

# Institution Building

# James Voorhies

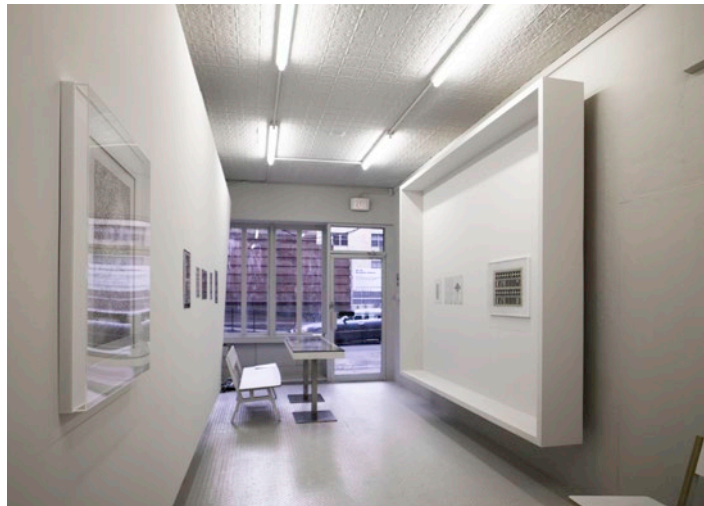
In March 2014, I was less than a month on the job as the recently appointed director of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (CCVA), an exhibition and academic institution housed in a majestic 1963 Le Corbusier building. I ambitiously envisioned a new program that would create a pulsating art and education institution, including transforming a defunct café space at the crest of the building's signature concrete ramp into a beautifully proportioned coffee bar in the only building in North America designed by the famed Swiss-born architect. As I pictured it, the coffee bar would become a gravitational point, full of the social life and energy of Harvard University students and neighboring community, while conceptually integrating into my curatorial ideas for this institution. I believed Martin Beck would be the perfect inaugural artist in an initiative that would, as I wrote him, reenvision the appearance of this café space as part of

an expanded form of exhibition that takes the shape of a spatial environment designed by an artist. The initial plan is for this designed space to exist for at least two years before

another artist is invited to reimagine the space. I am deeply interested in fostering connections among design, architecture, performance, and visual culture.

Beck's practice has long engaged with questions about the relation between form and the social, paying particular attention to the way institutions and organizations use exhibitions, architecture, and design to assemble, address, and communicate to the public. One of my most memorable encounters with his work was a 2011 installation he made in collaboration with architect Ken Saylor for Ludlow 38, Goethe-Institut's contemporary art space on New York's Lower East Side (fig. 1). The intervention titled *Remodel* increases the functionality of curatorial initiatives at Ludlow 38 by improving the flexibility of the narrow storefront space with regard to the institution's mission to display works of art and assemble publics for various kinds of events. *Remodel* is comprised of four components. Beck and Saylor constructed a wall projecting slightly away from the original, rough-hewn

Figure 1. Martin Beck and Ken Saylor, *Remodel*, 2011, MINI/Goethe-Institut, Ludlow 38, New York.



wall of the nineteenth-century tenement building on the south side that runs nearly the entire 50-foot length of the space. It supplies a necessary refined white surface, a display space. A so-called booth encountered at the entrance serves as both a work surface for administrative staff and a casual gathering point for visitors. Visible on the left immediately after entering is a large, almost case-like frame delineating the north wall area as a display site. In the middle of the room and encountered on the south side as one walks toward the rear, Beck and Saylor have articulated something they call a “passage,” an existing pathway resulting from the enclosed bathroom and closet. The artists acknowledged the value of this physical structure that visually interrupts the flow of the space, preventing visitors from viewing completely into the space when they enter. It adds a dramatic quality to the room because visitors must walk toward and into the passage in order to experience the remainder of the room. And, in the rear, a freestanding wall—or “screen”—built on wheels supplies a clean surface for the projection of video or slides or presentation of two-dimensional work. It also performs as a room divider when needed. Each component in the overall display system is a discrete intervention while complementary to one another. *Remodel* was intended to be a three-year exhibition, physically altering the space yet walking a fine line between functional architecture and sculptural intervention.<sup>1</sup> Added to my knowledge of Beck’s other projects, his overall practice, and my interest in alternative curatorial models, the experience at Ludlow 38 and the artist’s expanded approach to exhibition left an indelible impression on me.

