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CIRCUMSTANCE
+ RESISTANCE:
WALEAD BESHTY

POLITICIZATION
OF CULTURE: WHW
IN CONVERSATION

COMPASSION
SITING + CONTEXT:
BERGER + PURATH

PUBLIC
INTERVENTION:
CREATIVE TIME SUMM



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Concreteness and Circumstance

Noah Simblist in conversation with *Walead Beshty*

Noah Simblist: Your recent show at the Hirshhorn and your proposal for the Wexner Center both seem to engage architecture directly as a major part of the exhibition. Was the architecture part of the content, or a result of your desire to focus on a kind of site-specificity?

Walead Beshty: Both exhibitions began with an engagement with their context, not only the architecture but their overall circumstance. The architecture of a given venue often provides a concrete point of departure, a way to get involved in the histories and life of the place, and a way to understand the aesthetic framework within which my work is going to operate. Museum architecture always proposes a relationship between an audience and art objects. The building also tacitly defines the sort of art it is meant to contain, that is, the particular building's interpretation of the conventions of display implies a definition of the art object. This is always the case. No matter how broad, neutral, inclusive or ambivalent the architecture might try to be, it is always divisive in some way. I don't mean this negatively, it's just a fact. It always excludes something, resists some form of art, and regulates what does and does not constitute an art object. What is compelling about the Wexner and the Hirshhorn is that each seems to take on a conscious position, make a conscious argument about inclusion or exclusion. They both reject the possibility of a neutral architectural container by actively problematizing certain conventional art forms. In Bunshaft's case, it begins with the wall, and anything that goes on the wall must struggle with the Hirshhorn's curves. In Eisenman's case, any work that takes the Wexner's uniform, level, and gridded floorplan as a given becomes troubled. Both broadly emphasize art's dependence on Cartesian grids. Bunshaft's building draws attention to the artwork's dependence on and assumptions about the wall. Eisenman's performs a similar function with regard to the floor. It's clear that Bunshaft's thoughts on art objects were premised on painting, while Eisenman was focused on sculpture. Each posits the visual as the chief means to experience a work, and constructs rather unique approaches to a building's optical framing of an artwork.

But coming back to your question, I was not interested in the exhibitions being "about" the Bunshaft or the Eisenman building. Nor was I to simply accept the programs inherent in the buildings as a starting point, as something that I had to account for before I made any choices about what I was going to do. I have to account for my site, much as buildings themselves inevitably must account for the sites that preexist them, and will outlast them. This doesn't mean that the show is "about" the site, anymore than a building is "about" its site, but rather that it comes out of preexisting competing forces, which include the site. In each instance, the key choice is which forces you actively account for, and how that choice defines the work. I think it's important to say that it isn't my choice to make an exhibition site-specific or not, insofar as the display of the work in a particular context is already specific. The question is which contextual cues are expanded upon.

NS: You're not constructing it because it's there already.

WB: Yes. The building is simply part of a given set of conditions, something in which you—that is, any agent within it, including the artist, the viewer, the curator, and so on—are playing a role. And there is agency in the choice of where to begin. For example, a visitor, an artist or a curator can choose to move through the museum in a way that the architecture attempts to discourage; they can "read" the building against its grain. After spending a lot of time at the Hirshhorn, I realized that the Bunshaft building is very much about a dialectic between perception and its synthetic representation, however implicitly; it deals with the disjunction between corporeal vision—the curved stereoscopic perception of the lens or eye—and the abstract Cartesian formula of Renaissance perspective—as realized in the rectilinear pictorial form of wall work, and its ur-form, painting. The building generates a fundamental friction with art objects that, made with the idea that walls are flat, assume the rectilinearity of perception. In essence, it shows that a flat wall is an idea, a choice, a naturalized convention of art objects, in short, the material result of an abstraction and not an absolute or universal condition.

