



Martin Beck

in conversation with Ricky Ruihong Li

MB — Martin
Beck

RRL — Ricky
Ruihong Li

Martin Beck is an artist based in New York and Vienna. His work transposes rigorous research on architecture, design, music, and popular culture into installation, video, photography, writing, sculpture, and drawing. I was fascinated by his *Last Night* (2016), which draws on the seminal New York dance party known as the Loft. Taking the form of a book and video installation, the project revisits the exact sequence of records played by its musical host, David Mancuso, on June 2, 1984, at one of the final parties at the Loft's 99 Prince Street location. It opens up a channel of communion across time where memories, desires, and mediums enmesh. *Last Night* will be installed at [MoMA](#) on June 2, 2024, marking 40 years since the evening it commemorates.

In a conversation that traverses from dance music to graphic design and from George Nelson to ecology, we delve into the notion of citation, the

institution of art, and the emblematic treatment of history. This exchange traces the conceptual and methodological contours of Beck's wide-ranging body of work. The interview was conducted in July 2023.

RRL What led you to make *Last Night*?

MB *Last Night* has been a long time coming. For years, I have been collecting dance music and making playlists. While sorting some Loft classics—songs regularly played at the Loft—in my collection in the late 2000s, I stumbled over fragmented lists of songs played by David Mancuso. Mancuso started to host informal invite-only dance parties in his home, a loft at 647 Broadway, already in the late 1960s. The official “date of birth” for the Loft parties is February 14, 1970, Valentine's Day; the invite featured an image of Salvador Dalí's painting *The Persistence of Memory* and the phrase “Love Saves the Day.” The invitation-only Loft parties quickly became an influential template, after which many other disco-era clubs and parties tried to model themselves. The song lists that I found turned out to be from one night at the Loft's second location at 99

Prince Street. I started piecing the fragments together into a playlist, just for the enjoyment of listening and trying to understand how Mancuso sequenced the records. He was known for always playing complete songs, no matter their length. He didn't mix records but, over the course of a whole night, was sequencing songs into narrative journeys, going through peaks and valleys.

RRL When did you first learn about the Loft?

MB In the mid-1990s, I briefly lived in a building next to the Dance Tracks record store on East 3rd Street, where they sold bootleg copies of Loft classics. I didn't know about the Loft then, but they piqued my interest. Around that time, I read (either in the *Village Voice* or the *New York Times*) about the closing of Mancuso's space on Avenue B. I loved the few Loft songs I was aware of, but only after reading Tim Lawrence's 2003 book *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture 1970–1979* did I start to understand the larger history.

For years, my Loft interest was a private passion, not connected to anything I did artwise. The shift happened once I realized that the playlist fragments I was listening to came from one of the final parties at

the 99 Prince Street location of the Loft—the time period at Prince Street is considered the Loft’s heyday. The date was June 2, 1984, and I understood that the playlist could potentially document a pivotal moment in the history of New York City dance culture. 1984, of course, was also the year when music went from analog to digital, when SoHo’s real estate fortunes turned, and when the dramatic impact of AIDS on New York’s downtown culture escalated, never mind George Orwell.

RRL How many records are included in *Last Night*? How did you source them?

MB *Last Night* documents 119 songs, played from a little less than 100 records—some songs played twice, and, towards the end of the party, Mancuso played multiple songs from albums. When I started working on this, Discogs, an online marketplace for used and new records and CDs, had taken off internationally, and it was possible to find most of the records. Without that resource, relying on brick-and-mortar stores alone, assembling a complete set of the records would have been pretty much impossible.

RRL Is *Last Night* a musical project?

MB Music is one of its foundations, but *Last Night* is, first of all, a visual project, its heart being the presentation of the data in the book and watching the records spin in the video installation. *Last Night* is also a project about memory, about presence and absence. It speaks about a specific history and how it can or cannot be imaged. And, *Last Night* is a project about communities, past and present, about gathering to listen to and enjoy music collectively.

