

# INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN BECK

AMELIA STEIN

In early 2014, Martin Beck met with James Voorhies, then the Director of Harvard University's Le Corbusier-designed Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (CCVA), to discuss an invitation for Beck to design the spatial environment for a coffee bar on the Center's third floor.

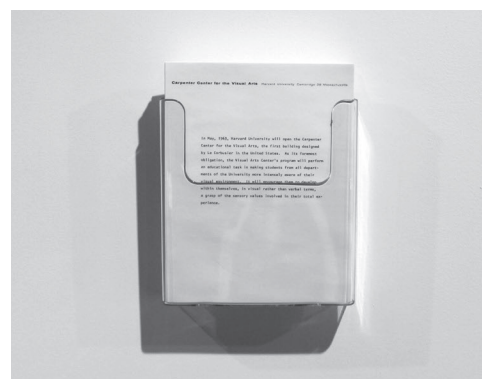
Although Beck is a visual artist, the request was not altogether arbitrary: Beck's work looks at the social histories of space and structure, as well as how spatial strategies such as display can and have been used to manipulate meaning. His seemingly impartial yet highly systematized revisitations of records and artifacts make space from time, returning materiality and form to historical events, forgotten theories, ephemeral phenomena or old controversies.

It is possible to imagine ways in which a coffee bar could become a frame for such concerns—but after spending some time in the Carpenter Center's archives, Beck chose not to 'intervene', as they say, in the space; instead, he decided to haunt it.

The resulting engagement, simply titled *Program*, was structured as a sequence of ten 'episodes' that took place at the Carpenter Center from 2014 to 2016. Several installments hinged on the redisplay and recirculation of archival material from early in the Center's founding; another involved the screening and DVD distribution of a 1971 16mm documentary about the Center's academic life; another was presented as an "artist lecture" that, as Beck describes in our interview, both was and was not.

While "program" might suggest an experience that is propositional or instructional in nature, Beck's *Program* was closer to an invitation. Through each subsequent episode, audiences encountered opportunities to examine how the Carpenter Center formed and continues to form and reform itself as an institution—to reflect on the ways it considers, communicates, reinforces and queries itself; to see and think and act as it does.

In order to create an environment in which this could occur, Beck opted not to be physically present for much of his "residency." He neither dominated nor absconded entirely; instead, he



Martin Beck. Installation view of *Program: 1963* with facsimile of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts' inaugural press release, 2014. Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge, Mass. Image courtesy of Martin Beck and 47 Canal, New York.

handled his presence with the same measured neutrality as he handled every element of the project, including Le Corbusier's iconic architecture—as points in a constellation, each only as vital as the other.

Amelia Stein: It's almost difficult to begin an interview about this project without talking about Le Corbusier. I suppose he would have wanted it that way.

Martin Beck: Le Corbusier's building is, of course, always the background for whatever one does at the Carpenter Center. But from an artistic perspective, in 2014, which is when my project there started, Corbusier as a topic felt a little tired. After the initial site visits and conversations with the director about the invitation my interest became more about the institution's identity as a whole: how the institution understands itself as an amalgam of building, curriculum, exhibition, events program, and their respective constituencies.

AS But Corbusier tends to hang around: the structure of *Program* is very much about sequencing time and space, sequencing experience in the way that Corbusier explicitly intended to do with the design of the Carpenter Center.

MB Maybe I should specify a little more: when I use or reference architecture in my work, it is usually more about the images a discourse generates than images of buildings, per se. The decision was not to screen out Corbusier or his architecture; it was to understand their

presence as one element in the way the institution as a whole communicates.

Le Corbusier still appears as one of the subjects highlighted in the CCVA's inaugural press release, which I redistributed for one of the early episodes, and as the maker of a sun-drenched exhibition space in the building that ended up necessitating curtains along the perimeter windows to protect light sensitive exhibits. But my focus was not on him or his building; it was on how the institution operates within and beyond that framework.

After learning about the institution's history and digging substantially into its archive, I focused on the founding period of the CCVA and how it constituted itself through the communicative channels it used to interact with its constituencies.

