



DIRECTIONS - LEGIBILITY

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Fold (60°/120°/180°/240°/300°/360° directional light sources), June 5th 2008, Annandale-On-Hudson, Foma Multigrade Fiber, 2008. Black-and-white fiber-based photographic paper. Courtesy the artist and WallSpace, New York. Photo by Lee Stalsworth



FedEx Medium Kraft Boxes ©2005 FEDEX 330504 REV 10/05 CC, FedEx 2Day, Los Angeles-New York trk#864049582968 & trk#867525901423, Priority Overnight, New York-Los Angeles trk#863133194810 & trk#86313319480, 2007. Laminated Mirropane™ and safety glass, FedEx boxes, shipping labels, metal, silicone, and tape. Courtesy the artist and WallSpace, New York. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen

Notes on Process and Titles

The photograms featured in the Hirshhorn's exhibition begin in the darkroom, where the artist cuts pieces of photographic paper from a large factory roll roughly in relation to the scale of his body. Beshty produces the black-and-white photograms by folding the paper into a three-dimensional form with anywhere between three to six sides. Then, he exposes one side of the resultant sculpture to light, rotating the object until all sides are exposed; he then develops and fixes the print by hand in large trays.

The color photograms are created somewhat differently, due to both the nature of color processing and Beshty's distinctive fusion of predetermined procedures and inherent chance. Working in the total darkness that is required with color processing, Beshty attaches a piece of cut paper to the wall, allowing it to curl or flop. Then, using a color enlarger, he exposes the paper to cyan, yellow, and magenta light (these colors form the basis of all color processing), rotating the paper between each exposure. He then runs the prints through a standard RA4 wide-format color processor.

Each title chronicles that object's production, including the date and site of the darkroom facilities. *Fold (60°/120°/180°/240°/300°/360° directional light sources)*, June 5th 2008, Annandale-On-Hudson, Foma Multigrade Fiber, for example, records the fact that the black-and-white photogram is a product of folds and four exposures and rotations, while *Six Color Curl (CMMYYC: Irvine, California, July 17th 2008, Fuji Crystal Archive Type C)*, specifies the order of the colored light exposures and the artist's reliance on curls, rather than folds. The titles also note the type of paper employed, because its physical characteristics in part influence both the techniques and forms, a reference to the fact that conventional discussions of photographic images pay little heed to material matters. In an analogous manner, the title of each glass sculpture denotes the various venues to which it has been shipped, including the tracking number and transit time.

¹ László Moholy-Nagy, "Photography is Manipulation of Light," in Andreas Haus, *Moholy-Nagy: Photographs and Photograms* (New York: Thames and Hudson and Pantheon, 1980), 47–48. James Johnson Sweeney, "A Conversation with Marcel Duchamp," interview at the Philadelphia Museum of Art recorded for film made by NBC television in 1955, broadcast January 1956. Edited version cited in Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 135.

² Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), 127.

Directions: Walead Beshty: legibility on color backgrounds
April 30–September 13, 2009
Directions is made possible in part by Trellis Fund.

Related Programs

In Conversation, Ring Auditorium, 12:30 pm
May 1, Curator Evelyn Hankins and artist Walead Beshty

Friday Gallery Talks, Meet at the Information Desk, 12:30 pm
May 29, DC-area artist and St. Mary's College of Maryland professor Colby Caldwell

June 19, DC-area artist James Huckenkaphier

July 31, Terra Foundation pre-doctoral fellow Jeannine Tang and curatorial research associate Ryan Hill

September 11, Curator Evelyn Hankins

For more information, visit hirshhorn.si.edu.

The Sculptures

Beshty's glass sculptures likewise feature a savvy rethinking of Modernist precedents filtered through more recent ideas about how meaning is produced after a work leaves the artist's studio. Beshty has an industrial glass manufacturer fabricate shatterproof sculptures that conform to the shape and size of standard FedEx boxes. Each time the pieces need to be moved, they are shipped, according to the artist's instructions, by FedEx in the company's packaging, rather than in the specially crafted crates handled by professional art shippers that are normally used to transport works of art. With each shipment, the sculptures acquire cracks, dents, chips, and other abrasions, which provide a visual trace of their movements from the artist's studio to various exhibition and storage venues and collectors' homes. Indeed, it is only after they leave Beshty's studio (and control) that the objects are transformed, through unforeseen and uncontrolled actions, as well as by anonymous hands and unspecified machines, from almost identical multiples in a limited edition (ten of each size and shape of box in both clear and mirrored glass) into unique artworks, which, in theory, are never finished, as they can always be transported again. The sculptures' gradual decay actually adds to their value as commodities, upending conventional notions about the way an artwork's condition influences its commercial desirability. Not only does each successive dislocation and the correlative chance damage add to the boxes' visual complexity, but with each exhibition the sculptures accrue additional critical attention and publicity, which also can impact the works' stature in the eyes of collectors. Displayed alongside their shipping containers, Beshty's glass boxes give visual form to the trafficking of contemporary artworks and encourage questions about authorship, intentionality, and the production of meaning.

