

# REGEN PROJECTS

Tumlir, Jan. "Walead Beshty: Piece by Piece." Aperture Vol.192 (Fall 2008) [ill.]



## WALEAD BESHTY PIECE BY PIECE

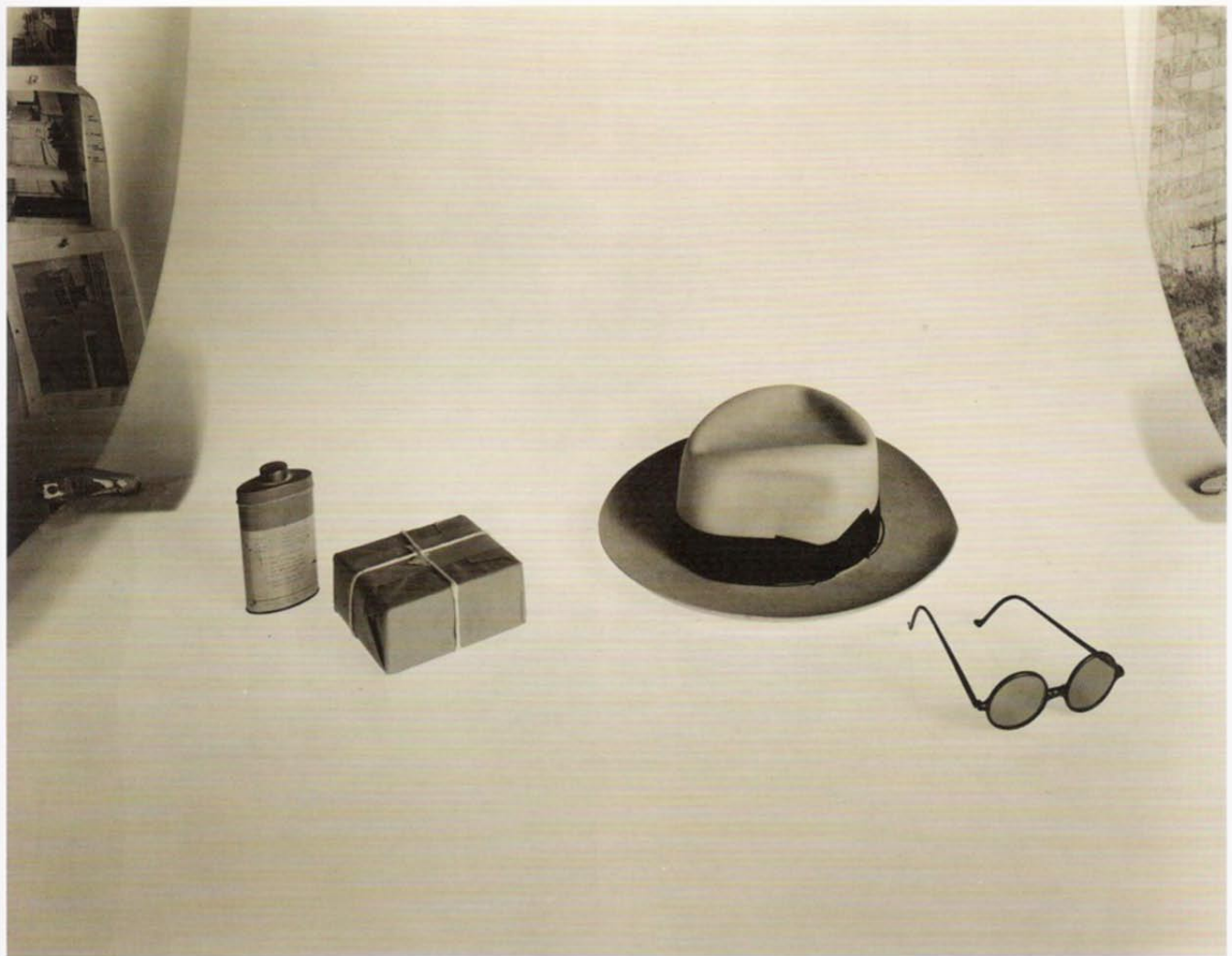
BY JAN TUMLIR

On first impression, Walead Beshty would appear to be one of those "artists who make 'pieces,'" as Ed Ruscha inscribed on the face of a 1976 painting—meaning, I assume, that he works on one thing after another. Aside from an abiding interest in the photographic medium, its particular history and its impact on history in general, the work evinces a restless, roving curiosity. Beshty is the active protagonist of some of his own earliest output, from the start of this century, which accordingly falls under the heading of "self-portraiture," but almost immediately he begins to retreat toward the pictorial margins and blind spots, finally disappearing altogether and ceding to what was formerly the background. Ensuing works take in the landscape, architectural, and still-life genres, and touch on a wide range of topics, from the displacement of the public sphere by such things as planned communities and shopping malls to the postcolonial realignment of the geopolitical power structure by corporate capital and telecommunications. More recently, it is the background of the background, the material

substrate of the image as such, that has caught this artist's attention. Beshty's latest photographs are almost entirely abstract, verging on psychedelic; there is no referent available for us to ponder outside the technical means employed in their making.

The earlier "pieces" do not exactly anticipate this more recent development in the sense of a narrative causality, but they do lend retroactive support. To grant these abstractions the sort of autonomy and distance from their particular historical context that are traditionally expected of abstract art would be to drastically foreshorten our access to a practice that is salient, rather, in its overall depth and density. If one takes the opposite approach and attempts to arrange the "pieces" into a meaningful whole, the results will perhaps remain tenuous, ramshackle, but that is the treatment that Beshty's work invites. It would be wrong to assume that just because he began by focusing his camera on himself, the subsequent turn toward the nonfigurative remains grounded in self and incrementally follows the involuted trajectory of a kind

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of abstract expressionism. Indeed, in the light of the abstractions, we can say that the work was never really about interiority per se; instead, it was and remains about a lack of interiority. The signposts of the poststructuralist dissolution of selfhood are called out in passing, with nods to Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault.

