

# ABITARE



## The particular way in which a thing exists

For the first time, projects by the artist Martin Beck from the past twelve years are brought together for critical examination in the context of a university gallery.

In Montréal, until 26 January, 2013

by *Meredith Carruthers*

*Six photographs of aspen trees*

*Five stainless steel cubes, open at the ends*

*Four photographs of concrete*

*Newsletter headlines*

*Recycled car tops, cut to triangular shape, sides folded*

*A video showing the assembly of a display structure*

*A photograph of the moon*

*Seven desert views*

*Five prints depicting a connector joint*

*Five silkscreened modular display diagrams*

*A travel itinerary*

*A video documenting the drive between two places*

*A bubble diagram*

*A partial library (including instruction manuals, cookbooks, etc.)*

(A list of things in “the particular way in which a thing exists“)

As the title implies, “the particular way in which a thing exists” is a rigorously formal exhibition. This exhibition is the result of four-year dialogue between artist Martin Beck and curator Michèle Thériault. For the first time, projects by Beck from the past twelve years are brought together for critical examination in the context of a university gallery. As an exhibition, it eludes the usual retrospective analysis. Instead, more than a decade of Beck’s work and research are assembled together into a simultaneous present.

On entering the exhibition there is an immediate impression of gallery-ness and exhibition-ness. All of the hanging details are impeccable. The labels, almost invisible, are flat white and set in the gallery standard of Franklin Gothic (1980 ITC version). The exhibition is rigorously edited and composed, and unabashedly elegant. But more than this, there seems to be an eerie, almost canny watchfulness about it all. The extreme care in the configuration of this display creates the suspicion that the things may not be what they seem. This impression is not dispelled upon closer inspection.

As a list of things, the content of the exhibition reads as an obscure taxonomy. But what are these things? They are elements drawn from Martin Beck’s past projects, the silent background “stuff” of the complex narratives Beck is drawn to explore (in themselves often small details or footnotes to other histories). But placed in this space, nearly outside of time and context, these things give up a surprising and informative beauty. Images of aspen leaves, backlit by sun reveal the complexity of their structure. A travel itinerary from San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury, to the commune Drop-City becomes a concrete poem in floor to ceiling vinyl lettering. Multiple desert backgrounds from Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *The Passenger* emerge as delicate watercolours next to lovingly framed prints describing five possible configurations of a display system.

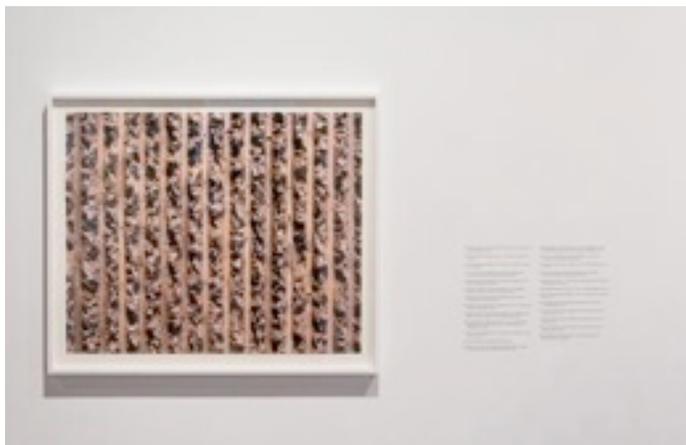


^ Martin Beck, *We were simply delegates in Aspen...*, 2008 (detail).  
Six gelatin silver prints on baryta paper. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

Evidence of the complex provenance of each these works is opened up as a parallel narrative within the gallery's handout, "Ways of Thinking". For example, the aspen leaves pictured in *We were simply delegates in Aspen...*, are not just from any aspens, they are also from *Aspen*, Colorado – the hosting site of the yearly International Design Conference. In 1970, the conference "Environment by Design" became a site of conflict and debate about the potential role of design in environmental thinking. Beck's multi-year engagement with this topic resulted in the exhibition *Panel 2 – "Nothing better than a touch of ecology and catastrophe to unite the social classes..."* (at Gasworks in 2008 and at Columbia University's Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery in 2009), and an edited compendium *The Aspen Complex* (published by Sternberg Press, 2012), which has become a new source of information for the scientific, design and environmental communities, rendering more complex the discourse in these disciplines.