The clean, geometric form, outsourced fabrication, and modular character of Beshty's glass sculptures share an affinity with Minimalist practices from the late 1960s; however, the legacy of Marcel Duchamp, particularly *The Large Glass*, is perhaps a more suggestive historical touchtone for Beshty's boxes. Started in 1915 and left "definitely unfinished" in 1923, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* is viewed as Duchamp's *pièce de résistance*, an enigmatic deliberation on the machinery of sexual desire that, along with the artist's earlier Readymades, established the groundwork for later conceptual artistic approaches. Comprising two glass panels painted with oil, varnish, lead foil, and wire, *The Large Glass* shattered when it was transported by truck after its 1926 debut. Duchamp described the damage as "an extra-curious intention that I am not responsible for, a ready-made intention, in other words, that I respect and love."² A decade later, he subsequently repaired and stabilized the work by encasing it in an aluminum frame and two additional glass panels. Duchamp's work, unlike Beshty's boxes, is considered to be too fragile to move again and, therefore, *The Large Glass* has remained on continuous display since 1954 in the exact location where the artist installed it in a gallery dedicated to his work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. With *The Large Glass* enshrined in a museum, Beshty's sculptures pick up where Duchamp left off by deploying a discerning combination of predetermined rules and chance operations to explore the nature of abstraction and the ways artworks accrue both critical and monetary value.

Evelyn C. Hankins
Associate Curator, Modern Art

Walead Beshty's oversized photograms at once expand upon and deconstruct these Modernist precedents, particularly Moholy-Nagy's experiments. Beshty frames the element of chance in the medium with predetermined rules that provide underlying parameters for his process, resulting in mesmerizing works that pose questions about the nature of abstraction, as well as the material properties of photography itself. Dispensing with the tangible objects (or subjects) that were essential to earlier experiments (see *Notes on Process and Titles* at right), Beshty's photograms complete what previously had been only a partial separation from the mimetic representation that was long considered to be fundamental to photography. The interlocking, overlapping passages of tone and color that are the hallmark of these works have no connection to now-absent objects or referents. At the same time, however, the images cannot be classified as abstractions, as they are both defined by and a direct product of the circumstances of their creation. With their luminous, jewel tones and elusive forms, Beshty's compositions entice us to partake in their beguiling formal play, yet the tears and creases that disrupt the paper's surface repeatedly return us to the material world that is the basis of all photographic images.



Six Color Curl (CMMYYC: Irvine, California, July 17th 2008, Fuji Crystal Archive Type C), 2008. Color photographic paper. Courtesy the artist and WallSpace, New York. Photo by Lee Stalsworth

"The photographer is a manipulator of light.... It must be stressed that the essential element of photographic procedures is not the camera but the light-sensitive layer. The light-sensitive layer—plate or paper—is a tabula rasa...."
—László Moholy-Nagy (1928)

"I like the cracks, the way they fall. You remember how it happened in 1926, in Brooklyn?"
—Marcel Duchamp (1963)¹

Walead Beshty (American and British, b. London, England, 1976) creates tantalizing photographs and sculptures that blend a fascination with Modernist visual culture and an incisive inquiry into the nature of art. Beshty's works often make use of historical formats and media, such as photograms or stereographs, but they equally embrace more recent technologies and approaches, including color processing and outsourcing production to industrial fabricators. No matter what the medium, Beshty's practice is distinguished by a magnetic combination of formal, conceptual, and historical concerns, which produces visually resonant works that bring attention to issues ranging from the ideological underpinnings of aesthetics to the indeterminacy of viewing. Beshty's *Directions* project features recent photograms and glass sculptures that together pose questions about the material premises of their respective media and the nature of abstraction, as well as the production, valuation, and consumption of art.

The Photographs

The photogram is a cameraless, negativeless photographic process that dates to early nineteenth-century experiments with light-sensitive materials. William Henry Fox Talbot, Anna Atkins, John Hershel, and others made contact prints by placing botanical and animal specimens on paper coated with silver salts and then exposing them to light. The resulting images are composed of white areas where the paper was covered and dark regions where it was exposed to light; a spectrum of grays reveals the objects' varying translucencies. This process remained relatively obscure until the 1920s, when avant-garde artists working in Europe, including Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Christian Schad, adopted the technique to explore abstract form and develop a distinctly modern visual language. Using common, found objects for the most part, these artists created seemingly abstract compositions that challenged photography's reputed capacity for representation. Man Ray, an American artist associated with both Dada and Surrealism, exploited the technique's potential for unconscious and automatic expression in what he called Rayographs, since the process always takes place entirely in the dark, produces unique works, and, moreover, does not reveal the image until after it is finally developed. By contrast, László Moholy-Nagy, a Hungarian artist who taught at the Bauhaus and who coined the term photogram (light + writing), used multiple, often moving light sources that obscured the objects' identities and instead created dynamic compositions suggestive of vast space.

