

**Geschichte als Kontext**  
**Innerhalb der kulturellen Ökonomie**  
**Display und Autorität**  
**Praxis fokussieren: Verbindungen herstellen**

Julie Ault (Künstlerin, Autorin und Mitbegründerin der New Yorker Künstlergruppe Group Material) und Martin Beck (Künstler und Autor) sind Vertreter einer kritischen Kunstpraxis, welche die Bildende Kunst als erweiterte Form kultureller Praxis auffasst. In ihren Arbeiten und Texten werden die Verhältnisse zwischen Geschichte und Gegenwart, Aktivismus und Kunst, Präsentation und Institution, Historisierung und Archivierung von künstlerischer Praxis neu vermessen. Sortiert in vier Kapiteln, enthält dieser Band ausgewählte Texte von Julie Ault und Martin Beck aus den Jahren 1995–2003. Das Schriftmedium Buch erfährt eine mehrfache Aufladung und Neuinterpretation: Als Künstlerbuch und Streitschrift ist es zugleich sein eigenes Gestaltungsmodell.

**History as Context**  
**Inside the Cultural Economy**  
**Display and Authority**  
**Focusing Practice: Making Connections**

Julie Ault (artist, author and co-founder of the New York-based artist collective Group Material) and Martin Beck (artist and author) are representatives of a critical form of artistic practice that understands the fine arts as an extended form of cultural practice. Their works effectively redefine the relationships between history and present, activism and art, presentation, and institution. Divided into four chapters, this book features essays by Julie Ault and Martin Beck from 1995–2003. The familiar printed medium “book” receives an extra charge of meanings and reinterpretations. Both an artistic product and a pamphlet, this publication also defines the model for its own creation.

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CRITICAL CONDITION  
AUSGEWÄHLTE TEXTE IM DIALOG

Julie Ault  
Martin Beck

KOKEREI  
ZOLLVEREIN  
Zeitgenössische Kunst und Kritik

KOKEREI ZOLLVEREIN Zeitgenössische Kunst und Kritik  
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CRITICAL CONDITION

AUSGEWÄHLTE TEXTE  
IM DIALOG

Julie Ault Martin Beck

Umschlag / Cover: Julie Ault, Martin Beck, *Display System*,  
Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Wien, 2001; Foto: Gerald Zugman

JA: The curator had divided the material into sections, and also wrote extended captions. To distinguish the sections without interrupting the visual field and the impression of density, we color coded the background panels and vitrine surfaces for individual sections. There were eight colors, each selected for its symbolic association to the section as well as for its facility to set off the predominant paper color and visuality of the arrangements.

MB: Due to conservation issues we had a few instances where materials had to be placed in vitrines. These were either attached to the walls or freestanding. The color-coding scheme was maintained throughout, and made it possible to also tie in the vitrine material. In addition, we used blow-ups of certain photographic material including iconic magazine covers. We enlarged to floor-to-ceiling height a photographic contact sheet showing images that

documented the making of *Picture Press* magazine in London. We wanted these images to function on an architectural scale within the exhibition and to materially be differentiated from the original magazine artifacts.

JA: These few examples demonstrate that designing exhibitions—in practice—requires genuinely engaging with artworks and materials, with authors, with curators, with institutions, with spaces, and with respective audiences, as well as with sets of relations between these in order to find tailored solutions. This keeps the process fresh for us and allows us to learn from these experiences.

MB: We don't want to become service designers, or for designing exhibitions to become a *job*. The priority is still to generate our own art projects. The aim is that exhibition design is something that relates to, crosses over into, and enlarges our artistic practices.



*The Rise of the Picture Press*, ICP, New York, 2002

## Making the Politics of Display Visible

A Conversation between Julie Ault, Judith Barry, and Martin Beck

MARTIN BECK: One of the points of contact that underlies this conversation is an engagement with the exhibition as a form in our individual artistic practices. We also share an ongoing interest in design as a social and critical discourse. And, we all have a history of collaborative as well as individual practices, which raises questions of authorship. Let's start with clarifying our relationships to design.

JUDITH BARRY: The notion of "design" and all that it implies—from the ideological to the stylistic—has always been part of my understanding of the art world. What has always amazed me is that design is rarely discussed. For instance, it was a major component of many of the art practices of the 1980s Neo-Geo and Appropriation movements, but it was as though the term "design" could not be named. Or if it was mentioned, it was on the level of anxiety. I remember a comment about Barbara Kruger's use of red frames being reminiscent of John Heartfield. The worry was that in using red frames she was attempting to claim his ideological position as well. Meanwhile, the radical content of her work was overlooked.