Beck’s practice problematizes the exhibition form, along with the social and aesthetic implications it wields on our perceptions—and the crucial influence perception has on writing history, in fact, defining history. To this end, the artist works across disciplines in a contextual practice that sometimes involves architecture and design,

like *Remodel* at Ludlow 38, to apprehend spectators' spatial and sensorial attention, their bodily encounter with situations and environments. *Remodel*, for example, does not announce itself as anything in particular, though the perception that something is "slightly off" is palpable. After one experiences the totality of the system at Ludlow 38, the intervention becomes subtly more legible, often in relation to other works on display or the social scene gathered within it. In his inimitable way, Beck interweaves architecture and design, regularly featuring elements of popular culture, education, film, sound, performance, and photography, to create enveloping experiences for spectators. Herein, the qualities of space and time inherent in the exhibition form also become essential to an understanding of his practice. This is why I was excited by the possibility of working with him at the Carpenter Center.

After several weeks of email exchanges, Beck arrived in Cambridge. Characteristic of his practice, as a means of orientation, he immersed himself in the Carpenter Center's archive and began to explore the rich history of the landmark building and learn about the creative activity and celebrated faculty visiting CCVA over the years. As months passed, the research visits accumulated without any defined direction from me. Yet our conversations became more involved, more intense, and more invigorating from artistic, archiving, and curatorial perspectives. Beck would spend time in the archive, often entire days. Following these visits, he would relay his findings, verbally summarizing documents about the early academic aspirations of, for instance, Light and Communications, a department that would eventually transform into film studies at Harvard. This exchange of reflections would continue after he returned to New York. From May 2014 to May 2016, Beck emailed 32 PDF sketches, which I saved. Often less than 10 pages, the PDFs are a combination of photographs he might have taken of documents in the archive along with excerpts from letters or documents that he would transcribe. Or they could be a combination of words or

thoughts from our conversations along with a scan of a photograph. Now, looking back at those PDFs, one can easily appreciate the think-through quality of these documents and see that some ideas eventually coalesced into his final project. I occasionally reciprocated by writing to him with further research references or providing longer narratives on current affairs at the Carpenter Center, changes in the building, staff, plans or problems with exhibitions, etc. This correspondence became complementary contemporary reflections on the archival material suddenly animated by Beck. As the months passed, my dream of a coffee bar—an institutional space offering more convivial social engagement—became a less-likely reality due to complications around the physical space, budget, labor practices, and administrative hurdles. But what unfolded over the next two years with Martin Beck and concludes with this book was far more in-depth than I had at first imagined. The initial invitation morphed into an expansive exhibition that Beck titled *Program*.

*Program* manifested through a sequence of interventions, installations, events, and displays that drew upon the exhibition histories and academic pursuits of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts and Department of Visual and Environmental Studies. This sequence—each node of which Beck considers an “episode”—lent particular attention to the founding aspirations of the Carpenter Center, which sought to cultivate its position as simultaneously an iconic modernist building, school, and exhibition venue. In the early years, the exhibitions, public discussions, and screenings, all impressive in scope and depth, were regarded by university officials as integral to the pedagogical concept of a visual arts education. In its entirety, the Carpenter Center performed a kind of exhibition of education, a performance that occurred in both its educative framework and its public outreach. In the early 1960s, the selection of Le Corbusier by Harvard officials intended to signal the pedagogical aspirations of the university’s newly

focused attention on teaching the visual arts. This visual arts center was to be a place where practitioners from different disciplines and departments at Harvard—architecture, design, philosophy, and film—would intersect in a cohesive learning environment. The atmosphere ideally prioritized teaching visual literacy over perpetuating ingrained notions of the professional artist-painter or artist-sculptor. And in doing so, the unique curriculum provided students with tools to critically reflect on and analyze the world around them: to study their visual environment. In these early days, the Carpenter Center was a new institution, unhinged from fixed expectations. It thus aspired to elevate the pedagogical value in the experience of making and working with materials to the same stature of knowledge production found in other disciplines in the humanities and sciences. Archival photographs show elaborate exhibition designs and creative uses of space, while written documents and films recall a storied past of cigarettes and coffee in the lobby, late nights and cluttered spaces, students and professors reacting to the Vietnam War, everything unfolding into a sprawling, urgent pedagogical pursuit where art production, critical thinking, filmmaking, and teaching collided. But something happened in the intermittent decades to the exhibition component where the graying of an institution caused it to perform the now well-rehearsed white-cube model. In the gallery, the expansive spatial opportunities originally offered by Le Corbusier were no longer viewed as beautiful challenges but negative forces to be contained. Such is the legacy that, at the time of my arrival at CCVA, defined the Carpenter Center and curriculum of the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies.

