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ART

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IN CONVERSATION

WALEAD BESHTY with Amy Ontiveros

The brutally systematic, though still empathetic works of Los Angeles-based artist Walead Beshty are undisguised elucidations of specific active systems. Often hinging on frameworks of social or commercial labor, such as the day-to-day activity of gallery staff, X-ray machines, or FedEx shipping operations, his photographic and sculptural works are each indexical products of transactions—whether initiated by, or exposed by the artist. Large color-bleeding photograms, minimalist copper surrogates with indelible fingerprints, and humming deconstructed office machines comprise the material contributions orchestrated within *Open Source*, the artist's second solo-exhibition at Friedrich Petzel Gallery (April 20 – June 17, 2017). In the midst of this, and on the heels of a major curatorial endeavor at the Hessel Museum at Bard CCS, *Picture Industry* (opening June 24, 2017), Beshty speaks with Amy Ontiveros about our negotiation and construction of conventions, activity as material, and systems as tools.

Amy Ontiveros (Rail): We're surrounded by dismantled devices, some of which are deceptively alive. I'm curious, do you see objects as vessels? In having the capacity to hold cultural information, relationships, or emotion?

Walead Beshty: Cultural information, sure, I think all objects exemplify certain cultural ideas. They are a representation of how we understand or see the world, how we interface with it, how we seek to manage the world around us. They also represent the body in absentia, because they interface or augment the body in some way. But I see them as empty vessels, or conduits, and their physical qualities, their aesthetic management, defines what might be able to pass through them. I think of objects like appendages, they extend the body in some way, allow it to interface or manipulate some aspect of the world, and extend the world into us. I think it's important to add that I don't believe objects have a "life," or meaning beyond their role in a system, so I don't really think of them having any emotional content; I just don't think this is something they are capable of. People have emotions, objects don't, nor do I think objects convey emotion. They might elicit emotion in a viewer, trigger emotional responses, but to me that is very different from conveying or containing emotion.

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Rail: I take it then that you're not a believer in Animism?

Beshty: What do you mean by Animism?

Rail: Inanimate objects—plants, natural phenomena—having spirits or souls.

Beshty: I don't believe in the existence of a soul, not in people, and certainly not in objects. You could think of things as reflecting human agendas, that they index our ideas about the world, which is evidenced in a machine's functioning, its aesthetics, and so on, but this is not a soul. Soul would be a metaphor for this kind of understanding of a machine, but I think metaphors are inherently dangerous. They allow brutality, they turn life into an abstraction.

At its base, the notion of a soul as separate from the body doesn't make sense to me, I am my body, and my

personality, behavior, and so on is inextricable from it; there is no me that exists apart from my body. I think of the soul as a religious narrative which justifies pain and suffering, that the soul is immune to certain physical brutalities, so we are told to tolerate human suffering because there is the myth of a self which transcends the body. And if we project this onto objects, it gets more disturbing, which is to say, humanizing objects is also a way of dehumanizing people. Which is really a capitalist construction of labor; that labor can somehow be alienable from the body, that you can sell it as you would a car, that labor can be extracted from the body, like iron from the earth. That it is somehow natural to monetize bodies, transact in people. I think at its extreme, [the concept] produces a terrifying set of conditions.

Rail: What is your relationship with the internet?

Beshty: I want to say I don't have one, but that seems snide. I don't think I have a particularly interesting one. The internet is a bit too general of a term to me to be meaningful. I mean, I have relationships through the complex of systems we would call the internet, just as I have relationships through a variety of media. But it's just another kind of interface, and I wouldn't say my relationship to it is any more complex or noteworthy than my relationship to, say, chairs for example, and yet my relationship to chairs would be as difficult to describe in the abstract. I think I'd be dumbfounded by that question also. I don't use social media if that's what you mean; I don't have a connection



Walead Beshty, *Office Work* (Canon image CLASS D1350 Monochrome Laser All-in-One Printer, Copier, Scanner, Fax F161402), 2017. Canon image CLASS D1350 Monochrome Laser All-in-One Printer, Copier, Scanner, Fax F161402. 72 1/2 × 28 3/8 × 28 3/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

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to “online communities.” I use email, I Google stuff, read the news, buy shit—that’s about as intimate as it gets for me online.