Of course, design issues percolated alongside Conceptual, Pop and Minimal Art. With Conceptual Art this might be characterized as an anti-design aesthetic and an anti-commodities stance, as both design and object-making were eschewed in favor of interventions less tainted by commodity-culture. For Pop Art the issue is much more complicated, since media and product design, while not active terms, were celebrated. Similarly, the industrial design technologies that produced Minimal Art weren't part of art discourses. To me this is like "the elephant in the room." It was not so much that



*Coca-Cola Event*, exhibition design by Judith Barry, San Francisco Piers, 1980

design was repressed, for it was very clearly in evidence, but that it was not acknowledged.

JULIE AULT: The art world has maintained a fairly puritanical approach to keeping its boundaries intact and protecting its economy. Within that model art is largely considered an idealist creative form of culture while design is regarded as a service industry associated with commercial and promotional culture. Many people believe art should not be contaminated with design, which is, in its functional sense, such an integrated part of society.

My formative experiences in the art field took place within Group Material, which was part of a larger context of practices that sought to engage popular culture as a discourse and as a visual field, and interrogate formations of “high” and “low” culture. Group Material employed design, as form and content, but we didn’t think about it with a capital “D.” The notion of the thematized, designed exhibition environment was something that the group developed over time. The situation was that in order to give our projects form, we had to make aesthetic, visual, and spatial decisions. Thinking those through and investigating what those decisions communicated meant we deliberated over presentational modes and display and their application, as well as distribution. Through these processes we gained awareness of style, its uses, meanings, and reception. Additionally, relationships of politics and aesthetics in culture at large were a central theme throughout Group Material’s work.

MB: Looking at such debates retrospectively, it seems that the art field perceived design as a surface treatment, which gets applied to an already developed content or product. This is a distinction that reiterates the “old” form and content debate. What is also implicit in such a perception is the conflation of surface and superficial. The result then is almost necessarily a negation of the visual and the consequent repression of anything that smells like design. One of the ironies with the attempted negation or exclusion of design in visual art practice is that this negation is a design choice as well; and this choice is ideologically loaded.

In relation to my practice I see design mostly as a structural force at the basis of communication. What makes its framework very useful is

that it provides analytical tools capable of interconnecting the various layers of information that I engage with in my art practice. The internal make-up of an art institution is, for example, just as much a designed environment as is a temporary exhibition. The framework of design allows for bridging ideology with form.

JB: Before the early 1990s there was a fairly strict separation between visual cultures and art-world cultures. Now this separation has become more blurred, especially with the rise of “visual cultural studies.” For instance, in the 1980s I was interested in appropriating popular culture strategies, including design ideas, to transform popular and art culture—to make it better, more challenging. This process included analyzing how popular culture functioned: what its aims were, how design strategies target different audiences, how any intervention would be received in both the popular and art world(s).

Arguably many artists today reference design styles and histories overtly in their work. I am thinking of practices as diverse as those of Monica Bonvicini, Sam Durant, Olafur Eliasson, Liam Gillick, Rita McBride, Jorge Pardo, and Andrea Zittel. Today, I think as artists we feel free to use popular culture as raw material, including design ideas.

This puts design “on the table,” but doesn’t necessarily interrogate design or any other popular culture strategies, or demonstrate an impetus to radically alter culture. Nor does it necessarily invite an investigation of the ideological questions implicit in what design can and cannot do and how it, potentially, could be used.

MB: I think what you call “referencing design” is quite different from an understanding of and engagement with design as a social and political function of contemporary society. In general I welcome the broadening of the art field in order to be more inclusive and to push its own boundaries, but what I find necessary is a discussion of something like a “methodology of referencing.” Cultural studies has provided extremely useful and insightful models of how to conceptualize design in relation



Liam Gillick,  
*Delay Screen*, 1999

to the social, and also something like a theory of cross-referencing. In particular I am thinking of Dick Hebdige's *Hiding in the Light* and Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*.

Also, given that many of the design references or sources some current art is informed by are historical (Archigram, Verner Panton, Alvar Aalto, Italian design from the 1960s, etc.), I consider it important to also develop a sense of historicity, and that the work produced articulates and reflects the newly established relationship between present and past. It is one thing to plunder "the archive" for a certain period look; it is another to attempt an understanding of how contemporary visuality and processes of communication are constructed from the fragments or ruins of the past.