RRL What was the thought process behind using video as a format for *Last Night*?

MB My first idea was to make a film showing someone playing the records at home, but I was unsure if anyone other than myself would be interested in watching records spin for over thirteen hours. Instead, I decided to do a book and meticulously document the songs and their production data. I wanted the book to be conceptually rigorous with a simple design and generic typography, but it should be generous visually and conceptually seductive. After the book came out, I mentioned the film idea to a close friend, the filmmaker James Benning, who thought the film was a great idea and urged me to pursue it. He even offered to help by doing the camera work. That prompt made me realize

that, maybe, others might be interested in such a film.

RRL What does showing *Last Night* within the gallery, a space that foregrounds the object nature of art, do to dance music culture? What does it mean to make visual a culture defined by its ephemerality?

MB It's a tricky thing to do for several reasons. Ephemerality is one challenge; another is the ethics of appropriation; and a third is accuracy. Any attempt to capture the mood or experience of the party after the fact is probably bound to fail. But what's a fact is the sequence of records. The book documents that sequence in painstaking detail. The video shows the records playing on a turntable in a domestic setting, thereby distancing the process of listening from the actual party. The video's viewer might imagine what happened at that particular 1984 party, creating her own images, or a specific song might conjure up a memory. The project does not *represent* or *portray* the party; it focuses on what happens after. It questions the kind of relationships we can have and build with a moment in history. Depending on the background from which we enter the video's presentational space, very different experiences can be had—experiences

of remembering, of discovery, of loss,
of joy.

RRL *Last Night* struck me as waking up from a party the morning after with bleary eyes. Dance music is playing but has a calming, sobering, and even silent quality. The historical distance from the actual event lends itself to a charming afterglow, further accentuated by carefully angled shots locking at a Thorens turntable spinning alone, devoid of the host, dancers, or balloons—no crazy dance moves. *Last Night* is marked by an absence.

MB Absence is key. *Last Night* is a project about the desire for something that no longer exists.

RRL Let's zoom out a bit. How do you understand the cultural prominence of the DJ's role that, to some extent, the Loft brought into existence?

MB David Mancuso never considered himself a DJ. He avoided the term. Instead, he understood himself as what he called a musical host. His role at the Loft went beyond that of a record spinner. With the Loft, he created a whole environment, music being only one part of it. There is a big difference between a club and what happens at the Loft, the first being a

business wanting to make money by selling alcohol, the latter a community endeavor that is run with no profit intention. Contemporary DJ culture revolves around a star system with dancers mostly facing the DJ, like at a rock concert. At the Loft, the musical host is not a celebrity but disappears into the background as the dancers dance with each other.

RRL As you said, one aspect of the Loft that keeps fascinating people—and largely drove the making of *Last Night*—is the sequence of records physically maneuvered by an experienced, discerning musical host. What do you think has changed since digital technology, in large part, mediated how music is distributed, produced, and consumed—and the rise of playlists?

MB That's too big a question to answer here, especially the production/consumption part. The term "playlist" might be tied to digital technology, but its idea predates the digital era. In the 1970s, it was the cassette tape that one made for oneself or a loved one. Making tapes was something I grew up doing—assembling songs from friends' records, taping from the radio, etc. In the 1990s, my partner Julie and I still made mixtapes, putting together songs

from CDs, which we played in the car. Making playlists for friends and loved ones is about sharing passions; it is a form of communication.

RRL You still make playlists.