Rail: I don’t mean social media; I mean the internet as a whole, as an active system that operates under rules. So do you feel in control of your experience of it?

Beshty: I think the internet is an amalgam of so many different things; I don’t think of it as a singular *thing*. I think it’s misleading to define it that way, as something discrete and yet sublimely huge, it makes it divine, abstract, unthinkable, and treats it as though it has meaning in and of itself, as though it has meaningful boundaries. Like any media or cluster of technologies, it is geared toward the dissemination of certain information, and abandons others. For example, it is text and image heavy, but it omits the haptic. Maybe there will be an internet of touch one day.

Rail: Do you know Timothy Morton’s theories of hyperobjects? The internet is one example of a hyperobject. Global warming is another example. An entity that is non-physical, but whose effects are measurable, and that operates in temporal and spatial dimensions—this constitutes a new kind of object in a way, that is constantly changing.

Beshty: In general, I find a predilection towards discreteness problematic, because I think it conceals how interconnected all these systems are. Say the relationship between the internet structure and the telecommunications systems that predate it, or its ecological impacts, its tie to the power grid, to state and private territories. If we think in terms of bounded objects, we lose the fluidity of life, that all things have a shifting character, even if their physical shape remains constant.

For example, this table doesn’t contain meaning, but it creates relations in real time, it creates a spatial arrangement between people that come together around it. It encourages certain kinds of social relationships and discourages others. The thing may have edges, a shape, but it is not really *discrete*—it extends into the people around it, influences their experience of one another, and people are extended, and live through such objects. And this web of relations changes over time. So, to go back to the table, it, like all objects or technologies, acts as a kind of node, a social fulcrum, and its use, its cultural meaning or significance, as in how it signifies, evolves over time, it isn’t fixed.

I think of the conventions of use like paths worn in a meadow over time. There is this way that convention starts to structure the understanding of things, but when we treat convention as fact, we commit a fallacy of misplaced concreteness, to use Whitehead’s term. The problem is when convention or social agreement is seen as *intrinsic* to things rather than an incremental process of negotiation and renegotiation that occurs *around* things. The table is a connection point, a place where a set of forces can be pooled, stored, and redirected. The table gives us a place to convene where one didn’t exist before. But the use of it isn’t fixed, there are conventional ways to interact around it, which are learned, but these certainly aren’t the only option, and each time we use a table, come together around it, we negotiate with and potentially add to the convention, tweak it in some way. It informs our interaction, gives it shape, and in turn, we give it shape, give it significance.

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Rail: Treading collective paths through a meadow or through the internet is interesting, and how that builds a hierarchy of information based on parallels, trends, visibility. When you were describing the table as a normalized object or collection of matter, it made me think of one of my favorite architects Peter Zumthor, who has written about a specific door handle that led into his aunt's garden, as something he could still feel in his hand and that triggered memories of moods and smells. Do you think any power can be transmitted from an actual object, or is it rather what we project onto that object?

Beshty: I think it's about an interplay, or interface between a person and an object, the object isn't doing anything on its own. And when convention arises, like how we sit around a table, that's when that mnemonic resonance, individual understanding of how to use a thing becomes shared, moves from a personal association to a communal or conventional understanding. The more people that share it, the more it becomes normalized. Every person experiences their own mnemonic triggers, and while I think that personal associations are legitimate, they only become meaningful when they are

shared among a group and enter the commons. That is, when we all own them, not when they are authored, or dictated.