JA: I remain a cheerleader for democratization of the institutions of art, and that extends to access to fresh tools and possibilities in terms of site and content as well as the notion of democratic design. Personally I have experienced my practice deepen as a result of thinking through design more consciously, rather than through an old-fashioned lens rooted in peremptory art-world structures. I'm not willing to contradict myself

by saying "yes, it's great that people do intra-medium work and actively engage design, but I think there are wrong and right ways to do it." There are degrees of social inquiry in current art that draws from popular culture and design, and some artists are not concerned with that at all. Critical orientation is a choice, which I regard as a specific interest, just as the consideration of design as a decorative device may indicate another interest. Maybe we can distinguish between the cultural phenomenon of art and design fields becoming more prone to cross-referencing and crossbreeding one another, and how that functions in the art world, which means talking

about the institutionalization of design/art appropriations.

MB: In that regard, I find it sometimes disheartening to see how the art field (or world) valorizes what one could call the re-separation of aesthetics and politics, specifically in relation to art practices that ap-

propriate design strategies, which grew out of the modern promise to integrate the two. Unfortunately, the entry of design issues into the art museum is often accompanied by decontextualization; and, it is part of the structural logic of the art museum that, in relation to contemporary art, it is more interested in authors than works or practices. The result then is often the embrace of the authored signature style that is somehow "freed" of context, references, and historical specificity. This could be related to what has been continuously happening in popular culture, where you always have layers of appropriation as well as retro phenomena, nostalgia, and all forms of exploitation. But whereas popular culture is too broad a field for such appropriations to be capable of completely erasing contexts and references from the larger debate, the logic of the art museum operates to construct originality by exclusion. What is also crucial in relation to the art museum as an appropriating institution is if and how in this process a political layer and a sense of historicity can be registered at all? Are there ways to engage that process and salvage a critical agency within that?

JB: Perhaps we should return to the question of the failure of modernism and postmodernism to provide strategies for the continued integration of aesthetics and politics. It is not only that we require articulated, specific political strategies of intervention and a sturdier critical discourse than is in evidence today. As artists we also need to be more forthrightly critical of certain elements within the current status quo. I still think artist peer groups are one of the best ways to address these issues, and I think there are a lot of functioning artist peer groups, but lately it seems that a notion of the "political/critical" is not foregrounded.

JA: The art system is not really a thinking machine. It's chaotic and largely governed by economic forces. In part, it is a machine that is fueled by ideas and images and talent, and when there is a dull period or an economically slow one, new ideas and images, new blood and youth are needed. When such preconditions occurred in the mid-1990s, one trajectory had to do with recognizing that young artists were not looking inward to the field of art, but to other arenas and sources, design being one example. As design enters artistic vocabulary it seems an appropriate



Jorge Pardo, *Project*,  
Dia: Chelsea, New York, 2000

time to question what this recent “opening up” represents and what it will lead to structurally.

MB: I think there’s still quite a resistance to a structural understanding of design where engaging and using design within an art and exhibition-making practice means also radically questioning the structures of that practice and how they produce the systems of valorization, distribution, and communication.

JB: That is why the programming of the exhibition design—its aims and goals—is so important. This is where substantive critical analysis must occur. Interesting design projects involve articulating a concept during the program phase, which is then materialized within the exhibition itself. We give an immaterial concept a form that people can recognize and engage with. What I have always been after is to use exhibition design to provoke a set of visible concepts and provide a space for critical reflection.

One of most satisfying exhibitions that Ken Saylor and I designed was *From Receiver to Remote Control: The TV Set*, curated by Matthew Geller, at the New Museum. We were asked to simultaneously develop the curatorial program alongside the exhibition design. For this exhibition the checklist initially consisted of eighty vintage television sets, nothing else. Briefly, the exhibition became a demonstration of how every room in the home, over time, was radically transformed in relation to the institution of television—from the DIY days of early TV, to “Home Theater,” to portable and cable TV and early interactive games, circa 1989. This was rendered visible in more than twenty “period” rooms complete with appropriate programming, and also by direct viewer involvement—visitors could produce their own programming.