MB Yes, I do. Two or three times a year, I put together songs that I have come across and like, new and old. I then mix them into a playlist, give it a title, design a cover with a tracklist and a quote, and then send it to friends. One of the most recent ones, “unconfirmed entry,” includes jazz, soul, gospel, house, and ambient tracks ranging from the 1960s to today, and its cover shows a photo I took of a lush gold-thread embroidery. The quote is from something I was reading at the time. The playlists are usually around two hours long; the songs sequenced to gently build into a high-energy moment, then slow down again, getting almost ethereal. I also try to connect the songs for the beginning and end so the playlist can smoothly loop into itself. Once done, I email the recipients a download link to an mp3 music file and the PDF cover. I like this informal sharing of passions. It’s a form of gift-giving—a gesture that occurs spontaneously, without a specific occasion.

RRL Your work often addresses countercultural histories going back to the 1960s and '70s in an Anglo-American context. What is your relationship to it?

MB I sometimes joked that, where I grew up in the Austrian Alps, the 1960s arrived in the mid-1970s. As teenagers at the time, my brother and I were just discovering 1960s rock bands. Music has often been an entry point into the cultures that generated those sounds. Musical cultures frequently envision different worlds and ways of being; they imagine futures that challenge whatever the mainstream is at a particular time. Maybe that's what triggered my interest.

RRL When did you first visit New York?

MB I spent a few months here in 1989 and was intrigued by the art and music I encountered. Back then, Vienna, where I went to art school and was living at the time, was a city at the end of Western Europe where a lot of art and music information wasn't easily accessible, making New York very exciting for me. Between 1990 and '93, I kept coming back for extended stays, and in 1994, I was able to rent a reasonably priced apartment, thinking I would stay for a year and see how I

got by. I'm still here now.

RRL What aspect of 1990s New York did you find most intriguing?

MB New York had a vibrant “neo-conceptual” art scene at the time. Studying art in Vienna in the 1980s, one had two choices: become either an expressionist painter or an abstract painter. Neither option was particularly attractive to me, even though I did paint then. In New York, being exposed to different ways of making art, seeing lots of shows, having access to books, etc., was consequential for me. I was particularly fascinated by the approach to exhibitions I encountered at Colin de Land’s American Fine Arts, Co. and across the street, Pat Hearn Gallery, and some of the non-profits.

RRL How did American Fine Arts and Pat Hearn’s gallery influence your thinking?

MB It wasn’t so much individual artists’ work but the breadth of practices shown in these spaces that fascinated me and made me rethink what I was doing as an artist.

RRL You often reference design and its history as sources for your work, such as in *Installation*, an exhibition you co-

authored with Julie Ault. How has design become a subject of your artistic practice?

MB When studying art, I was often drawn to design and architecture history courses. At the time, I didn't have a way to integrate those interests into my practice—I was still painting then. Soon after graduating, I quit painting and began figuring out a different kind of practice that could include those interests, as well as my interest in music. Julie and I met in 1994 and quickly realized that we share many interests, including an interest in design. We started working together around 1997, and our early collaborations focused on design, architecture, and display issues. This period was also an experience of learning for me. Julie was more experienced as an artist, and witnessing how she worked has been inspirational for me. We helped each other with projects, and our exchange about design and exhibition-making, and their histories was formative.

RRL What aspect of design in the '90s interests you?

MB Around 1994, I was looking very closely into the consequences of digital production in graphic design and

typography. A new aesthetic emerged from the availability of digital technology, with a central feature being slick digital surfaces referencing countercultures such as punk, cut-and-paste, and DIY aesthetics. One poignant example was Trixie, a typeface by Dutch graphic designers Erik van Blokland and Just van Rossum. It simulates old typewriter script, including its sound when writing. I thought of that as a perfect McLuhan-esque moment, a new medium mimicking the aesthetic of an old one.

I collected publications about radical design and architecture of the 1960s and early 1970s—Superstudio, Archizoom, Archigram, Yona Friedman, Victor Papanek, etc. Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau's *S,M,L,XL* came out around that time and was an inspiration, design- and content-wise. I was also intrigued by *Any* magazine, loving the design by Michael Rock, and I collected all the early *Emigre* issues, which were edited and designed by Rudy Vanderlans and Zuzana Licko.

