



Image/World

Recent Work by Andrew Beck

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On first encounter, Andrew Beck's works are striking for their formal precision. Carefully handled and finely attuned to textural effects, restricted to black and white (and the grey tonal range between), each assemblage manifests a palpable intensity, as if eye, hand and mind have worked in unison. Works are presented singly as framed objects, as pairs and series, and as multi-part sequences arranged in careful relation to their architectural settings. They occupy space commandingly both because of their individual visual impact and because of their subtly contingent relation to their surroundings. Each operates as a rebus or puzzle that the eye firstly has to take in and then the mind unravels.

Take *Shadow Redux* (2015), a framed black-and-white rectangular composition just over a metre high and a little less wide. This features a diagonal black bar painted directly onto a sheet of non-reflective glass. This bar is separated from its dark ground by the thickness of the glass and the matte finish of the paintwork, but also by a pale, slightly blurry white area that offsets but mirrors its lower end. At first this looks like a conventional abstract painting where line plays in relation to a bounded planar surface. But on close scrutiny assumptions come unstuck.

The 'ground' in fact is photographic paper that has been exposed after the painted glass has been laid over it. Beck made this in his darkroom, angling a lamp on the floor at one end of the assemblage and exposing it to light for a fraction of a second.

(opposite) ANDREW BECK *Shadow Redux* 2015
Acrylic on non-reflective glass with silver gelatin print,
900 x 1300 mm.
(Photograph: Shaun Waugh)

After chemically fixing the photogram, he put the two parts back together, framing them tightly so that photographic paper and glass are literally touching, but painted stripe and indexical image remain just slightly separate. So the pale wedge is the image of the black bar, a contingent, mechanically produced trace formed by a dark flood of light caught in silver emulsion. 'Painting' is now riven by its worldly other: 'photography', yet the two cleave together by means of what normally is thought to be ancillary to the artwork: the picture's frame and its glazing. What began as a visually seductive image returns as a profoundly unstable ontological conundrum: where does the work begin and end? What is ground and what is surface? Which is shadow and which is form?

Ultimately, as with all of Beck's work and in spite of visually echoing iconic abstract precedents, *Shadow Redux* undermines modernism's central precept: the idea that painting is autonomous, existing all-at-once in a separate sphere as the object of pure contemplation. Instead the world muscles in, first through the intercession of light as the phenomenal means by which the image is produced, and second, by the breaking up of time into 'before' and 'after' and the juxtaposition of duration (the processual time of painting) and the instant (the 'that-has-been' of photography). Further, 'redux' means to bring back or revive. Instead of pure presence, we are witness to an oscillation between a thing and its representation, the flip and play between two shadows, and the staging of a clearly manual process of production, reproduction and (re-)assembly.

'Redux' might also serve as the term to describe Beck's relation to art history. Without doubt, a coherent theme in his work is the overt and oblique quotations of artistic forbears. In his notes and titles, as well as via visual cues, he invokes obscure and iconic sources: Rodchenko, Oiticica, Malevich, Cordeiro, Moholy-Nagy, Serra, Morris, and closer to home, McCahon and Dashper. It would seem the past is something he seeks to 'bring back or revive'. But to do so is to acknowledge a break rather than to take one's place in a living tradition. These figures are ghosts and echoes rather than authorising masters or oedipal fathers. This sets Beck apart from both modern and postmodern positions, suggesting instead the lineaments of a particularly contemporary relation to his artistic inheritance.

Let me explain. Despite the analogue nature of his practice, Beck is the product of our digital era. He is embedded in a system in which actual space and present time blur seamlessly with a screen-centric domain in which images swirl, where distances collapse and multiple temporalities coexist. In this new condition the call to medium specificity seems redundant, for now things and their representations merge and blur; place and non-place, past and present fluidly intermingle. In this space the hierarchies of

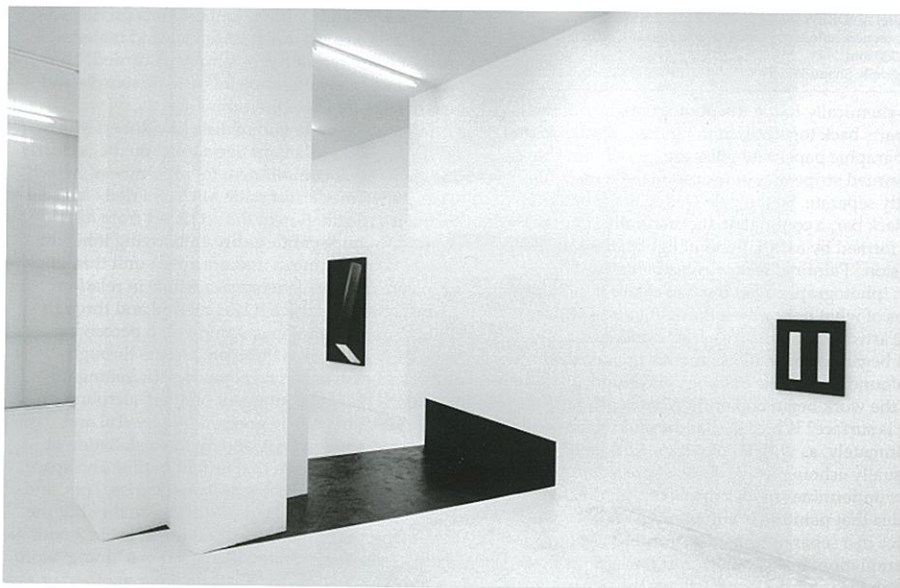
original and copy, surface and depth, a privileged real and its suspect other, pure idea and material substrate, are reordered or simply discarded. This is why Beck can both quote his artistic sources and redefine the tenets of their thinking.

