

Walead Beshty

Standard Deviations

25 January – 19 April 2020

Born in London in 1976, Walead Beshty now lives and works in Los Angeles. His artistic work encompasses a wide range of media such as photography, sculpture, installation, prints, drawing and collage. Beshty's works are developed in series, which over the years evolve into comprehensive work complexes. The exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Winterthur, his first ever in a museum in the German-speaking world, features works from the last decade, many of which are on display for the first time anywhere. His large-format photograms, with which he first attracted international attention around 2000, will be shown, as well as the renowned FedEx works.

Beshty's works are mostly machine-made and geometrically abstract in form. The process of their production can be appreciated by looking at them. Sometimes the works are even simply fabricated from the components of computers or television sets. It is not the classical conception of an ingenious idea and its virtuoso realization by a gifted artist that underlies his art, but the awareness of the conditions of the specific context. Consequently, materials, production conditions, studio and exhibition spaces determine the work as well as its context within transport systems, exhibition institutions, the public, critics and the art market, in the framework of which it is ultimately perceived. This is always visible in his work in complete transparency: "I tend to think of my work in terms of constraints, either in context, convention or material, and use their logics to generate the work. I guess that's because I see life as an improvisation within constraints, and affirmative notions of selfhood, autonomy, freedom, etc., arise through the active negotiation with restriction." (Walead Beshty) In principle, the artist is concerned with the structural constraints that a system exerts on its parts and the constructive possibilities that derive from them. This intellectual dimension, which underlies the relationship between individuals and society, is subtly present in his work. Although the microsystem of art could well be understood as a testing ground for the macrosystem of our capitalist society, Beshty has no intention of commenting on the world or formulating any moral claim. As an artist he concentrates on the field of art, its formal issues and aesthetic appearance. The artist shares the serial production method, the use of industrial or commercial materials and the complete renunciation of illusionism with the principles of Frank Stella and Donald Judd, to name but two examples. Minimal Art also influences the constructive formal vocabulary and the belief in a com-



FEDEX® LARGE KRAFT BOX ©2008 FEDEX 330510 REV 6/08 GP, INTERNATIONAL PRIORITY, LOS ANGELES–TOKYO TRK#778608512056, MARCH 9–13, 2017

munication by means of aesthetic forms in space. But in contrast to this, Beshty's works are not simply designed as autonomous objects that define their presence in the triangle between exhibition space, audience and oeuvre. In fact, Beshty understands his objects, machines and photograms as dynamic components of the art system, which is determined and permanently changed by the simultaneity of conception, production, circulation, criticism and trade, etc. These issues, usually ignored in the perception of art, are always recognizable in his work. On the basis of selected examples, the central themes of Beshty's work, such as circulation, trade, and the conditions of production, will be discussed below.

The FedEx works (see rooms 12, 13, 14, 15, 17) deal with the importance of art circulation. It is a basic prerequisite for art to be perceived globally. The necessary logistics are carried out in secret, although this involves enormous structural efforts. Volume and form of the copper objects determine the standards of the worldwide transport service Federal Express. As a consequence, Beshty's objects must be transported from one exhibi-

tion to the next by this shipping service. As a material, copper leaves traces of borrowing, transport and handling on its surfaces. Cargo consignment notes, customs documents, shipping labels and barcodes remain an integral part of the work, which therefore looks different at each exhibition location. On one hand, each work reflects its shipping history, on the other, it also mirrors the respective concrete exhibition context. The FedEx works made of laminated glass behave similarly: glass too reflects its surroundings. Because of the transportation-related cracks in the glass and the altered physical form resulting from the forces acting on it during shipping, this changes the way in which the cubes re-arrange and fragment their surroundings each time. The FedEx cartons, in turn, function simultaneously as transport boxes, sculptural elements and pedestals, and they are an integral part of the presentation. These are only a few aspects of the processes that take place and manifest themselves in the works. They illustrate that Beshty's work does not merely circulate, but that the circulation is the work itself, as it is ultimately experienced in the exhibition space.