The self is conjured out of the shadows of "the other," as Beshty demonstrates in *Absent Self-Portrait #3 (Age Progressions)* (2001), where the task of portraiture is outsourced as part of a missing-person investigation. Provided with several photographs of the artist in the so-called latency period of late childhood and early adolescence, a forensic specialist is asked to cosmetically advance Beshty's appearance to meet his then-present age of twenty-five. The results are fashioned around a generic range of lifestyle options available to young adult American males—rowdy sports-fan, preppy wiseacre, businessman-to-be, etc.—but these ready-made character types never quite gel

with the underlying facts of the image. Eight photographs yield eight distinct "sitters," all of whom appear to be playing a role, a deception. A nagging sense of misregistration between the givens and the variables of identity lend to the face a sinister peeled-off quality vaguely reminiscent of Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse* films, or Georges Franju's 1960 *Eyes Without a Face*, and confirming Sigmund Freud's suspicion that there is nothing more uncanny than the look in the eye of a liar.

A concurrent series produced between 2001 and 2003 and titled *The Phenomenology of Shopping* suggests that the self is pieced together from a mix-and-match "system of objects" (as per the title of Jean Baudrillard's 1968 book). Beshty snaps himself inside a succession of stores, literally gorging on merchandise. In some of the most extreme instances, with face buried in colorful displays of soft, frilly, welcoming things, and body hanging limply behind, his shopper takes on the appearance of an overgrown parasitic worm. The brief of these photographs is a straightforward



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PAGE 32: *Excursionist Views (Oriental Gardens 1971, Rebuilt 1983, Street Detail, after Paul Rudolph)*, black-and-white stereographic photograph, 2001-05; PAGE 33: *Still Life in the Observatory (Perspective/Composition Study after Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye at Poissy, Toit-Jardin Looking Southwest, "Gray Hat, Sunglasses, and Two Indeterminate Objects," 1931)*, 2005; ABOVE LEFT: *Travel Picture Sunset (Tschaikowskistrasse 17 in multiple exposures\* [LAXFRATHF/TXLCPHSEALAX], March 27-April 3, 2006)*, 2006-08; ABOVE RIGHT: *Travel Picture Rose (Tschaikowskistrasse 17 in multiple exposures\* [LAXFRATHF/TXLCPHSEALAX], March 27-April 3, 2006)* (\*Contax G2, L-3 Communications examiner 3DX 6000, and InVision Technologies CTX 5000), 2006-08; OPPOSITE: *Absent Self-Portrait #3 (Age Progressions)*, 2001.