For that purpose, Harvard mobilized a number of elements: an iconic building by a star architect, a curriculum to address the challenges of the visual world, a collection of photographs, academic rituals and routines, formal and informal modes of engagement, forms and formats of communication. In all these the building has a presence, as it is the location where these threads intersect. What emerges then is not an image of an institution 'as a building' but an abstract image—of the institution—that is constructed by relationships between tangible and intangible components.

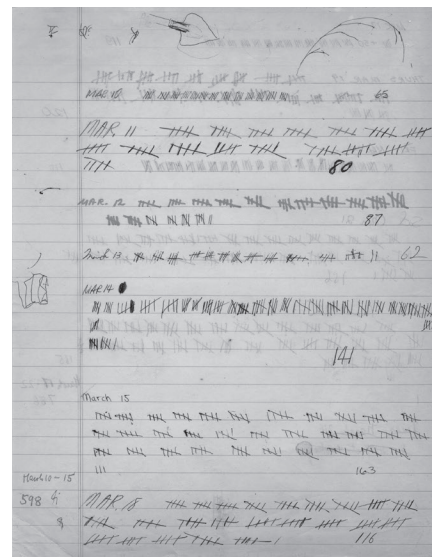
AS In the lecture episode, I remember you spoke about the idea of an archive as a form without form. And that formlessness is sort of in tension with the very intentional systems, ideologies and structures that comprise an institution, not to mention the very dominant form of the building itself.

MB My interest was really in the institution as a set of relations, and that extended into the present tense. James Voorhies, the Director at the time, was hired to reinvent the Carpenter Center, and his process of reviving and rebranding and what I, at his invitation, was constructing in my project were, in a way, parallel projects: although they differed in ambition and goal, they both engaged with the making of an institution.

For some time now, I've been thinking about the functionalizing element of institutional invitations in which artists are asked to do a project by intervening in a defined context and changing something, architectural or otherwise. One is sometimes invited to solve a problem for an institution, by, for instance, activating a certain space—the idea being that an artist might have a more 'creative' solution to a problem than an administrator, designer, or architect.

That is how the discussion started: James asked me to develop a spatial frame for a coffee bar at the CCVA, to increase social and communicative exchanges in the building. But I was more interested in taking a step back to address the larger situation: the institution identifies a problem and wants a change, and believes I, as the invited artist, can deliver a solution. Rather than offering the anticipated solution, I wanted to dig deeper. I wanted to understand the relationship between the institution and its communicative behavior, to understand how the various channels of communication contribute to the institution's self-understanding.

AS From memory, quite a few of the episodes had to do with photographic archives and photographic record keeping. There was that collection of installation photographs of one of the early exhibitions held at the Carpenter Center where



Attendance sheet presented in Martin Beck, *Program: Photography and the City*, 2015. Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge, Mass. Image courtesy of Harvard University Archives, 19725, Box 5.

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most of the shots were of the crowd and the flower arrangements... and I thought it was really interesting that, in seeking to make the inner workings or psyche of the institution visible, you often focused on a medium that is so involved with the mechanics of vision, with optics.

MB Most documentation of the early exhibitions at the Carpenter Center reflects the convention of photographing shows without any visitors in the images. Interestingly then—and a total anomaly—was that almost all the installation photographs of a 1973 exhibition titled *The Social Question* are populated by audience members and show arrangements of asters distributed along the walls of the exhibitions.

*The Social Question* presented late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs of the social conditions of laborers, some of them fairly grim—which turns the presence of audience members in the installation images into a curious comment on the exhibition's subject matter. And then this peculiarity becomes even more heightened by the flower arrangements: one could think of the mode of installation and documentation—of how the exhibition was supposed to be remembered—as somewhat cynical. But there is also a strangely generous and touching aspect to it that speaks of an awareness of the audience's role, as well as a self-consciousness about the way the exhibition wants to be remembered.



Martin Beck. Installation view of *Program: Fifty Photographs at Harvard*, 2016. Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge, Mass. Image courtesy of Martin Beck and Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts.



Martin Beck. *Program: A Social Question*, 2016. Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge, Mass. Image courtesy of Martin Beck and Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts.

AS I'm realizing as you're speaking that photography was present in *Program* as both a means of making visible and a symbol of the act of making visible. It was there for its content—it's showing something historical—but also to sort of represent visibility itself.