By contrast, the *Copper Surrogate* tables and work surfaces (see rooms 17 and 20) deal with the place where works of art are negotiated and sold. They are constructed using polished, untreated copper plates in the masses of an office desk, such as those found in a particular exhibition space, for instance a gallery. The design of the existing table becomes a ready-made form. Through the choice of furniture, a gallery signals a certain identity and clientele it is addressing. This in turn influences the perception of the works that are sold there. Most

important, however, is the desk's function of exchanging information between the gallery and the collector, who in turn help determine the significance of the work. For the duration of the exhibition, the copper plate replaces the original desktop and "documents" the traces of the processes mentioned. Afterwards it is dismantled and treated as a conventional work of art. No longer may the copper plate be touched with bare hands. Essentially, the *Copper Surrogates* desktops document the traces of immaterial work in conversations, transactions and negotiations. In the work itself, the ready-made, design, trade and social interaction converge as an aesthetic object.



Cross-Contaminated Inverted RA4 Contact Print (MYC/Six Magnet: Los Angeles, California, April 11, 2016; Fujicolor Crystal Archive Super Type C, Em. No. 112-006; Kodak Ektacolor RA Bleach-Fix and Replenisher; Kreonite KM IV 5225 RA4 Color Processor, Ser. No. 00092174; 07216)



Table [Source: embossed lacquered medium density fiberboard and chrome finish steel conference room desk designed by Lievore Altherr Molina from the conference room at Galerie Capitain Petzel, Berlin ...]

For Beshty, the aesthetic form of a work is essential. In order to exist, it must assume form in order to be perceived. The photographs explore the limitations of this strategy. Normally photography depicts concrete forms. Because photographic paper has no depth and the images distract from the carrier material and evoke the illusion of an absent world, it is perceived as "incorporeal." Moreover, the production process is highly dependent on the material and technology used and is therefore very "physical." The *RA4 Contact Print* works (see rooms 13, 14, 15, 19) accentuate this. They are created with an old, large-format color printing machine that causes paper jams, stalls and has partial dropouts. The dysfunctional condition of the machine creates effects that cannot be controlled. For example, chemical properties are influenced by a malfunction of the thermostat or the developing time is not correctly maintained due to irregularities in the gears of the rollers. In the case of the *Cross-Contaminated RA4 Contact Print* works, the machine periodically

malfuncted while the photograph was in the fixing bath. The manipulation to restart the processes left traces during the exposure in the form of hand-prints. This also contaminated the developing bath in the machine, which led to changes in color shades and intensity. In the diptychs of the Inverted RA4 Contact Prints, the machine was additionally overstrained by developing two photographic sheets together and on top of each other. The papers then shifted in the machine and were no longer congruent, while the chemicals trapped between the sheets created mirror effects in the work. The oversized format and the non-representational nature of the work steer the viewer's gaze away from the usual narrative or content-related questions towards form, material and the production process. This approach is underscored by the massive frame with engraved archive number, emphasizing the objectivity of the photograph. The images almost appear physically present.

Normally, the viewers of an exhibition expect art to be displayed perfectly, to create illusions or tell a story, but to ignore its connection to the profane world of merchandise. Beshty undermines these expectations and makes the manifold connections to the art system transparent. While walking through his exhibition, one encounters all these references to production conditions and processes, logistics, handling, conservation, perception, the market, increase in value, etc. As a comprehensive picture, they provide insights into the largely hidden structures of the art world.



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Publication

To accompany the exhibition, the artist's monograph "Works in Exhibitions 2011 - 2020" is published by Koenig Books. With numerous colour illustrations and contributions by Noam Elcott and Lynn Kost, among others.

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Softcover, 272 pages, English/German
CHF 34.00

Publication date: 5 April 2020

Reservations until 31 March 2020 are shipped free of charge in Switzerland. If you are interested, you can register at the cash desk or order online: www.kmw.ch/shop

Events accompanying the exhibition

- artist talk
Sunday, 26.1.2020, 1 pm, Walead Beshty in conversation with curator Lynn Kost
- Curator tours
Sunday, 23.2.2020, 1 pm, with Lynn Kost
Sunday, 19.4.2020, 1 pm, with Lynn Kost
- Book launch and exhibition tour
Sunday, 5.4.2020, 1 pm, with director Konrad Bitterli and Lynn Kost

The exhibition is organized in cooperation with the MAMCO (Musée d'art contemporain et moderne), Geneva and was generously supported by
 - Gallery Eva Presenhuber, Zurich/New York
 - Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York
 - Rain Projects, Los Angeles
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