannes Böck.

Above: Martin Beck, *Approx. 13 Hours*, 2014, record albums, 12 1/2 x 12 1/2 x 14 1/2".

Right: Martin Beck, *Last Night*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 13 hours 29 minutes. Installation view, 2017. Photo: Hannes Böck.

Left: View of "Martin Beck: rumors and murmurs," 2017. Photo: Hannes Böck.



Spatial arrangement, and not simply the artifacts arranged, forms an integral part of Beck's work.

the form of a nearly empty wooden board. Emptiness played a significant role in the exhibition; indeed, certain sight lines revealed nothing but blank walls. Such moments called attention to the fact that spatial arrangement, and not simply the artifacts arranged, forms an integral part of Beck's work, a fact further emphasized by the manner in which his depictions of Dutch flower arrangements ("Flowers," 2015) recurred throughout the exhibition.

Whichever way one circumnavigated the larger gallery, one eventually spiraled in toward the black box containing the video installation *Last Night*, 2016. The work initially aroused curiosity by means of the carefully calibrated amount of sound bleeding through the light lock, which gave the acoustic impression of a distant late-night (perhaps extending into late morning) party. An immense labor of love, *Last Night* re-creates the entire thirteen-and-a-half-hour DJ set from one of the final parties hosted at the Prince Street incarnation of the Loft, an early New York disco presided over by the legendary David Mancuso. Recorded off a vintage Thorens TD 125 MK II turntable (lovingly depicted in Beck's photographic series "Sleeping Beauty," 2015) and played through two period Klipsch KP-360 professional speakers and a custom-built bass center, the sound quality far surpassed the capabilities of most museums. A Conceptual art–like listing of the set appeared in

the artist's books *Last Night*, 2013, and *Last Night: Errata*, vols. 1–3, 2014–17, while a full collection of the vinyl LPs and twelve-inch singles, stacked to run perpendicularly away from the main gallery's wall like the bricks in Carl Andre's *Lever*, 1966, formed the sculpture *Approx. 13 Hours*, 2014. In the installation, the turntable's playing of each of the 118 tracks spun at the Loft on the evening of June 2, 1984, was documented via ten different camera angles, providing just enough visual variety to induce attentive listening over protracted periods of time. Functioning something like the exhibition's black hole, *Last Night* drew people in but did not allow for easy escape.

Including a comfortable couch, the installation resembled a typical club's chill-out room. Yet this mise-en-scène did not so much displace the sterility of the rest of the museum as dialectically heighten it. In so doing, *Last Night* proved true to the insights and operation of Dan Graham's seminal video *Rock My Religion*, 1983–84. Often viewed as an early infiltration of popular music into the realm of art (paving the way for the recent vogue of popular-music concerts at art institutions), *Rock My Religion* actually relates to the gallery as what Smithson termed a "non-site," the "site" for which is not the abandoned quarries or railroad tracks of Smithson's New Jersey (although Graham's *Homes for America*, 1966–67,

clearly revealed his intimacy with such suburban landscapes), but rather the rock club, with its communal ethos. "If art was only business," Graham noted of the aftermath of Pop, "then rock expressed that transcendental, religious yearning for communal, nonmarket aesthetic feeling that official art denied."³

The question "Is there a form to shared togetherness?" guided Beck's investigation into both the communes of the 1960s (abundantly featured throughout the exhibition) and the disco of the '70s and early '80s, two cultural poles most often perceived as in stark opposition to each other.⁴ (This dichotomy is similar to that between the counterculture of the '60s and the management culture of the following decades, which Beck's work also deconstructs.) In attempting to "trace and project the connective tissue that constitutes togetherness," Beck effectively placed the ideals associated with his site, the Loft, into a productive tension with those of the museum.⁵ "The Loft was not about celebrity," writes Vince Aletti of these ideals; "it was about community." "The Loft community also came to be known," Beck further emphasizes, "for its diversity of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, style, and dance capability."⁶ That both remarks can be read as pointed references to the contemporary art world reveals Beck's continued engagement with the legacy of institutional critique.

In *Last Night*, disco—habitually regarded as one of the most ecstatically present-focused musical genres—receives a historical shadow not cast in stereotypical bell-bottoms and beads. It suggests the hazy realm of personal memory (as in, "What happened last night?"), while reflecting on the irrevocable nature of a past (*the last night*) that cannot be entirely recaptured even by those who indubitably *were* there. Given the fact that Mancuso passed away the year the video was completed, the work also cannot help but acquire certain memorial resonances. Yet if *Last Night* is powerfully haunted by the community associated with the Loft, it also implicitly, and optimistically, posits an image of artistic practice as similarly nurtured by communal interactions, such as those of Beck's friends and associates, whose work infiltrates the exhibition. And while *Last Night* successfully avoids becoming a mere nostalgia trip, the inescapable sense of loss or longing it evokes nonetheless bespeaks something of the fragility of community formations, which, like flowers, require care, arrangement, and replenishing, lest they wither and die. □

Beck curated a concurrent exhibition of works from MUMOK's collection titled "watching sugar dissolve in a glass of water," on view through January 14, 2018.

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NOTES

1. Craig Owens, "From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author'?" in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 122–39.
2. Julie Ault, "The Conjunction of Martin Beck," in *Martin Beck: rumors and murmurs*, ed. Matthias Michalka, exh. cat. (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2017), 14.
3. Dan Graham, "Rock My Religion," in *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects, 1965–1990*, ed. Brian Wallis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 94.
4. Martin Beck, "History and Love, Pleasure and Time," in *rumors and murmurs*, 39.
5. Beck, "History and Love," 39.
6. Vince Aletti, "'Ain't No Stopping Us Now,'" in *rumors and murmurs*, 16; Beck, "History and Love," 42.