Take for example minimalists like Robert Morris, Frank Stella, and Richard Serra to whom he is clearly indebted. Their commitment to 'presentness', which so unsettled modernist critic Michael Fried,¹ insisted on the transformation of the art object from a self-contained and separate entity embodying inherent formal qualities, into a manufactured unit that singly or in combination cohered as a whole in relation to the context in which it was located and through a phenomenological encounter with a perceiving subject. Beck invokes these precedents through the production of serial geometries, by setting up situations that are contingent on their surroundings and which can only be grasped by physical and perceptual engagement, and by the installation of sequences of elements that unfold in time and space. With titles like *Ten Phases*, *Unitary Overlap*, *Lean*, and *Descending Platforms*, he doffs his cap to the shift the minimalists executed from thinking of art as a noun (a thing), to treating it more like a verb—a 'doing' word, which exists in time as 'one thing after another' or as a kind of active but suspended duration.

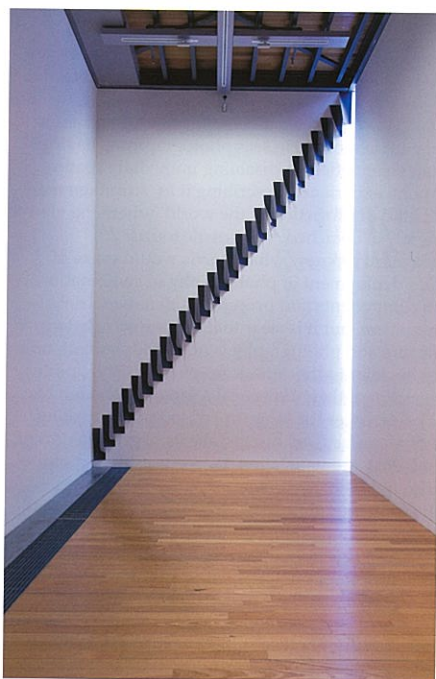
But Beck also betrays key differences. Robert Morris in his 1978 essay 'The Present Tense of Space', in attempting to define and valorise contemporary sculpture as engaged with 'the present tense of reality' through its enabling of an 'immediate spatial experience', betrays a deep distrust of photography by linking it to the 'scenery of memory's mental space' and thus to static rather than embodied consciousness.² For Morris only 'real-time interactive experience' allows access to the conscious self, the 'I' that is present, rather than the 'me' perceived as an image in memory.³ He sees photography as having a malevolent effect in disabling immediate spatio-temporal experience, describing it as 'shrunken reality . . . a kind of projection of the world' where the viewer is merely a 'detached, voyeuristic tourist'.⁴

It is hard to know what Morris would make of Beck's deployment of photography in combination with components and procedures that owe a debt to minimalism, but it is clear that an antipathy between sculpture and photography is not Beck's subject, nor does he defer to the American sculptor's concluding suggestion of their dialectical relation. Although his work references the language of sculpture (making use of manufactured objects: sheets of glass, pieces of wood, etc.) and its relation to architecture, individual works and whole installations tend not to fully embody three-dimensional space, favouring instead the planar as a field for spatial and temporal play. Why might this be? Could it register a fundamental, indeed epochal shift?

If Morris juxtaposed the realm of the real with that of representation, assigning space to the former and time to the latter and splitting human consciousness into kinaesthetic and mental awareness, do we still



adhere to such binaries? Beck intimates that we may not. For him it would appear that a photograph, at least in its most basic analogue form as a photogram, is in some sense real, bearing the impress of light and



capturing the effects of actual chemical processes. While we might not be able to perceive the moment of capture (which takes place in a split second), nor grasp it as a bodily reality, the material transformation is undeniable proof of the world at work. Importantly, this flash of the 'real' occurs without or in spite of the perceiving subject. This would suggest that Morris's humanism has given way to a new kind of materialism, in which 'consciousness' may somehow be vested in things and not just in people. Perhaps, for Beck, the photograph serves not as and for memory, but rather as proof, in a sense that transcends the documentary.