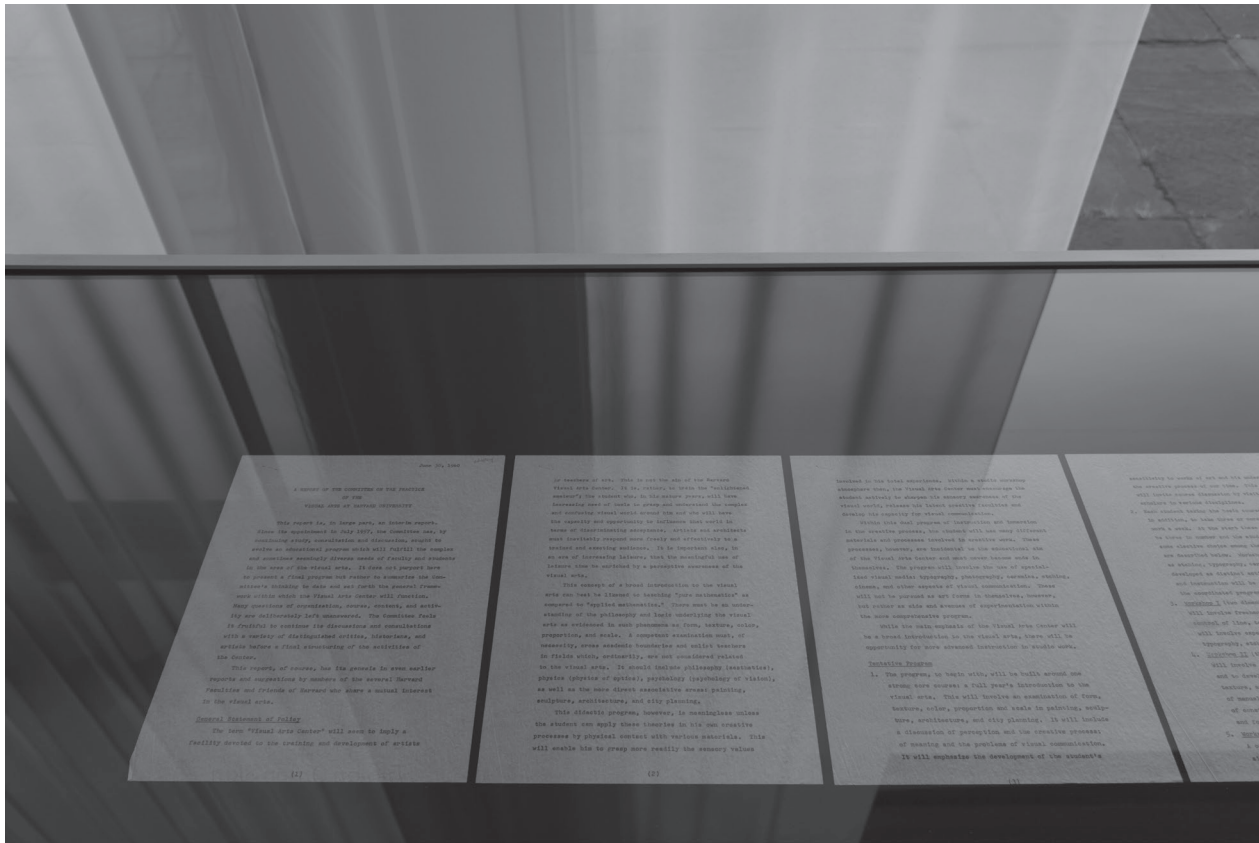
MB The last episode, *Fifty Photographs at Harvard*, presented parts of the CCVA's 1960s photography collection, which was created for educational purposes so students could engage with original works. But, curiously enough, that collection was mostly of photographs from early expeditions into the American Southwest. One has to wonder about the thinking behind it: why, in 1966, foreground photographs by Timothy O'Sullivan, John K. Hillers, etcetera? What is the educational agenda behind such a collection?

AS One of the primary things about working with archives must be the joy and humor in seeing what people thought would become important.