In actuality, everybody has mnemonic experiences like the one you recounted about Zumthor, a smell, a touch that evokes an emotional response, and that's a beautiful experience. But I'm allergic to producers who foist this upon others, who claim that their personal associations should somehow resonate with all people, because it implies a hierarchy between the experiential life of that producer and everyone else's experiential life. In other words, just because I know how to make a building, my personal associations aren't any more meaningful than any other person's. Everyone has such associative memories and the emotional responses that result, and to place one's own above those of others is problematic. It feels antidemocratic, and at its extreme it starts to be about shapes and objects equaling feelings by mandate, prescribed by some absent agent... that is the very definition of fascist aesthetics, the prescription of



Walead Beshty, *Sharp LC-90LE657U 90-inch Aquos HD 1080p 120Hz 3D Smart LED TV*, 2017. Sharp LC-90LE657U 90-inch Aquos HD 1080p 120Hz 3D Smart LED TV. 80 7/8 × 47 11/16 × 4 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

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meaning by fiat power. I despise this form of self-validating authority, the presumption that meaning can be prescribed.

Rail: Can you talk about the aesthetic choices you made in the “Office Works” being shown here? Though I’m hesitant to say, there is something figurative, even subtly expressive, in their configurations and positioning in relation to the body.

Beshty: I guess the main choices were to force the machines to be upright, make them stand in the room, and act like a figure. To draw the anthropomorphism we apply to objects, like when we might say our objects are misbehaving, into tension with the base fact of their existence as dumb matter. They are all discarded machines, things that are used up, that the gallery was planning to toss. When they are stripped of their conventional use, they become something else, they are released from their prescribed functioning, and become somewhat perverse. But their perversity comes from our impulse to anthropomorphize, which I would say is the original perversity in this case. We ascribe intentions to our objects, attach desire to them, think of them as wanting something, or not liking certain things, which really is an expression of our lack of understanding of how these commercial products work.

They are ideal in some way, like humanity before Adam ate the apple. But of course, human beings without self-awareness, aren’t human. Regardless, just like this story anthropomorphizes them, it is the only tool we really have to understand the world, and that approach to the world produces paradoxes. I think that is where those works came from, my interest in that tension, between the dumbness of things, and the projections we use to navigate the world, although I don’t think I fully understood that when I first started making them. I still don’t feel like I really understand why I made them, it’s been four years since I first skewered a discarded office machine, and I still have to think about them more to really understand what I’ve done. I just have a few guesses about why I was compelled to do so.

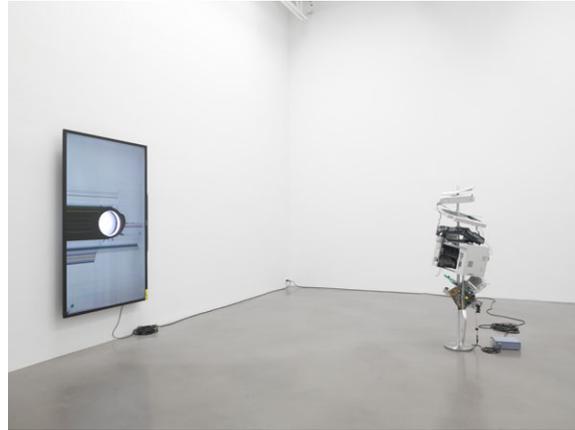
Rail: The placement and orchestration of elements within the gallery feels sharply specific. In light of an approach of treating objects with equivalence, I’m curious how you come to arrange objects in space while evading self-imposed hierarchies?

Beshty: Sure, you can’t really avoid that, even carelessness is a choice. Very early on, I got frustrated by installing my work, because I felt like an interior decorator—placing objects *just so*. I hated the tastefulness of it. Then I went through a period of about nine years where I would install everything based on a system, an arbitrary system: splitting spaces up according to some aspect of how the architecture was designed, trying to use that logic as a readymade system which I’d just extend into the exhibition design. I think my interest in working this way was to demystify the installation decisions, have them be based on something accessible to a viewer, something that extended out from the conditions of the exhibition into the larger world. But sometimes the architecture isn’t thoughtful, and it stopped making sense to try to extend the logic of a space when it was sloppy or incoherent, so now I think more about the flow of a space, what one sees first, how one moves through it, how the experience of a space is cumulative.