Conversely, when Beck works in 'real' space he ends up encoding representation there. For example for his first solo show at Galerie Luis Campaña in Berlin in 2013 he installed *Invariant Shadow*, a black floor painting that produced an impossible shadow for a pillar in the brightly lit, windowless space. Whilst acknowledging the specifics of this architectural context, Beck here created an abstraction, an image that had an indexical relation to the building yet was not based on phenomenal fact. And at the Adam Art Gallery, his *Shadow Strips Cascades* (2015), a stepped series of overlapping oblong pieces of

(above) Andrew Beck's *Invariances* at Galerie Luis Campaña, Berlin, September 2013, showing *Invariant Shadow* (2013), oil on floor, 2800 x 1700 mm.

(left) ANDREW BECK *Shadow Strips Cascades* 2015
27 silver gelatin strips, 210 x 530 mm. each, 5500 x 4000 mm. overall (Photograph: Shaun Waugh)

(opposite) ANDREW BECK *Collected Shards* 2015
Acrylic on glass & wall, silver gelatin print, framed, dimensions variable (Photograph: Simon Cummins)

photographic paper installed on the tall narrow end wall of the Lower Chartwell Gallery, had an equally complex relation to its context.⁵ Though scaled to fit the space, and aligned in response to the narrow strip window that runs the full height of the wall, this was only partially site-specific. Made in his darkroom, this work was a serial photogram in which each sheet registered the 'shadow' of the one adjacent to it, a flow chart of light that bore no actual relation to the real light in the Gallery. Here, real space and photographic representation were held in careful relation, distinctly apart and yet close together; neither presiding over the other. While the light of the world was literally 'in' Beck's installation, its actual capture was self-consciously executed elsewhere. But natural daylight did fall on the work in situ, where the curling edges of the paper intercepted its passage to cast further shadows. So here, real light appears supplemental, coming after its representation, in a poised reversal of normal relations between world and image.

Such subtle reversals, delays and doublings, which operate to shift conceptions of 'time' in relation to the artwork, are matched in Beck's practice by a very particular relationship to space. Rather than fully modelled in three dimensions, he seems to prefer 2-D surfaces, planes, and layers, playing with different orders of transparency and opacity and twisting the perception of depth in a tightly modulated play of and between surfaces. These are the dimensions of our digital age, proof of an ubiquitous screen aesthetic. And yet, all of Beck's work is demonstrably handmade with simple everyday ingredients often harking back to earlier technological times (overhead projector transparencies, photo-sensitive paper, paint, store-bought timber, sheets of glass, incandescent light); while the work could be produced digitally, it patently has not been. This would suggest a willingness to accept some kind of permeability between screen and material domains, and to consciously work at their interface in an effort to propose their contiguity.

In his new show at Wellington's Hamish McKay Gallery there is a work that elegantly speaks to this ambition. *Collected Shards* (2015) is a portrait-format framed 'canvas' with a white painted ground and thin black 'shards' distributed across its surface like falling rain. These shapes extend beyond the canvas appearing on the gallery wall in a swarm around the painting, as if it too has been caught in a passing shower. On close inspection we see a subtle play of surface effects: the black shards 'in' the painting are negative details where the white paint has been stripped away to reveal the underlying black photographic paper beneath the glass, while the wall-based elements are painted additions. Where it seems that a shard crosses from the wall to the work, in fact it disappears behind the frame, emerging on the other side within the picture, an almost imperceptible flip from positive to negative detailing. By the careful articulation of layers (over, under, behind, between) and the delineation and transgression of the picture's edge, Beck binds a representation into its spatial



surround, knitting the two together to suggest both seamless transition and vestigial division. What better way to indicate the new fluidity between image and world?

As a coda to this effort, let me quote Hélio Oiticica, an artist Beck has invoked on more than one occasion, most especially in his 2015 *Hélio Oiticica, Metaesquema 1957 (Remake with Transparency)*, which faithfully reproduces one of the Brazilian neo-concretist's series of small paintings (gouache on card) that were designed to 'dissolve the two-dimensional plane' in order to go beyond the compositional imperatives of conventional abstract painting.⁶ Oiticica writes (in 1957–8) that his 'Metaesquemas do not found a new/art: they model transformations'.⁷ This both aptly captures Beck's relation to his artistic inheritance and describes where his art appears to be heading.

1. See Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', first published in *Artforum* 5, June 1967, pp. 12–23, reprinted on several occasions, notably in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Gregory Battcock, New York 1968, pp. 116–147.

2. Robert Morris, 'The Present Tense of Space' (1978), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, an October Book published by MIT Press, Cambridge MA & London 1995, p. 176.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

5. This was one of a group of works collectively titled *After Image*, which were installed as part of the Adam Art Gallery's *The Specious Present* exhibition (10 July–20 September 2015).

6. See 'Chronology (1937–1980)' in *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Colour*, Tate Publishing and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, London 2007, p. 355.

7. Hélio Oiticica, *Metaesquemas* 57/58, exhibition catalogue, Galeria Ralph Camargo, São Paulo, 1972, reproduced in *Hélio Oiticica, Projeto Hélio Oiticica*, Witte de With & Jeu de Paume, Rio de Janeiro, Rotterdam & Paris 1992, p. 27.