Portrait. Martin Beck

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

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Martin Beck, Panel 1 - Social Abstraction, 2008

C-Print © Martin Beck

- 1 Following his studies in Austria, Martin Beck (born in 1963 in Bludenz), quickly moves from a the specificity of a medium towards a more intermediary practice grounded in

contextual art. Currently based in New York, Beck chooses to confront the makings of history and the archive. He continually interrogates singular moments within our visual culture with the purpose of reflecting on their social and political dimensions with a *critical perspective*. His investigations are manifested through a series of devices, at times demanding, often subtle; his last book, *The Aspen Complex*, is a prime example¹.

- 2 Several historical figures linked to the field of design and architecture (Herbert Bayer, George Nelson, Charles and Ray Eames, Charles Jencks², Reyner Banham) are frequently called upon in order to bring up the ambiguities that they face. The artist has become well aware of the fact that the partition between modernism and post-modernism proves to be placed within a binary over-simplification that masks a certain number of pitfalls that need to be closely examined. Thanks to a few remaining photographs from an exhibition, Beck recreates in metal, for example, a modular structure developed by George Nelson in 1948. This work is integrated into Beck's exhibitions, and thus brings to light the possibilities of *display* as a social tool of ordering and arranging objects and the people who use them, as a kind of *social abstraction*. *StrucTube* bears elements of communication or can become the actual subject of the video. "The modular exhibit system and its emblem, the connector joint, are at the heart of a paradox that continuously haunts modernity's utopias: they liberate as they regulate and they regulate as they liberate"³ (Beck). An intermittent contributor to the reviews *Springerin* (Vienna) and *Texte zur Kunst* (Berlin), Beck has also written several texts as part of collective works⁴. Clearly influenced by Michel Foucault's legacy as well as those of *cultural studies* (in particular Lawrence Grossberg), writing plays an important role in his practice. His work more generally resembles a vast display of meanings that finds its full expression within the *form of the exhibition*. It is important to underline the significance of the close collaboration he has held for more than a decade with Julie Ault (co-founder of Group Material 1977-1996). In 2006, the exhibition they propose to the Palais de la Sécession is simply entitled *Installation*⁵. This title is not as significant as it appears since the installation is in itself intimately linked to the heart of curatorial practice. The book *Critical Conditions*⁶ allows us to return to the different levels of individual and collective implications and most certainly offers the best introduction to whoever wishes to further understand Beck's work. How do modern utopias move, transform, adapt themselves? What can fragments of the past tell us about our notion of contemporary esthetics? These are the types of questions Martin Beck never ceases to pose.

NOTES

1. See the note on the lecture of *The Aspen Complex* (Martin Beck ed.) published online by www.critiquedart.revues.org
2. Cf. *Half Modern, Half Something Else* (Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, First, Second, Third, Forth, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Editions), New York: Florian Pumhösl, 2003
3. Martin Beck, *About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe*, Utrecht; London; Casco; Four Corner Books 2007

4. See for example: Beck, Martin. "Alternative: Space", in Julie Ault (ed), *Alternative Art New York. A Cultural Politics of Book for the Social Text Collective*, New York; Minneapolis; London; The Drawing Center; University of Minnesota Press, 2002, pp. 249-279
5. Ault, Julie, Beck, Martin. *Installation* (22 August- 12 November 2006), Vienna: Secession, 2006
6. Ault, Julie, Beck, Martin. *Critical Condition: Ausgewählte Texte im Dialog*, Essen: Kokerei Zollverein, 2003