The new institution that I conceived of developed out of this history and responded to this educational context, aspiring to create a cohesive exhibition-cum-learning site, an institution potentially indistinguishable as either distinctly education or distinctly exhibition. Beck's *Program* became part of that intention. It pulled that history into the

present and then redirected the institution's aspirations back onto itself. To that end, during his time at CCVA, Beck focused on various points of public interface that define the Carpenter Center as an institution. These included physical spaces, curriculum, student relations, media relations, and time-based instances of connecting with the public, such as talks and screenings. The series of explorative strategies he employed simultaneously performed and critically reflected on the kinds of activity an institution uses to build, organize, and engage with its audiences. From the institution's physical infrastructure to its communication strategies, from its foundational curricular principles to visitor tallies, from building usage to welcome rituals, Beck examined institutional behaviors that collectively form institutional identity and integrate audiences into a cohesive program of public address. All of these components were considered in the form of distinct "episodes," ten in total. Two of these episodes left a permanent trace, whereas the others were ephemeral in character, not really "conventional artworks" with a physical body. They included momentary arrangements of objects, presentation of archival documents, photographic installations, a lecture, and a postal piece. The pacing of episodes was strategically organized to demonstrate to the public Beck's commitment to the institution, and the institution's commitment to the artist and his work. An undercurrent of routine visits with students, faculty, and the neighboring arts community transpired in the private sphere of the artist's comings and goings as he traveled from New York to Cambridge. Relationships were forged.

*Program* became the first project in an ongoing platform that I eventually instituted at CCVA under the moniker "Institution (Building)." Still pursuing the initial interest in a two-year engagement with an artist—or an expanded mode of residency—this platform emerged with the intent to work with artists whose practices would benefit from time and resources for extensive research at a particular location,

and creative and critical dialogue with the curator and institution. The platform is an opportunity for artistic processes to unfold at their own pace where the curator becomes a thinking partner in support of the work. The platform thereby fosters the uncertainty of creative processes in the arms of the institution, intercepting and interpreting them for the public. It acknowledges and supports the fact that artists' ideas shift as they take shape. Things change. The key challenge for the curator in this method of working—for me, in the case of Beck—was to balance the openness and encouragement of an uncertain process without an agreed-upon endpoint or plan, uncertainty that typically takes place in the private realm of a studio before exhibition, while maintaining legibility for its communication to the public sphere. While Institution (Building) is an opportunity to support work by artists whose practices don't exclusively circulate in conventional economic and curatorial streams, it is also envisioned as a critical mode of curating where ideas and conversations in both public and private realms could move over time, shift, accumulate, and pile on top of one another, trip and stumble, all while prioritizing collaboration and communication among artist, curator, administrators, and the academic community, drawing on the rich history, architecture, and archive.<sup>2</sup>

This book, *An Organized System of Instructions*, is several things at once. It is, on one hand, a document of *Program*. On the other, it is an extension of the exhibition that uncovers and expands upon some of the underlying questions raised by the work, including the potential instrumentalization of the artist figure, evident even in my original invitation to Beck that, on the surface, could have been easily construed as an invitation to design a coffee bar. Other questions and concerns develop out of an artist working to “respond” to context, combined with the industrial art complex's extraordinary pressure on both curator and artist to continually produce something new and with someone else, then press repeat. Some of those questions are addressed within.