PAGE 1: **Walead Beshty**, *Six Magnet, Three Color Curt* (CMY: Irvine, California, September 6th 2009, Fuji Crystal Archive Type C), 2009, color photographic paper, 50 x 103 inches (courtesy of the artist and WallSpace, New York; photo: Hugh Kelly) / OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT: **Walead Beshty**, installation view of *Popular Mechanics* at WallSpace, New York, March 3–April 8, 2009; OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT + BOTTOM: installation view of *Walead Beshty: Legibility on Color Backgrounds* at Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, April 30–September 13, 2009 (all images courtesy of the artist and WallSpace, New York; photo: James Ewing)



I felt like the spirit of the Bunshaft building resonated with my own thinking, that is, the understanding that all pictures are abstractions. I wondered if it were possible to make a non-abstract photograph, in essence, to denaturalize the relationship between the pictorial and the photographic. I guess I would say that my work, photographic or otherwise, actively resists abstraction and metaphor. Anyway, the pictorial is a form of abstraction. It's not inherent to photography or any medium, it is simply a convention that the material is called upon to support. Pictorial photographs assume that every photograph is "about" or "of" something else, "of" something that's not present—indicated by the absence of its referent—and in turn, is a schematic representation of that absent thing. As photography became more reflexive, photographs became about this lack of presence—the theoretical commonplace that photography is "about" death, or is centered on a fundamental absence or distance, arises from this line of thought. I think this model is problematic, and more exactly, it reifies what I believe is the fundamental political problem associated with depiction. So I try to make the point that the phenomenon is in the room, as is meaning, which is socially grounded, present in every moment of reception. Understood in this way, a photograph isn't about what's not there—it is about what is there. It might just be a language-based problem, in terms of how to describe something, what it's "called," but language also has high stakes; it allows, by naming something, by reference, the isolation of qualities and the understanding of those qualities. It colors, if not defines, our means for thinking analytically about the world around us. Things without names are invisible, and the edges of the categories defined by the act of naming are significant. They, along with actions or processes of production, dialectically form our experience of the world. I think it's important to be careful about what terms we allow into our thinking; categories, can obscure as much as they reveal. Site-specificity, for example, implies that there's such a thing as a non-sited act, that it is possible for an enunciation to be free from the circumstance of its expression. I believe this is a patently false assumption.

NS: It seems that site-specificity is such a loaded term because of all of its historical uses. But a kind of self-consciousness to context—to the

context of a material, a process, a history of those things—recurs, as you were saying, in the photographs or even with the FedEx boxes as readymades. Architecture becomes its extension.

WB: I think the question of consciousness is key, because this history is always working, consciously or not. No viewer is outside of history or outside of a particular context. As for the readymade element, I'd agree. I think of the site as a kind of readymade, a big readymade mechanism that has its own specific flow. The readymade points specifically to context, site, and the way that cues present in a location—be they social or physical—make art art. This applies to language as well, insofar as it is a kind of frame. The problem of the readymade is that it implies that the construct is static. But the tacit agreement to discuss an object in a particular way—be it as art, in terms of its architectural frame or whatever—leaves out the contingent element. In other words, it posits that art is a categorical delimiter, a type of object, by avoiding its contingent, socially determined dimensions. It points to conventions but doesn't strive to alter them. It simply puts convention on display. But this is beside the point. In my work, I think of the means of production as the readymade, whether it be FedEx, the x-ray machine's interaction with photographic film or the exhibition itself—in the case of the glass floor, which is made by being seen. But this is always conditional. I try to juxtapose these systems of production, read them against their grain. The most interesting thing about doing a show is probably that you have to adapt to a particular set of constraints. The challenge is to make these constraints generative, rather than repressive. Too much art that is socially and politically self-aware is about monumentalizing repressive forces through overt opposition. In the end, that's self-defeating. It often results in melancholia or a kind of anomic celebration of its own lack of efficacy. Negation is the chief expression of this tendency, and every act of negation is a perverse form of preservation. Working in Eisenman's Wexner Center is a good example. There is a pronounced aesthetic program attached to the Wexner, more aggressive than Bunshaft's Hirshhorn. Eisenman's building competes with the objects it contains, sets up an opposition between the building and the work. You're not going to win a direct fight with it, but you can redirect its emphasis and exploit

its blind spots, which are like small pockets of indeterminacy within its totalizing structure.