- MB That was certainly the case with finding visitor tallies in the archive. Before 1970 there is no record of the institution's documenting audience numbers, but from then on attendance sheets have been archived. So I asked myself, why in 1970 and not before?
- AS It's so great because it's sort of where the humanity enters. You know, with the visitor tally, it's meant to be this quite objective record of behavior and how people interact with the institution, but it's also just one person's funny decision, to think that that particular thing is going to tell anyone anything.
- MB It speaks to that but it also speaks to a change in the institution's self understanding. Somebody made the decision to start collecting these—today nobody knows why. But maybe the larger university administration pressured the CCVA to document audience numbers for their shows to show that there was an active constituency and thus legitimize their exhibition expenses. There is an institutional narrative embedded into these tallies, but looked at out of context, they are also beautiful abstract drawings.
- AS That's really fundamental to your engagement, as you've said: to work with all this material insofar as it reveals how the institution conceptualized or imagined itself. And then, in doing that work, you become part of the way the institution is conceptualizing or imagining itself now. How did you conceive of your presence over those two years?
- MB Throughout the course of my project, I enjoyed using a specific metaphor when describing what I was doing: the idea of the ghost. My presence at the CCVA was being billed as a residency, although after the initial research I didn't really stay there much. But through the project and the concept of 'residing,' I was always there, as a 'spirit,' even when I wasn't there as a physical body. In relation to this, the timing and form of my 'artist lecture' at the tail end of the project was very deliberate. A year and a half had gone by and various episodes, some of them quite ephemeral, had unfolded. People get interested in one way or another, but, for many, it is difficult to put a finger on what the project is because there was never a 'this-is-it' moment. Then, toward the end, the speaking format of the artist lecture introduces my physical body, the body of the artist, into the equation.
- My lecture was composed of a script consisting mostly of quotations from 1960s and '70s books on creativity enhancement. The visual element was a video showing a sequence of heuristic terms from that context against a continuously changing, brightly colored backdrop. The artist lecture is the site where schools and artists come into physical contact—a body appears from behind the work—so I wanted to create an almost hypnotic environment in which I, and my body, were, yet again, able to remain in the shadows.
- AS A ghost is a perfect metaphor. You know, people talk about the trace, and when you gave a version of that lecture at Columbia someone mentioned the trace, and I thought, oh god, the trace. It always seems too easy and too obfuscating at the same time. I like how a ghost is much more about personhood, and has a much more complicated yet also more specific relationship to temporality and form and space.
- MB Le Corbusier repeatedly used the metaphor of the human breathing apparatus to describe his ambition for the building—the Carpenter Center's ramp representing the windpipe and the flanking volumes the lungs, making the building very much about the movement of air. This connects almost too well with the idea of the ghost as, most often, a ghost is only noticed when air starts to move in a space without an apparent cause.
- The idea of being there and not, the questioning of the concept of residing, became quite intriguing. It wasn't something I started out with, but the longer the project went, the more I enjoyed the metaphor of the ghost—not only in relation to my presence/absence but also in relation to activating some of the histories of the CCVA.



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Martin Beck. Installation view of *Program: A Report of the Committee*, 2015. Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge, Mass. Image courtesy of Martin Beck and 47 Canal, New York.

AS I'm wondering, how would you describe—and I know it was called *Program*, so I would understand if you just said 'a program'—what was made? I was thinking you could talk about it as a kind of atmosphere, or you could talk about it as another kind of archive that you've made in the process of activating the old archive.

Two years is, I would say, an unusually long engagement for that kind of project. You could even call it a calendar or a timeline, if you want to think of the episodes like that.

MB I would describe it as constructing and activating a web of relationships in order to change the atmosphere. I always referred to the various manifestations as episodes—as used in the context of television, but also in the medical sense: episodes as being temporarily affected by a specified condition. Each episode inhabited one of the institution's various modalities of speech. Together, interwoven, they not only construct an abstract image of the institution but also something sensible.

AS You mentioned Arnheim in the lecture and I was thinking of Gestalt, which is a similar idea.

MB One of the Arnheim quotes I used in the lecture is about form finding. In his *Visual Thinking*, Arnheim describes the process of identifying star constellations: from an assortment of bright dots in the night sky, one can connect certain stars to outline a figure, a shape. He points out that the brightness of certain stars, as well as the empty space around groupings, are factors that allow for the construction of forms that are then marked and further identified as constellations. Those forms do not exist in the night sky, per se. They are something the stargazer puts together. I was thinking of the existence of form in a similar manner in my project.

AS I was going to say form without form, but it's more like form and no form at the same time.

MB Just like the ghost—