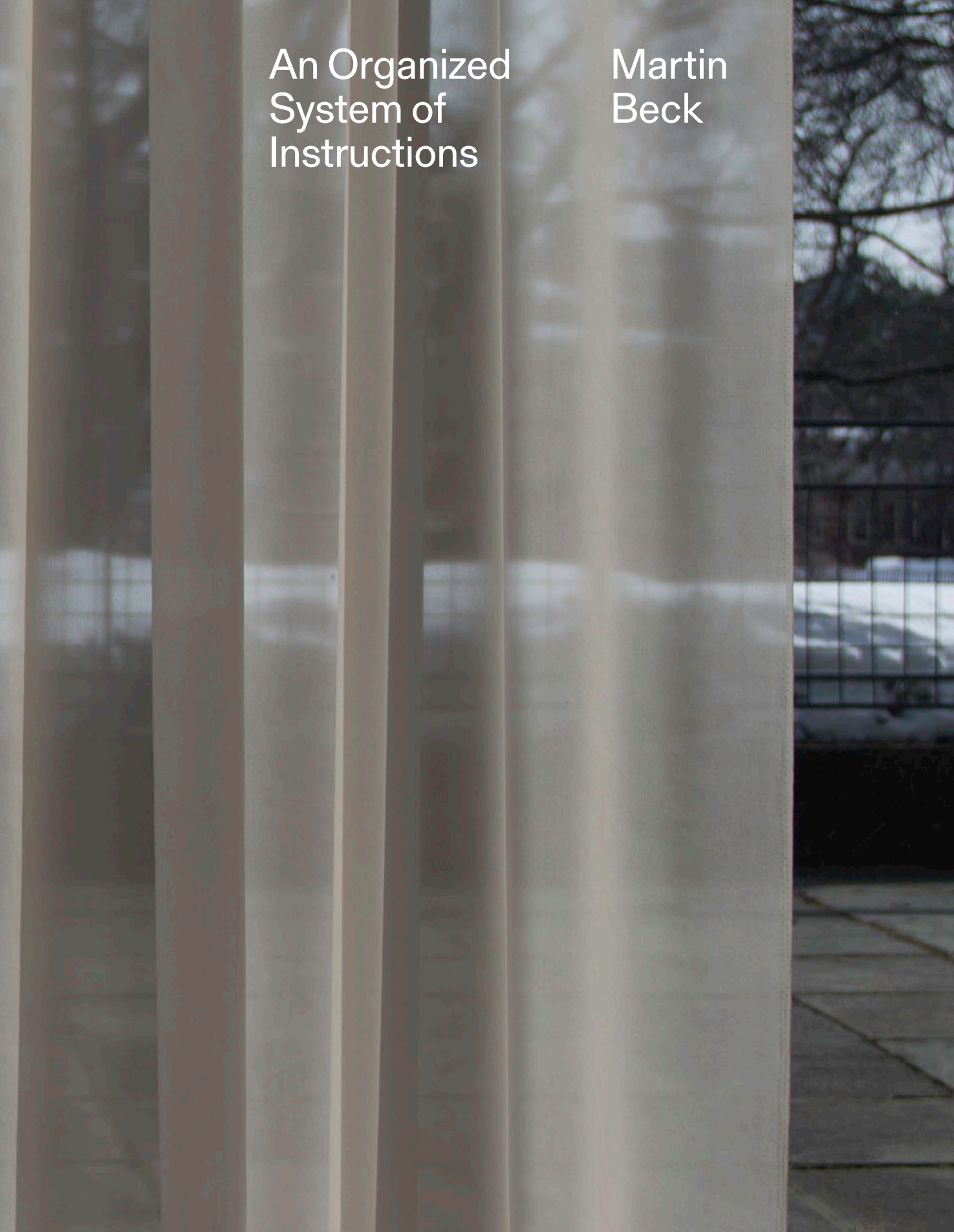


This book contains an essay titled “Seven Contemplations on *Program*” by the architect and historian Keller Easterling, whose atmospheric reflections on Beck’s work have palpable references to select episodes, giving them almost a visceral sensibility of their connections to the Le Corbusier space. Then, a conversation between art historian Alex Kitnick and Beck, titled “Institutional Sensibility,” reveals both the practical aspects of the making of *Program* combined with theoretical ruminations on the supple ways in which Beck’s presence, even when physically absent, intervened in the day-to-day institutional organism of the Carpenter Center. And my essay, “Functioning Limits,” looks closely at three episodes of *Program* within the historical contexts and legacies of institutional critique and issues around the struggle for artistic autonomy, including consideration of works by the late Michael Asher, whose practice has been influential on Beck. The essay examines modes of criticality pursued by both artist and curator, who at times may conspire in mutual and overlapping reflections to find—together—new pathways through and between spaces that optimize, expand, and reach beyond the usual borders of art institution.

1 *Remodel* remains installed at time of writing, although slightly altered from its original state.

2 Institution (Building) is now a permanent part of the program at the Carpenter Center. The platform supports inquiries related to the archive, architecture, and history of both the building and institution, and the binary and inseparable relationship between the two. An artist’s work can

manifest in any form, from exhibitions, events, and installations to interventions, tours, and publications, taking shape and changing throughout the residency. Generally, Institution (Building) seeks to recover the history of the institution while placing it within the broader contexts of contemporary art, culture, and the legacy of the Le Corbusier building and Harvard University. Renée Green is the participating artist in 2016–18.