RRL What did this interest in design lead you to?

MB Against this background, I started connecting my interests in music and countercultural histories with my interests in design and emerging and

newly published discourses in architecture and cultural studies. I was reading Beatriz Colomina, Mark Wigley, and Anthony Vidler's books and essays, and, concurrently, I was digging into Birmingham School cultural studies. I was also drawn to Frederick Jameson's writings, which offered deep insights into the relationship between culture, technology, and the social.

RRL How did this theoretical affinity inform your artistic interests in design?

MB My interest in design is less an interest in designed objects than a desire to understand the way the social realm is constructed through design. I'm interested in how design conditions us and how it enables us to interact with each other. All that reading provided me with a deeper understanding of the political and technological aspects of this relation.

RRL In *Installation*, the George Nelson-designed Struc-Tube, an industrially manufactured display system from the late 1940s, was one subject of your inquiry. Why are you interested in this particular object?

MB This interest goes back to an image I encountered in a book by Stanley Abercrombie in 1995, *George Nelson:*

The Design of Modern Design. The image showed the exhibit system with a display panel featuring the phrase “the artist in social communication.” That was enough to trigger a deeper interest as it brought together abstraction (as embodied by the orthogonal exhibit system), economy (as implicit by the no-tool, no-expertise method of assembly), and communication (as an agent in constructing the social as the way we connect, assemble, and exchange according to a system of rules).

RRL In one interview, you point out that the way design is invoked by visual art museums often focuses on its formal, visual property and obfuscates its historical contexts. Can you expand on this point?

MB In the second half of the 1990s, making artwork that copied the look of certain period designs seemed to become fashionable. For example, the early works of Andrea Zittel’s living environments and sculptures liberally took inspiration from Italian radical designs of the 1960s and ’70s without ever referencing their political background. Jorge Pardo turned Alvar Aalto’s strive for a human, ethical, and democratic architecture into must-have decoration for wealthy collectors. The argument I made back then (also

in an essay I wrote titled “On Formatting History”) was that, in some of these works, design is primarily understood as a visual surface and that the artworks, thereby, obstruct or obscure design’s social, political, and cultural contexts.

RRL So is the way design’s history is mostly constructed by institutions of art, focusing on visuality and a timeline of forms. Your work looks at design differently.

MB I was preoccupied with developing and am still invested in an artistic method that allows for contextualizing the material I am drawing from, making visible the conditions that generate the forms and visuality of my reference points.

RRL How do you approach history as an artist?

MB I am interested in the idea of the emblematic: to zero in on single, sometimes small details within a broader cultural milieu and, from there, to develop new, contemporary forms that speak about the context I draw from and how it impacts the way we look at the world today.

 I am interested in historical shifts and how they can be represented by

zooming in on a brief moment in time, a detail of an artifact, or a discursive hook from which threads are drawn out into the larger culture. The threads allow me to tie different narratives, visual strategies, and media together. From there, I can build exhibitions as environments that contain multiple layers of meaning, extending in more than one direction simultaneously.

RRL Referencing design's histories and cultures seems to be a continual focus in your method. Your exhibition at Gasworks in London in 2008, *Panel 2—“Nothing better than a touch of ecology and catastrophe to unite the social classes...”* for instance, cites, directly in its title, a speech delivered at the 1970 International Design Conference at Aspen.

MB In my work with design history, I aspire to not simply exploit it and not treat design (or other) history as a visual treasure chest. If I draw from a particular field, I want to give something back. It has to be an exchange. *Panel 2*, for example, zoomed in on a little-known episode from the 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado. Part of the project was a book, for which I commissioned the design historian Alice Twemlow to dig deep into that situation. I also commissioned Felicity

Scott to write about the so-called Aspen Movie Map, one of the threads I followed in the project. Both essays offer new and substantial research into previously underdocumented territory—research I would not have been able to do myself. Also included was a 1970 short film by Eli Noyes about the conference events, which started to circulate again due to its exposure in the exhibition and book.