That's also like discussions of political opposition—symmetrical versus asymmetrical warfare. The best way to confront something isn't necessarily to make a more bombastic gesture, to symmetrically oppose it, like I'll make something huge and stab it right through the middle of Eisenman's building. Of course, in doing this, the building always wins, it has the force of permanence and capital behind it. It also seems perverse to try to speak a language of power if one is endeavoring to denaturalize power. Fighting fire with fire is a kind of allegorical gesture, an allegory for art's lack of efficacy, because it reifies the very power it is attempting to question or oppose by inhabiting its language, proposing it as the only option. I can't accept that premise. For me, the only suitable response was to propose a work that literally reflected some of the Wexner's surfaces, recast the building within itself, and heightened it to the point where it becomes something else. I tried to capitalize on Eisenman's fetish for the abstraction implicit in plan, and the disjunction between the plan and the physical object. In this translation, a space is opened up, a space which isn't territorialized, not digested by either the building or the plan it originates from. The model for the building is the interplay of two abstract organizational systems—two systems that are overlaid, actually two major and two minor systems. As such, there's a reification of the idea of dominant orders in that building, which inhabits the interpenetration of those orders—specifically the city grid of Columbus, and the grid of the University, which are skewed at 12.25 degrees from one another. But there's wear and tear. The building is subjected to a whole range of incidental effects that aren't accounted for in its development along these abstract axes. So my plan for the lobby wall was to refinish it by planing it and making it exacting, thus revealing the layers of paint and substrates as a side effect of making it adhere to the initial abstract proposition of the building, to push the friction between the material and abstraction to a liminal point.

The other part of the exhibition is an installation of a shatterproof mirrored floor, which cracks as the space is used. Although I've shown this work in various contexts, it seemed ideal for the Wexner. Firstly, the program of the building, in its assertion of dominant orders to define its

OPPOSITE, TOP: installation view of *Walead Beshty: Passages at LA <ART*, Los Angeles, March 21–April 18, 2009 [photo: Fredrik Nilsen]; OPPOSITE, BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Transparency (Positive)* [Fuji Provia Positive Film: April 10–April 16, 2007 LAX/ORD ORD/EWR EWR/ORD ORD/SNA SNA/LAX], 2009, Epson K3 Ultrachrome archival ink jet print on Museo Silver Rage paper, 44 x 59.471 inches; *Transparency (Negative)* [Kodak NC Color Film: November 4–November 10, 2008 LAX/IAD IAD/BRU BRU/IAD IAD/LAX], 2009, Epson K3 Ultrachrome archival ink jet print on Museo Silver Rage paper, 44 x 59.471 inches



structure, ignores the quotidian and incidental use/markmaking of a public that moves through it. In other words, it attempts to work outside of common use or time, presenting itself as a static juxtaposition of orders rather than a diachronically dynamic one. It privileges the spatial and pictorial over the diachronic. I wanted to emphasize accumulated indexes of use, to insert this element into the building's fetish for power. I also wanted to insert the contingent, by way of the transitional light effects that occur within the institution—the cracks in the floor create a constantly evolving pattern of reflection within the building—and the shifting of meanings that daily use assigns to the building. The floor reflects an image of the building that is constantly being fractured and rearranged—at the antipode to the fragmentation that is statically rendered in the building itself.

NS: As you go back and forth between various media, a consistent line of thought persists. That's one way of thinking of abstraction—in a formalist sense but not necessarily in the way formalism is normally used. It's more about looking for abstract structures that could be in relationship to the concrete qualities of specific media like architecture, sculpture, photography, or even painting and furniture design—all of these things are malleable because of the forms that transcend the definition of each medium. At the same time, you often end up really becoming self-conscious of the medium that you're using and its specific history. Within a particular strain of modernism this would be described as the autonomy of one medium, like painting for instance. It's interesting because they seem to be two different tendencies, but

somehow you're working back and forth between them.

WB: I don't see them as separate. Form and material are dialectically informed by one another. Form, or use, defines the historical and technological development of material, while material defines the types of form that can be made, or even imagined. I'm not interested in a grand definition of a particular medium—some sort of ontological construction—but in the particular expression of a set of relations within specific contexts. I think I'm most interested in the translation of abstract ideas—from abstraction in general to the materially specific. I'm very sensitive to abstractions, but I don't want to traffic in them. It's what I find interesting about law. Law is a set of abstract rules that try to compose action within moral categories. What did Oliver Wendell Holmes say? "The right to swing my fist ends at the tip of the next man's nose"—abstract ethical ideals are engineered from a basic premise, an example, and then are applied to other instances, which are often much more complicated. One goes from an idealized notion of society or ethical relationships to the concrete world. In order to apply these ideals or rules, there is compromise, negotiation, and this is where the real work is done. Abstract ideals are adapted to the concrete world when the rubber really hits the road. It's always in those confrontations between the abstract and the mundane that one encounters a surplus. That's the stakes. It's that transition that I always focus on. Take, for example, the embassy. The abstract notion of international sovereignty creates an accident, that is, a building that is untouchable and lost, while still being a physical presence. It's continuous with