An Organized  
System of  
Instructions

Martin  
Beck

# An Organized System of Instructions

Martin  
Beck

Editor  
James Voorhies

Carpenter Center  
for the Visual Arts

Sternberg  
Press

37

Removed  
and Applied

53

1963

75

Integration of  
the Program

87

A Report of  
the Committee

99

Photography  
and the City

111

Reality Is  
Invisible

143

The Limit of  
a Function

151

A Social  
Question

163

An Organized  
System of  
Instructions

197

Fifty  
Photographs

206 Contributors

207 Credits

11		Process document excerpts
<b>Institution Building</b>		Martin Beck
James Voorhies	7	May 22, 2014
21		
<b>Functioning Limits</b>	33	May 27, 2014
James Voorhies	49	June 5-6, 2014
61		
<b>Seven Contemplations on <i>Program</i></b>	57	July 24, 2014
Keller Easterling	71	August 3, 2014
123		
<b>Institutional Sensibility</b>	83	August 9, 17, 2014
A Conversation Between	95	September 4
Alex Kitnick and Martin Beck		December 23, 2014
171		
<b>An Organized System of Instructions</b>	107	March 30
Martin Beck		April 5, 2015
	119	May 27, 2015
	139	September 15, 2015
	147	September 22, 2015
	159	November 2, 2015
		May 18, 2016
	167	December 9, 2015
	193	November 14, 2015
		February 12, 2016

# An Organized System of Instructions

Editor: James Voorhies

Contributors: Martin Beck, Keller Easterling,  
James Goggin, Alex Kitnick, James Voorhies

*An Organized System of Instructions* is the culmination of Martin Beck's exhibition *Program*. The exhibition was a two-year engagement between Beck and the Carpenter Center as part of an expanded mode of residency called Institution (Building), an ongoing platform founded by James Voorhies with the intent to work with artists whose practices benefit from time and resources for extensive research at a particular site or context.

Design: James Goggin, Practise  
Type: Concorde (Günter Gerhard Lange, 1968)  
and Gerstner Programm (Christian Mengelt  
and Stephan Müller, 2017, after Karl  
Gerstner and Christian Mengelt, 1964–67)

Copy Editor: John Ewing  
Print: Die Keure, Bruges

## **Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts**

James Voorhies, Former John R. and  
Barbara Robinson Family Director  
Dina Deitsch, Interim John R. and  
Barbara Robinson Family Director  
Daisy Nam, Assistant Director  
Anna Kovacs, Exhibitions Manager  
Daisy Wong, Exhibitions Production Assistant

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts,  
Harvard University, 24 Quincy Street,  
Cambridge, MA 02138. carpenter.center

Sternberg Press, Caroline Schneider,  
Karl-Marx-Allee 78, D-10243 Berlin  
sternberg-press.com

ISBN 978-3-95679-263-2

© 2017 Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts,  
President, and Fellows of Harvard College

# Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts

## **Mission**

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts is dedicated to the synthesis of art, design, and education through the exhibition of existing works and production of new commissions. It strives to bring people, ideas, and objects together in generative ways that provide unparalleled experiences with contemporary art, ultimately enriching the creative and intellectual lives of our audiences.

## **Program**

The Carpenter Center program fosters meaningful engagement among artists, art, and our audiences. Exhibitions, lectures, residencies, publications, performances, screenings, and informal gatherings are choreographed to create a place where visual literacy, knowledge production, contemporary art, and critical inquiry seamlessly meet.

## **Institution (Building)**

Institution (Building) is a biennial invitation to artists to consider the institutional behaviors and practices of the Carpenter Center and Harvard University. In repeated visits to the university over the course of two years, artists engage through an expanded form of exhibition with various facets related to the archive, architecture, and history of the Carpenter Center. Their work manifests in anything from exhibitions, events, and installations to interventions, tours, and publications, taking shape and changing during the residency. Institution (Building) seeks to critically and thoughtfully recover the history of this institution and situate it within broader contexts of contemporary art, culture, and the extraordinary legacy of the Le Corbusier building.

Support for this publication is generously provided  
by Bundeskanzleramt Österreich,  
The Austrian Federal Chancellery, Arts and Culture

BUNDESKANZLERAMT ■ ÖSTERREICH

FEDERAL CHANCELLERY OF AUSTRIA

Removed  
and Applied

1963

Integration of  
the Program

A Report of  
the Committee

Photography  
and the City

Reality Is  
Invisible

The Limit of  
a Function

A Social  
Question

An Organized  
System of  
Instructions

Fifty  
Photographs

**Carpenter Center  
for the Visual Arts**

*Sternberg Press* 