

THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF FEELINGS AND DEBATES

Yuki Higashino on Martin Beck at Mumok, Vienna



"Martin Beck: Rumours and Murmurs," Mumok, Vienna, 2017, installation view

In her book "The Human Condition," Hannah Arendt famously classified human activities according to three categories: labor, work, and action. As a simplified explanation, labor is an activity to fulfill biological necessities and reproduction, such as agriculture, which is by nature cyclical because there is no end to these needs. Work, on the other hand, involves processes that do have a beginning and an end, and the products of work – our built environment, our culture, our civilization (e.g., science, tools, law, arts) – have use value that is (relatively) permanent. Action, meanwhile, can be understood as the process by which humans relate to each other in the public realm, such as speech or dance. By nature, action is of the moment; it is unpredictable and has

limitless possible consequences. The relationships between these categories are multifaceted. Between work and action, work establishes the structure in which action is possible. One might think here of how law, architecture, and poetry define for us the principles, space, and rhetoric of political debate. Conversely, ephemeral actions can only be recorded and transmitted through the products of work. Work thus both enables and represents action.

Such a model of labor/work/action is useful in thinking through the art of Martin Beck. But if his practice – which is known, not least, for examining the way in which display plays into how we perceive objects and, in turn, make meaning – first appears to focus on the structures in



which human actions may unfold, they quickly reveal their true focus to be on how *humans behave* in constructed and specific situations. This summer, Beck mounted a survey of works from the past ten years. Informed by modernism's legacy (or incomplete project) of an art that is inclusive of design, his own fascination with pop culture, and a predilection for analytical exactitude, his medium could be understood as an investigation of context – how it defines what actions are possible, how we negotiate or transgress the limits of that context, and how design influences these behaviors.

In practice, this takes the form of work that elucidates the inner workings and intentions behind various societal entities (whether dance parties, hippie communes, or exhibition design)

and the nature and possibilities of actions that may or may not occur within those structures at the same time. Identifying with neither the confrontation seen in historical institutional critique (which would arguably seem limited in today's museological context) nor the senseless conceit of post-criticality, Beck strives for a synthesis of criticality and the experience of living in the world with all the irrationality (e.g., emotion, taste, memory) it entails. In a society where easy affirmation and academicized critique are increasingly polarized, one could read Beck's practice as a bid for attaining relative agency within the field of art rather than being a mere symptom of its social conditions.

Perhaps Beck's "Flowers" (2015) illustrates this synthesizing operation most succinctly. Comprised

ing a series of twenty-four framed photographs (grouped into thirty-six sets of two, three, or five images), the work features the same composition – a large glass vase shot against a black background containing a flower arrangement in various stages of construction or dismantling. In some frames, the vase is empty or holds only a few stems; in others, the vessel is flush with colorful, luxurious blooms. The hands of a florist are occasionally visible. To read the work metaphorically, one might take the unchanging vase setup for the “products of work” or as the social institutions that enable us to interact with each other; and the arrangements of flowers, meanwhile, as the momentary “actions” that transpire therein – the exchanges between members of society within an institutional structure.

Due to its ambitious scale and the central location it occupies in the gallery, the ensemble of works collectively titled “Last Night” plays a prominent role in Beck’s *Mumok* survey. The piece stems from a set David Mancuso DJed in 1984 during one of the last nights of the Loft – an underground dance party begun by Mancuso in 1970 that became legendary within NYC’s disco scene for its communal, tolerant atmosphere and high-quality music. Working with a live recording of Mancuso’s set, Beck (a dance music connoisseur himself) identified every one of the 118 songs played that night and proceeded to acquire every record. This work follows an earlier project by Beck on hippie communes (or, specifically, on publications and other forms of self-representation by these communes from the 1960s and ’70s, such as Drop City in Colorado). These two projects, while disparate, are bound in Beck’s oeuvre by his deep interest in how a temporal social group is formed, what the physical structures and

very often non-quantifiable factors that bind the members of such communities are – in the case of “Last Night,” a love of music and dance.

As temporal communities thrive in today’s digital realm, examining past analog examples as case studies aids us in understanding our current state of affairs. To this end, Beck first published the Loft playlist as a book (“Last Night,” 2013) with extensive information annotating every track, as well as a framed print. Then, in 2014, Beck showed the records as a piece (“Approx. 13 Hours”). As such, the vinyl was presented in its entirety, leaning against a wall like a minimalist sculpture – albeit one that can be functionally used for an actual DJ set. And indeed, Beck used these same records for his 13-hour 30-minute video “Last Night” (2016), wherein each track is shown playing in its entirety (as Mancuso had during the original party). For the length of the video, the camera remains trained on a turntable, with each shot lasting the duration of one track and taken from one of ten different angles. This tightly composed footage is synched to exquisitely high-fidelity audio of the songs themselves.

The obsessive precision involved in the production of the piece stands in stark contrast to the blurry ecstasy of a party setting. And yet it is precisely the work’s omission of any visual or other atmospheric references or documentation of the actual party that allows those encountering Beck’s piece to focus on what, for him, is the primary material that enabled that particular event to take place – the music, or in Beck’s words, the “ghostly scaffold around an architecture of the night.” Dance itself is conspicuously absent from this project, yet it is strongly felt, thanks to the meticulous construction of a situation where music can be heard in the optimal quality, as was the condi-

tion Mancuso insisted on in his parties, as the invisible center of the perfect structure around it. The piece does not attempt to recreate a historical moment as a stage set in a museum. Rather, it lets the audience feel the ghostly presence of a past social formation – and to feel it as a community to which we could have belonged – in the same way that reading a historical document, say Roman law, can sometime strike us with its echo in our present condition.

While the book and the prints can comfortably belong to the analytical tradition of Conceptualism, the film inspires an affective response that, despite the work's strict construction, is sincerely moving. Such synthesis of analytical and emotional/romantic impulses is what art can enable at its best. Importantly, this dualism corresponds with the crippling dichotomy that paralyzes contemporary politics, wherein data-driven managerial technocracy (whose affinity with historical Conceptualism Benjamin Buchloh, among others, has recognized) cannot interface with the irrational politics of emotion, which, absent critical thinking, are easily exploited by rightist entities. By creating a synthesis of analytical rigor and emotionality, Beck's "Last Night" ensemble presents a provoking conceptual model for how a civil society can be conducted and politics enacted.

Also in "The Human Condition," Arendt presciently speaks of the advance of what she termed the "social realm." In her analysis, all the activities formerly restricted to the private sphere (having to do with the necessities of life, etc.) merge with the public sphere, thereby destroying the boundary separating public and private and resulting in a social realm wherein mass politics and personal interests are indistinguish-

able. When Arendt made this observation in the 1950s, she cast it as a lamentable yet still possibly reversible tendency. With the imbrication of public and private realms across seemingly every aspect of human life today, not least the merging of politics with entertainment and the omnipresence of "social" medias in our post-Fordist economy, it is an urgent task for artists to craft a new methodology to operate in this terrain. By acknowledging without necessarily embracing the collapse of this distinction between private and public, Beck explores how to maintain integrity, complexity, and intellectual/aesthetic strength in today's media-social spaces. In his hands, this involves synthesizing private affections and public knowledge, analytical acuity, and deep emotivity – at once. Beck's work, in my view, refuses to be a mere symptom of contemporary conditions. Rather, he gives us critical debate with emotional depth, seeing the two modes as mutually, and even joyfully, interdependent.

"Martin Beck: Rumors and Murmurs," Mumok, Vienna, May 6–September 3, 2017.