the landscape, but not continuous with the laws governing the relationships between nation states. These relationships, in turn, define your rights, whether you're a citizen or an alien. We don't usually see that these rights are, in fact, alienable, able to be wrested from our bodies. We don't consciously confront how we become different types of "selves" in different circumstances, how we are defined differently and become different subjects in different places. We are instructed that selfhood is somehow static, inalienable, ontologically pure.

NS: You also write and teach. To me, these seem like models of concrete social reaction to the abstractions of artistic production.

WB: I started writing and teaching because it was a way to participate when just making work did not allow me to do so to the extent I wanted. It was simply another way to enter into the dialogue. On a personal level, it often clarifies my own intentions and my own lazy preconceptions. I do like the fact both teaching and writing circulate in a very specific way that is distinct from the movement of art objects. They both highlight that art traffics in more than just objects—in ideas, concepts, and communities.

NS: This relates to what you have said about the irony of the backlash against conceptual art because it's too elitist or against certain kinds of writing or artwork because they're too academic. These criticisms seem to be predicated on the idea that each experience of a work of art should happen independently of any wider history or discourse.



WB: That really troubles me. Conceptual art was directly focused on moving art into the public sphere, making it accessible, both in reception—from the magazine page to a diagram or a sequence of text, which don't require an art space—and in production, as most of the materials used were commonly available. It inspired a whole new set of concerns in art, and required a shift in the way art objects were discussed. This produced a backlash, a "theory kills art" type of thing. I remember that in his talk at UCLA, Robert Storr essentially told the students not to read "theory," because it would hurt their art. I was teaching there at the time, and was livid about his talk. I find it obscene to tell students to fear something. Theory—whatever that really means—is just one of many influences artists can look to, and they have free license to use it however they want. They absolutely shouldn't fear any set of ideas. It was obscene to me that an educator would tell students to fear and avoid ideas. It's a connoisseurist argument wrapped in faux-populism.

Such waging of a faux-populist argument by people who are in positions of authority drives me nuts. It's more than a little self-serving for them to act as if they were performing some sort of altruistic gesture when in fact it simply speaks to their own biases. Ultimately, to say that some things should not be looked at—that they can hurt the fragile psyche of the unformed or naïve—only serves to preserve hegemony in terms of access to culture. What's ironic is that the impulse behind conceptual art and theory was to open up and democratize art making, to wrest it from a connoisseurist discourse. People enjoy leveling accusations of elitism at journals like *October*, but the irony is that *October* opened things up. It accepted that artists were not people you wrote about, but rather that they are people you were in dialogue with. That's respectful. Populism, on the other hand, always assumes that people are stupid, that they need to be talked down to. I think for better or worse, incorporating the enterprise of theory opened up the situation. Even if you feel like the theory is rarefied, it opened up the situation so that a multitude of voices could course through it. My early influences were critics more than artists; I liked artworks, but critics gave me the tools to think more broadly about my work, and their work was accessible. I could get a book or magazine and carry it with me. Art is not transportable in that way. More than artists, critics were the ones who made the case that art was significant; I felt artists tended to speak in self-important ways, but that criticism

was more open, often less ego-driven. Beyond that, it meant something that someone gave a shit enough about art to write about it, use it to think new ideas, expand the frame of the work, and take its implications seriously. This was part of a move to democratize culture. I believe that this project both is important and, at its base, politically resonant.

Noah Simblist is an artist and writer based in Dallas and Austin.



OPPOSITE, LEFT TO RIGHT: installation view of *Walead Beshty and Karl Haendel: Plug 'n' Play* at Redling Fine Art, Los Angeles, October 24–November 28, 2009; ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: installation view of *Production Stills* at Thomas Dane Gallery, London, October 13–November 14, 2009 (photo: Hugh Kelly)