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metaphor on and about consumption, much like a joke—but this joke remains philosophically compelling long after one “gets it.” The comic mode is acutely physical, slapstick, as a direct consequence of x-ing the head out of the equation. At the same time, the slapstick designation is itself knowingly applied here, once again calling up references to early cinema in its vacillation between conditions of sheer interiority and sheer exteriority. One thinks of the silent work of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, and then later of Jacques Tati and Jerry Lewis, all of whom collided in one way or another with the efficient, streamlined surfaces of the modern world, but in this case, the round-peg-in-a-square-hole postures of torqued, spastic resistance give way to delirious merger. A channel of exchange is opened between person and thing, giving birth to a second-nature mutation, half alive and half dead.

In *Excursionist Views* (2001–05), and then in *Still Life in the Observatory* (2005), the figure is finally squeezed out of the space of the picture by built form, leaving us to imagine a self molded from without by the aesthetic ideals of architects, civic planners, politicians, and bureaucrats. The first series plays on the familiar theme of “design for life” gone bad in its gothic, ghost-town treatment of an early master-plan community in New Haven, all but abandoned by its tenants. Shot “day for night,” these shadow-filled homes with their boarded-up windows bespeak blindness, the eclipse of utopian vision, but, paradoxically perhaps, the photographs are presented stereoscopically doubled: one image for each eye. A similar sort of anthropomorphic extension takes place in the *Still Life* photographs, in which a selection of signature Le Corbusier accoutrements—the round spectacles, the hat, the drinking flask—are arranged into a still-life set-up that amounts, at the same time, to the portrait of a missing, or invisible, man. It is by recourse to prior works that one might be tempted to see these diverse things as prosthetic projections of the head and face, now haunted by its absence.

From here on in, Beshty’s practice grows more and more experimental as its referential coordinates are redrawn from the world outside to the closed space of the studio and darkroom. The deferral of strict intentionality and openness to the workings of chance and intuition evident in the later pieces invites comparisons with painterly process, except that this artist’s “dialectic of outside and inside,” as the phenomenologists would say, is pointedly not determined by memory, the internalized image. The clearing away

of every last trace of outlying objective subject matter does not yield to “inner vision,” as one might expect. Rather, it is the lack of any such vision that is made to stand out. No longer at the service of the eye, no longer explicitly linked to the process of seeing, the sensitive surface of the photograph is treated increasingly as a thing in itself.

In Beshty’s own estimation, his “breakthrough” project is the 2006 *Travel Picture* suite, executed partly inside, partly outside the Iraqi embassy in Berlin. Another unoccupied historical ruin that is maintained in place by the diplomatic agreements of a bygone age, this is a site of such obvious interest to an American artist working in this time of war that it could stand for topicality as such. But this same topicality is also the source of its challenge, for what can one actually do with such already-full, perhaps overfull, subject matter? Beshty began the series by taking a number of relatively conventional documentary views of the place as a decaying archive strewn with cheap office furniture and printed-matter mountains. The “finishing touch,” however, was found only upon return to the United States, at the very moment of border-crossing, as his undeveloped film was accidentally exposed to the probing rays of a scanning mechanism. Leaving a second order of information, non-referential but still potently indexical, atop the first, the scanning process is registered in the resulting pictures as washes of rose and vermilion color, softening the gray, historical “hard facts” of the disused embassy. Like antique photographs tinted by hand, these pictures reveal the submersion of one medium under another, but then, wholly divorced from the task of description, the softly modulated hues may also be seen as a kind of psychedelic mold sprouting forth from the image itself.