It's compelling when projects give new life to the materials and topics one engages in.

RRL "The artist in social communication!"

MB [Laughs.]

RRL Your 2007 exhibition at Orchard, *The details are not the details*, charts the contour of what you called the "exhibitory apparatus" of the 1950s and 60s, to which Nelson's Struc-Tube serves as what you would call an emblem. What other emblems did you employ in that exhibition?

MB The main element of the exhibition was the projection of a short video loop showing the assembly and disassembly of the Struc-Tube system, which I had reconstructed from archival documents. I also included a so-called animal locomotion plate by Eadweard

Muybridge, which shows, in stages, the movement of a male body against a gridded background. A wall-mounted vitrine housed the loose elements of *Aspen* magazine's minimalism issue, standing in for yet another form of a "portable exhibition" and connecting the grid fascination of some minimalist practices with the grid logic of portable exhibit systems.

RRL What do you mean by exhibition as an apparatus?

MB I would define the exhibition apparatus as the totality of means employed. I have always understood the exhibition as a medium.

RRL In *Program*, a site-specific project at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, you propose a series of interventions in the institution at programmatic levels, such as gallery amenities, public interfaces, attendance tracking documents, photo archives, and so on. How did *Program* come about?

MB James Voorhies, then director of the Carpenter Center, reached out to me, asking if I, as an artist, would be interested in designing the spatial environment for a coffee bar. At first, I was a bit bewildered by the request,

but we started discussing what he had in mind. Quickly, the conversation turned from a coffee bar to an engagement with the institution that he was in the process of repositioning.

RRL How did you become interested in Harvard's Carpenter Center as an institution?

MB On my first visit, I toured the whole building, where, among other things, I encountered a stack of twenty-something boxes filled with documents, papers, and slides. The boxes were the Carpenter Center "archive." They had been pushed to the side in the back of an office. Very few people had looked closely at the material or even considered it to be a proper archive.

On that visit, I also learned that, over the years, several artists have engaged with the Carpenter Center, mostly focusing on Le Corbusier's architecture, either favorably or critically. I didn't want to go down that road, as it seemed like a tired theme. But I became interested in a different aspect of the Center's history: I wanted to understand how such an institution that attempts to fuse exhibition, education, and representation comes about—not architecturally, but conceptually.

RRL *Program* offers a collection of institutional X-rays. What is your relation with the institution in the making of *Program*? How do you view it in the backdrop of a lineage of art practices associated with institutional critique that emerged in the late 1960s in New York?

MB In *Program*, I did not see myself as a critic of the institution. Instead, I wanted to enter into a dialogue. Many artists already in the 1990s understood that engaging an institution is not an us-versus-them scenario. If I am interested in the institution and the institution is interested in me, we both fulfill functions for each other. That's a different approach and way of understanding one's embeddedness in a system of investigation, mutual benefit, and use.

The dynamic of *Program* was one of continuous exchange between James and me. He articulated the challenges he was facing, and I reciprocated—and vice versa. It was a project resulting from many exchanges and conversations. I wouldn't say it was a collaborative project, but it was definitely a dialogic one.

RRL What kind of dialogues took place behind *Program*?

MB

For instance, for the first of ten episodes constituting the project, I proposed to alter the exterior of a climatized exhibition cube built into the Center's third floor in the late 1990s. This intervention would change the material atmosphere in the area, reorient the space around the cube, and make the space more functional for exhibition purposes. Such a modification was not something a regular exhibition budget could finance. James saw the potential of the intervention for his larger project of renewal. He started to think alongside me but focused on the administrative processes within the university. James recognized that Harvard's budget for building infrastructure could accommodate the alteration and framed "my episode" as a (renovation) building project. Over the two years that *Program* unfolded, there were other instances where he translated my artistic engagement and ideas into the world of administration and thereby allowed for things to happen that regular budgets or production routines didn't accommodate. He called it "institution building."

