

# ARTnews

## Martin Beck's 'Environments' Art Summons New Age Sights and Sounds

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If you like the idea of zoning out and luxuriating in the sounds of a “Psychologically Ultimate Seashore” or an “Optimum Aviary,” you are not alone—and in fact are part of a lineage that traces back to a series of mind-altering recordings debuted in 1969. The 11 volumes of *Environments*, a series of LPs featuring long-duration selections of nature sounds and aural abstractions like computer-generated bell tones, figure prominently in the history of ambient music and New Age culture. Now, more than five decades later, they serve as the subject of a new body of artwork by Martin Beck.

The original records are both obscure and ubiquitous, secreted away in record bins and hiding in plain sight. “When I first started buying them, they were \$1.50 or \$2,” Beck said. “Now they have gone up a little, probably because I bought so many.”

Beck, whose *Environments*-inspired works are the subject of a show at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut (through October 5), first learned about the series at a talk by a friend at Columbia University—“an architecture theorist preparing a book on psychedelics and space in the ’70s,” he said. “The records were a footnote, and after I looked them up and started reading the liner notes and finding more information, it became clear that they were a treasure.”

*Environments* was more than a footnote in its prime, garnering wide-eyed (and -eared) press attention—*Newsweek* called the first volume a “sonic tonic”—and landing a distribution deal with Atlantic Records. But it was a curious enterprise from the start, helmed by an impresario named Irv Teibel who came across as a mix of a utopian visionary and a hubristic pitchman with a flair for extravagant claims. An advertisement for *Environments* said the records could “replace aspirin, tranquilizers, other drugs,” and so-called “listening test responses” touted as testimonials on the LP sleeves include “a gentle, subtle trip,” “fantastic for making love,” “reading speed doubled,” “the speakers seemed to be dripping,” and “the alligators are star quality!” among many, many more.



The records, along with the promotional materials that were used to position them as lifestyle accessories and productivity aids, figure into Beck's artistic exegesis, which comprises everything from wall works and video to the overall design and vibe of the show. The first room of the exhibition greets visitors with album covers cropped into isolated imagery (a sensuous face, a swamp, lightning) via white overmats situated within frames, as well as a series of large, intricate drawings of ferns overlaid with text ("relaxation spas, hypnotism clinics, mental institutions..."). A separate room is devoted to a video work—soundtracked by Environments recordings—that traces subtle scenes of outside and inside over the course of a day in Joshua Tree, California, where Beck spends some of his time. (Born in Austria, he is otherwise based in New York and Vienna.)

Beck said he approached Environments via two lines of thinking. "One was how they literally provide a tool to map one space on top of another, to turn architectural space into a natural space. It's almost like a conflict of existence: Where are you? Are you at home? Or are you out in nature?"

He continued: "That related to an interest in the atmospheres of spaces, and particularly the atmospheres of exhibitions. What is the atmosphere when you walk into an exhibition? Is it an arrangement of objects that doesn't affect the space, or is it something that actually does something to you as a physical body, more than just directing you from one object to another? Does it make you feel comfortable? Does it make you feel anxious? Does it make you feel focused? Does it disorient you, or orient you?"



Beck sensed a connection between the way that “something simply acoustic would alter your relationship to space without you actually seeing anything” and the lurking “paradox around what kind of subject these records—or the claims made in the liner notes and the PR language behind them—propose. On one hand, there’s an explicit functional purpose behind them: to feel at ease so you can read faster, have better sex, focus better. What is the purpose of that? The purpose is that you become a more productive subject in a capitalist economy. You feel better, which is good. But you feel better for a purpose, which is exploitative. It’s a measure of control while you give a measure of well-being.”

The invocation of well-being signals the steady rise of wellness culture that, decades later, continues to be healthy and restorative but also oppressive and more than a little bit creepy. Beck noted having come across mention of the long-obscure *Environments* in recent scholarly books including *Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control* by Mack Hagood and *Turn On, Tune In, Drift Off: Ambient Music’s Psychedelic Past* by Victor Szabo. And it turns out that *Environments* has even been reincarnated by way of a newly conceived 12th volume imagined by Machine Listening, an artist-research collective in Australia. Taking the form of a sound installation as well as a vinyl LP released in June, *Environments 12* involves pointed research into the series’ origins and speculative extrapolations on its aims articulated in part by generative voice clones—all in the service of what Machine Listening describes as “a collection of songs and fables recovered from the ruins of a future history.”



For his part, Beck is more situated in the formative time when the New Age dawned, for better and worse. “Back in the late ’60s and early ’70s, these were the first products of a kind,” he said of the *Environments* records’ aspirations toward improvement, fulfillment, and anything else they might have to offer. “Now, of course, there are industries devoted to that, and everyone uses tools to try to function better in different situations.”

Ironically, the sounds of *Environments* brought Beck to a new state as an artist whose conceptual inclinations gave way to more elemental gestures. Around when he first delved into the series, “I started thinking that almost everything I’ve done as an artist over the last 20 years didn’t involve my hand, and I got curious about what I could still do to apply an artistic skill,” he said. So he began making the kind of drawings that figure in the Aldrich exhibition—and also lend the show its title: “... for hours, days, or weeks at a time.”

“For years I’ve been collecting and shooting images of ferns with a thought that someday I would do something with them, even if I didn’t quite know what,” Beck said. “I started making drawings of them and was really taken by the idea that I don’t need much to do that. I just need a pencil and a piece of paper. There’s no production involved. I don’t need any other people. I can just do it at the kitchen table.”

As he drew, he started incorporating poetic phrases pulled from text that Irv Teibel had compiled for the sake of *Environments*-related advertising copy—words along the lines of “concentration noise masking creativity / noise masking relaxation sleep / isolation noise masking reading / social interaction relaxation sleep.”

“The first few attempts were small-scale and didn’t work at all—they were just boring,” Beck said of his initial drawings. “At some point I thought: why not try changing the scale? And that ended up really working out. They have a bodily scale to them that gets into the absurdity of doing this with just a pencil, spending weeks upon weeks making drawings. I couldn’t draw for more than three or four hours a day because my fingers started to hurt. But it was a nice task to have at the end of the day, to just do a few hours. Then, over the course of two or three months, these drawings started to emerge.”