The objects presented in the exhibition and the gallery itself, are treated to the same process of scrutiny and subsequent transformation. The gallery, always a partitioned layout, seems now to be "about" partitioned spaces. Handcrafted panels have been affixed to the walls, re-covering them with the same burlap that originally formed a surface under years of white paint. This detail gives a clue to the process of the artist and curator; two people in conversation, reveling in the mechanics of display making. On one hand a spatial presentation of the artifacts of a research process – on the other a self-reflexive analysis of those very modes of presentation.

The installation, with its cross-section of projects, fosters a type of object ecology, a gathering of things with multiple connections and meanings. Focusing in this way on stand-alone fragments of past works, the exhibition highlights Beck's approach to research, and the fascinating (and in some ways overwhelming) wealth of details that escape the sweep of grand modern narratives.



^ Martin Beck, *Rumor* (June 14, 1969), 2002. Three pigment ink prints on paper and type transfer on wall. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Installation view of the particular way in which a thing exists, Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Montreal, 2012. Photo: Martin Beck



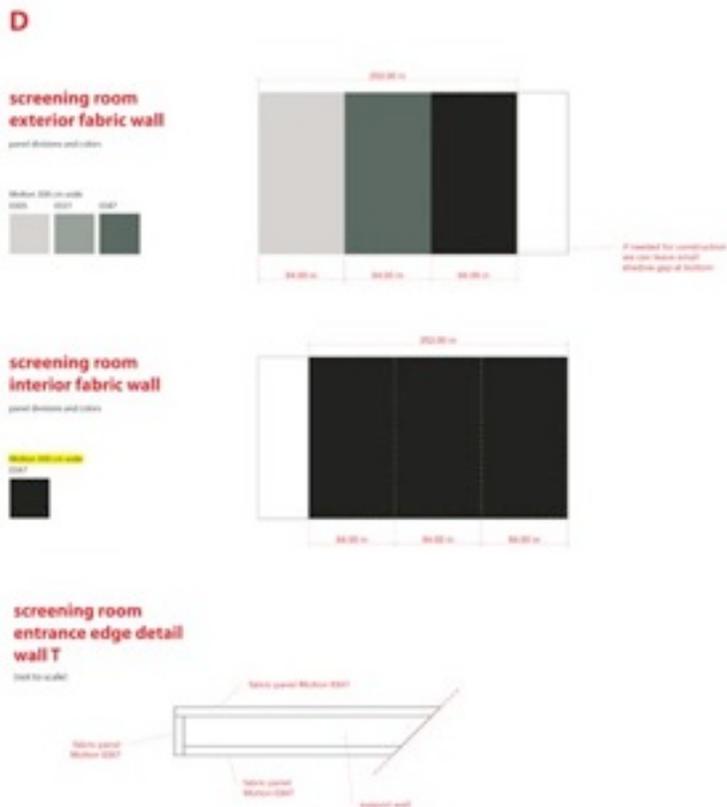
^ Martin Beck, *Incomplete Parts (version)*, 2012. Books, shelf, burlap. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Installation view of the particular way in which a thing exists, Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Montreal, 2012. Photo: Martin Beck



^ Installation view of the particular way in which a thing exists, Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Montreal, 2012. Photo: Martin Beck



^ Installation view showing fabric treatment into a screening room, the particular way in which a thing exists, Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Montreal, 2012. Photo: Martin Beck



^ Working drawing showing installation specifications of paint and fabric by Martin Beck for the particular way in which a thing exists, Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Montreal, 2012

*\* Artist and curator. From 2008-2011, she worked as part of the curatorial team at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). With Leisure since 2004, she has produced exhibitions and special projects in collaboration with venues in Canada and abroad.*

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***Martin Beck: the particular way in which a thing exists***  
*Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery*  
*1400 blvd. de Maisonneuve West, Montréal-Canada*

Curated by Michèle Thériault  
November 16–January 26, 2013  
Publication: forthcoming  
[www.ellengallery.concordia.ca](http://www.ellengallery.concordia.ca)

^ cover: installation view of the particular way in which a thing exists, Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Montreal, 2012. Photo: Martin Beck