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Rail: So rather than present something neutrally, the intention is to be as systematically specific and transparent as possible. Can you talk more about the system behind this exhibition's hanging?

Beshty: There is no such thing as a neutral hanging, or a neutral space; when we claim something as neutral we are just concealing certain qualities. But I did want the choices to be transparent. When things seem wrong, or fall awkwardly, the



Installation view: Walead Beshty, *Open Source*, April 20 - June 17, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

system at work becomes legible. One learns more about how a system works by seeing it make errors. This works best when two systems can play off one another. It starts to show the frictions between systems, their core logics. I mean, when I do a show, the placement is important, but if someone else hangs it, if it is curated, and it's clear that someone else arranged the work, they can do whatever they want. This is the case as long as the authorship is clear, and a viewer has access to those choices. I think in large group shows, especially biennials and the like, this can become confused because you don't know whether choices made are the artist's or the curator's, and the agendas at work become muddled. It clouds a visitor's ability to access the logic of the choices they are being presented with.

Rail: Translating this to your collaborative works, like your copper surrogates, do you have any kind of apprehension or forethought when other people engage with your works directly? Are both unconscious and self-conscious engagements meaningful?

Beshty: You mean in how they are using them?

Rail: Yes. For instance, If I were sitting at a copper desk, I would probably become so self-conscious of the marks I was making, or evidence of how my body was operating and reacting to elements, I'd want to control them or choreograph them somehow. Is that something you are interested in or have experienced?

Beshty: I think it's important to acknowledge that these objects have an effect on the people who used them, because there's no way to index something without having some sort of effect on it too. In fact, for me to say that the people using the tables are behaving exactly the same as they would if I hadn't replaced their work stations surfaces with copper placeholders would be to disavow them as conscious individuals. That said, I don't see the works as collaborative really, we have different agendas, someone is just trying to get their work done, and I am trying to make a work. Or better is to say that they aren't any more collaborative than a painting or any other art object, in the sense that a painting is collaborative because the work of those in the gallery informs the reception, and thus the meaning of the painting. The people who work in the gallery play a role in the production of the painting as a thing in the public sphere. Anyway, on one hand, there's no way around the fact that the work alters their activity, and on the other, I think

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it's honest if that's accepted as part of what's going on. Some people [during the gallery show in 2014] were embarrassed because their desks were more tarnished. Some tried to be more tidy, but they ended up giving up, because it would require a lot of effort to really change how they used their desks. But it's more about how repetitive behavior, and the sort of functions that have to happen across the desk in the course of a day, start to inform that object. I think the object affects the situation, and the situation affects the object.

But I haven't really thought about, nor do I know how I would think about how a person's activity was transformed by the surrogates. I imagine the most notable effect would be seeing a reflection of yourself, so there's self-examination at work, the effect of seeing one's self perform an action as it is taking place. So I imagine there were moments when people would be working and all of a sudden see what they were doing from a different vantage point from the one they were used to, but I don't know exactly what effect that has on the outcome of the work. I really didn't think about that before. It's interesting ...

Rail: You haven't lived with a copper surrogate yourself?

Beshty: No. Those works came out of thinking about the gallery, or that the gallery as a structure, informs or produces the meaning of a work as much as the physical object produces meaning. Also, thinking about the aesthetic management of the space. Like this table—someone sees it, and it inflects how they look at the art on the walls, there is a certain style it has, a set of associations, and this affects how the work is understood. So all of those aesthetic choices made by the gallery, the kind of furniture, the style of the architecture, informs the reception of my work, frames it, and it was a way to use those choices as a kind of readymade basis for what I put into the space, a way to acknowledge this interconnection. Also, the tables and desks are the site of immaterial labor. I mean ... I don't think it is really immaterial labor—that's Lazzarato's term. I think that the activities the people in the gallery perform, even though it isn't meant to produce a material object, is still material. Maybe it is better to describe it as social labor ... a labor that doesn't manifest itself in an easily identifiable discrete object. It is still real, it is material, it still involves bodies.