JA: Mary Anne Staniszewski has written that installation design as an aesthetic medium has been “officially and collectively forgotten.” This erasure of display as discourse and of exhibition design has gone hand in



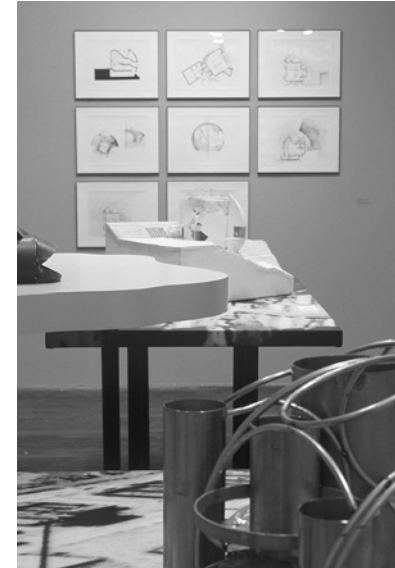
*From Receiver to Remote Control: The TV Set*, exhibition design by Judith Barry and Ken Saylor, New Museum, New York, 1990

hand with rendering the politics of display invisible. Art historians have only recently started investigating such histories. Likewise, the media of installation and exhibition design are only recently being put into wider practice by artists, architects, designers, and curators.

MB: This raises the issue of how do we classify (or not) what we are doing in our roles designing exhibitions. How do we identify professionally? What are the modes of authorship?

JA: In our role designing *Research Architecture*, Martin and I were regarded as co-authors of the exhibition, our voices and ideas treated on an equal basis with the curators. We were given the latitude to make ephemeral contexts visible through design strategies. In that case this involved making visual the battle between utopic visions of architecture and dystopic suburban sprawl. We straddled a number of different professional categories to do that—artists, designers, historians, and curatorial consultants. So, I’m wondering if it isn’t counterproductive to even talk about something like “exhibition design” because it can readily get reduced to surface. An enlarging practice of producing meaning requires a tacit understanding of collaboration by everyone involved in the production of an exhibition.

JB: I think you often have the chance to use exhibition design as a kind of laboratory situation. It becomes spatial thinking that cannot be performed in another way. For instance, the designs for the World’s Fairs or Friedrich Kiesler’s *Art of the Century* or the many exhibition designs by Charles and Ray Eames or Herbert Bayer. Independent Group and Archigram are the most exemplary for me, as they overtly proposed new social and spatial paradigms. Not only did they share common objectives: they were also interested in questioning the nature of what design, within the social fabric, could



*Research Architecture*, exhibition design by Julie Ault and Martin Beck, Thread Waxing Space, New York 2001

become. These were collaborative endeavors and it has always made me a bit sad that their success seemed to signal their demise, even though individual authorship within both groups was maintained.

JA: I lament that there aren't more mature collaborations or more people engaged with collective production in a long-lasting way. It seems the trajectory of a lot of ideologically based collaborations is that they are temporary by design. I'm not aware of many people who embrace collaboration as a lifetime commitment in terms of practice. With rare exception, artistic collaboration is something people try when they are younger, and then feel that they've outgrown, or should move on to develop their singular voices.

Collaboration has often been given short shrift and negatively mythologized. It is altogether omitted as a model from many schools and institutions. It is commonly believed that collaboration eclipses individual practice—when in fact they can be balanced to productively fuel one another. Being ego-oriented with a focus on individuation has been normalized. But it seems natural to be in dialogue and work with other people. The collaborative spirit gets taken out of people.

MB: One of the obstacles in that regard is that the system of valorization in the art (and culture) field works against collaboration. In order to maintain a collaborative practice in the art field you need a certain degree of idealism and also some sort of financial independence. And people do have that more frequently when they are younger—or in relation to certain social and cultural conditions, such as in late 1960s in Italy, where for a young designer or architect to pursue an individualistic practice was seen to be complicit with a despised bourgeois ideology. So the stakes were different. Realistically, most cultural practices happen on the basis of collaboration—they are just not credited that way. So maybe it's a matter of formalizing it and publicly committing to collaborative structures as a mode of authorship.

JA: Valorization of the individual author takes place in a lot of fields, like architecture, where in practice the collaborative process is actually structural. I believe if the values of collaboration and collectivity were ex-

perienced, theorized, and amply represented in the art field, then things would change and even institutional support could be generated from social desire and demand.

#### NOTE

Judith Barry is an artist and writer whose work crosses a number of disciplines: performance, installation, sculpture, architecture, photography, new media, and exhibition design. In 2000 she was awarded the "Friedrich Kiesler Prize for Architecture and the Arts" and in 2001 she was awarded "Best Pavilion" and "Audience Award" at the 8th Cairo Biennale.

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