RRL Would you remake *Program* at a different institution?

MB

I don't think *Program* is transferable to

a different situation. It's not only that the Carpenter Center is a unique institution with a particular history, but it was also the convergence of James' and my interests at a particular moment in the institution's existence and the unfettered access to the archive material. Halfway through the project and probably alerted by it, Harvard University Archives requested they store and process the boxes, making access a bit cumbersome.

RRL Let's talk about your PDF diaries. You have a habit of making a PDF every day. Can you speak to how this became part of your practice?

MB I started making daily single-page letter-sized PDFs on my computer a little more than ten years ago. At the time, I was traveling a lot, and, not being a studio artist to begin with, I realized I had little record of what I was doing between projects or when away. I have never been a diary writer or notebook keeper, but I felt like I wanted some kind of record of where my mind was at in those periods. At first, I was doing it only occasionally. But soon enough, it became a routine. I became more disciplined and did it daily, assembling images, graphics, quotes, lists, a few sentences, etc. When I had nothing meaningful to put down, I doodled around, connecting

dots on a grid. In 2016, I decided to keep the routine up for the whole calendar year to see what would happen. Toward the end, some entries started to look repetitive, so I stopped once the year was over. But after a more extended break, I started again, and since then, I have kept doing it for a few weeks or months at a time.

RRL How many of them do you have?

MB There must be at least a thousand single-page documents by now, maybe even more.

RRL Have you shown them?

MB I have printed them out and presented some on a horizontal wall shelf or in a frame, arranged in a grid akin to a monthly calendar. I wanted them to inhabit the formats we associate with measuring time.

RRL Besides your extensive exhibition projects, do you make individual artworks?

MB Yes. Video works, sculptures, photographs, drawings, etc. that, in most cases, are integral parts of the exhibition projects. I don't have a defined medium. When making objects, I aim to use a medium and a form that

is responsive to the content of what I am engaging with. Hence, the artworks don't have a "signature style."

RRL Can you tell us more?

MB *Last Night*, for example, includes the book, the video work, but also a sculpture made of a collection of records and a silkscreen print showing a list of song titles. For a new project I am currently working on, I have, among other things, been making some large-scale drawings that I think of as fully compostable.

RRL What do you mean by your drawings being compostable?

MB The drawings are just paper and graphite. If one loses interest in them, they can safely disintegrate, be recycled, or become part of the soil again—no toxic trace left.

I mentioned this to a friend, who commented that quite a few of my works repurposed existing cultural objects. For example, one element of the *Last Night* project is a stack of second-hand records. These records—collected, assembled, and displayed—constitute an artwork. Another work from a few years ago is a display of all the books published in the early 1970s on rural commune living.

Recycling as citing...

RRL

MB

Right. Wouldn't it be remarkable for the ethics of art production that one has to let go (or let disintegrate) a previous artwork before making a new one? What if putting a new object into the world can only be done at the expense of an old object?

RRL

You make me think of a circular economy for culture or how we sustain it.

MB

The idea of circularity has been on my mind when thinking about art making. What would ecological ethics be within artistic production? I find it sobering to think about this question when seeing the high production level often encountered in galleries and museums. I wonder what we are going to do with all that stuff in thirty, fifty, a hundred years.

RRL

Culture seems to always be sustained by referential practices, be they critical, satirical, or in-homage. By definition, artists, as culture's agents, recycle.

MB

How does culture renew itself through a cycle of appropriation, recodification, and recontextualization? I am still trying to

make sense of the connection between ecology, recycling, and the notion of citation within art production. I don't have a succinct answer to it, but it's something that I think about quite often.

© November
2024

November is a
nonprofit 501(c)(3)
organization and a
New York State
registered charity.



Twitter
Instagram

Email Address Subscribe

Index About
Volumes Support Us
Privacy