Walead Beshty, *Office Work* (Apple iMac A1312 27" Desktop Intel Core 2 Duo), 2017. Apple iMac A1312 27" Desktop Intel Core. 2 Duo and steel 72 1/2 x 30 1/2 x 30 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

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Rail: Something about them makes me think also of tattoos, of augmentations to the surface of something that are publicly perceptible symbols or marks of something often private.

Beshty: I never really understood who tattoos are for. Certainly when I see a good tattoo, it's interesting and I like looking at it, but I just don't understand the permanence. Unless it's like a militia marking, like gangs or the military use, a sign of commitment to some social group that is meant to be for life.

Rail: It's interesting how this goes back again to a separation between humans and objects—thinking differently about yourself than a material thing. You just mentioned activity as material. Can you expand on that more?

Beshty: Well, all actions are material, even if they don't leave conventional traces, or conventional products in their wake. Speech for example is material, it is the physical manipulation of the air to produce sound in certain patterns. Our diaphragms, our throats, inform the movement of air, shape it, and make it vibrate in particular registers. So it is material. I think this is where Althusser was super important for me, his insight that ideology is always materially based, that it is located in the habitus, in daily ritual that occurs without conscious thought. There is no ideology, no thought, without bodies, without things. I guess the FedEx works arose out of my thinking about this: how an art object changes as it moves through the world, acquiring meanings through its exposure to different circumstances. I wanted to make a thing that was informed by its traffic through the world, absorbed its context, made the invisible labor required to move it from place to place an immediate and tangible aspect of the work.

Rail: How do you think about your works as bodies of work or as series? Are there limitations to those structures that you impose yourself?

Beshty: I don't worry about those distinctions. They are grouped according to the rules at work in their making. I don't like the word edition, because the works are not the same within a certain grouping, they are equivalent in some way, but not identical. As for the discreteness of a certain body of work or series, I like things that run out of steam more than I like deciding to stop. What I mean is I continue something until I am unable. For example, the *Transparencies* (2006-present)—which are sheet film that go through my checked baggage when I travel and are exposed to X-rays in the process—I still do those. And it's kind of irritating to always do. I've checked a bag on every flight I've taken since I started them. I'm going to do that until they stop making the film I use, which is close to being discontinued. When that happens, I can stop. Because it's not my choice to stop, the stopping would point into the larger world, and the context the work was conceived within, rather than being explained by my own choice which wouldn't be consistent with the spirit of the work in the first place. The work was about committing to a certain set of parameters. If I change those rules just because I feel like it, it undermines the whole reason why the work was initiated.

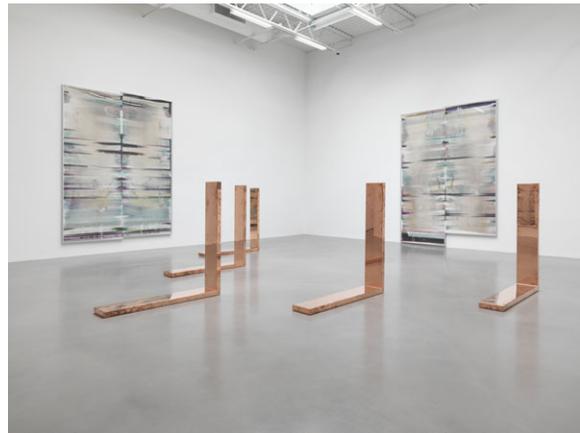
Rail: You're the constant. The X-ray film is the independent variable that would change the equation.