All of Beshty’s subsequent works are permeated by the same dank, shut-in atmosphere, a sinister and quietly ecstatic gnosis. The process of subjective dissolution is carried through to its end as even the sightline of the camera is broken. In this way, we are led through a succession of ever more radical erasures: the artist begins by hiding his own “true face,” and then, as though playing a game of peek-a-boo, makes the rest of the world disappear. What is left over is analogous to bright light filtered through closed eyelids, not outwardly oriented vision nor “inner vision” so much as the inward illumination of one’s own skin. The 2006–07 *Pictures Made by My Hand with the Assistance of Light*, as Beshty calls them, take shape neither on the phenomenal plane nor on the



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perceptual. These two planes are here overlaid as a single autonomous surface or screen that records every slight change in the surrounding conditions of light, temperature, humidity, etc., and does so “mindlessly.”

Taking his cue from the *Travel Pictures*, Beshty gradually dispenses with specific content in order to concentrate more directly on the overall treatment of the photograph as a kind of “painting with light.” His earliest abstractions are the outcome of directed exposures of photographic paper to a range of different light-sources and chemical applications. A second set of prints cut light entirely out of the process, thereby reflecting on the darkroom as a studio of sorts, a space of primary production. Here, the surprising range of “painterly” effects that Beshty achieves by other means—trails, swipes, drips, and splatters; feathering, scumbling, and stippling shifts in tone and hue; passages of pseudo-illusionism, of seemingly rendered topographies, textures, and atmospheres; hard-edged and wavy line-work with highlights and shadows; Rorschach-like

incidents of doubling, “ghosting,” and so on—are all outcomes of immediate hands-on manipulation of photographic materials.

More specifically, these moves point back to a photography that still unfolds in two distinct stages, continuously alternating between poles of darkness and light. One is reminded of the technical symmetry between the analog camera and the darkroom, both of which operate on the principle of exposure, brief flashes of illumination within a space otherwise sealed shut. By removing these crucial parts of the process—that is, first the apparatus of the camera and the enlarger, and then light—Beshty leaves us with a kind of blind photography. The ultimate eradication of any outlying worldly content in favor of this inward-turning loop of self-reflexivity is underwritten by a sound structuralist logic and distantly recalls the filmic exploits of such figures as Harry Smith and Stan Brakhage, who likewise applied their hands directly to the surface of their chosen medium. From the earliest futurist attempts to take film in a more painterly direction, either by way of conventional animation techniques or by painting directly onto celluloid, to the wholly film-free glass-slide and Petri-dish projections of chemical reactions and living cultures by Joshua White and the Boyle Family, these precedents clearly demonstrate how the path of technical reduction can sometimes lead to visual excess. Film simply cannot survive without light, however, and the fact that photography not only can, but appears to thrive in darkness, is one of the great revelations of Beshty’s work.

Where does this leave the self? One answer might be sought in the contemporary ascendancy of biology over physics as the dominant science, a turn that is reflected in a range of current fascinations from eco-sustainability to genetic engineering. A related sensibility informs Beshty’s paring down of the photographic machinery to only those elements that come into direct contact with the human organism. In art, haptic experience has long been theorized as an atavistic backdrop to the visual. The maturation of individuals and societies is accordingly narrated as a process of separation between the subject and the object-world via steadily expanding sightlines—the farther away the better, or more modern. Blindness, by contrast, is equated with regression, bringing the subject right up against things—“the skin of the world” in the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In Beshty’s cameraless work, the photograph is treated as a skin precisely, but in the darkness it is impossible to tell whether it belongs to the world inside or outside the body. This now is a zone of vast speculative potential, for it no longer describes a limit. Every pore opens onto a universe. ◻

**THIS PAGE:** *The Disney Store, West Field Mall, Bridgeport, Connecticut, 2001*, from the series *The Phenomenology of Shopping, 2001–03*; **OPPOSITE:** *Picture Made by My Hand with the Assistance of Light (detail), 2007*.