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Beshty: It feels more honest in a way. I'll make my bed and I'll lie in it. Somehow it's like penance for even doing it in the first place [*Laughter.*]. Sometimes being stuck with a choice is positive though. You learn things that you wouldn't expect. You get outcomes you don't expect. That is the exciting part to me, to see how these simple propositions can produce unexpected results. And you won't get to that point unless you force yourself to stick with it, if you commit to something in spite of yourself. To me, it's being true to the foundational impulse behind the work, to let it reach as far as it is able, reach into things you didn't expect it to.

Rail: Are there any other significant systems that you engage with in your day-to-day life, outside of your art practice?

Beshty: Sure. I can't think of any off hand, but life is a series of unthinking rituals, right? Those structures like, meds in the morning, eating lunch at a certain time, these are all patterns to help us navigate the unruliness of the world. In day to day life, I think about the world as a sequence of kinds of systems, and I don't mean that in a cold sense, just networks and structures, containments and operations, and I think of my actions as improvisation within constraints. In general, I think life is improvisation within constraint. Like the worn path in a meadow. The streets are basically an extension of that idea, and as soon as they become concretized, paved, prescribed, they become potentially repressive, and people improvise to react against that repression. I don't know that I have high-functioning systematic coping mechanisms. I see myself as a condition of my work, something that is outside of it, and is only significant in relationship to my work, if that makes sense. I don't think that who I am or the way I conduct my life is in some way more than just one among many factors influencing my role in the world. I try to allow this to enter my work, not conceal my existence as a person, not pretend that my work is somehow free of my existence as a body, not assert that it has some objective authority, but I also would never justify my work by saying it is an extension of myself. It has to be more meaningful than that to be viable as something that enters into the public sphere. For example, all the prescription medications I take are in this show, which is as meaningful as the information in the catalog about the budget, or the details of the making of the things. It's in there as just another material contribution to the exhibition.



Installation view: Walead Beshty, *Open Source*, April 20 - June 17, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

Rail: The expanse of material contributions. Your contributions—including teaching and writing as well—are all significant to consider in relationship to your work. And language here has become especially expansive. How do you think about the relationship between how you approach writing and how you approach object-making?

Beshty: Writing is a lot harder. I used to write a lot of essays which were polemical, but now I prefer monographic writing—writing about one artist. At this point, I get the most

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out of doing that; you can think through a set of choices that you aren't able to make, or can't do, and you can write into a certain kind of state of mind, build a world inside someone else's construct, try to inhabit their mode of thinking. It's a way to escape the strictures that I've built for myself in my own practice, so it becomes a way to explore the things I can't do—or not so much can't do, but don't have the basis to do within my work. But the act of writing can be stressful, because it can be so hard to actually formulate an experience into a linear form. It's easier for me to do now, I've started to enjoy the form and play of writing more. It's taken me a long time to develop a minimal sense of comfort in it.

It's such a different thing though. Objects are spatial. Writing is linear. And I'm not an elegant writer, I'm a hack, I'm clumsy. But I learn a lot by doing it; in the same way teaching was always really important for me—though recently, after fifteen years of it, I quit teaching. Maybe I'll quit writing one day. Anyway, it's seeing ideas in action, and having to really examine them, but in the case of teaching, this happens in real time. You have to think about why the hell it is you're saying what you're saying, and why you are thinking the way you are. It forces a certain level of intellectual honesty. And I find that really clarifying and helpful. I also like that teaching is about people coming together with a purpose. Curating is similar, putting together shows lets one think about the world in a different way. So all these side activities ground my thinking. It prevents me from getting high on my own gas [*laughs*] or become too hermetic and closed off, too comfortable with the way I view the world. But curating, writing and teaching broaden my thinking. It opens me up to things I might not be able to otherwise. There are times and places for both, and working between these modes has always been a part of what I do. I'd say, from the standpoint of a producer, it's the core of my practice, this shifting gears. I think I'd be stuck if I weren't slipping between approaches to art; it keeps me engaged and grounded in what I believe are the important aspects of art.

I think it's interesting to draw without looking.