The photographs

The photographer is a manipulator of light.... It must be stressed that the essential element of photographic procedure is not the camera but the light-sensitive layer. The light-sensitive layer—
—László Moholy-Nagy (1923)

“I like the cracks, the way they feel. You remember how it happened in 1936, in Brooklyn?”
—Marcel Duchamp (1952)

Walead Beshty (American and British, b. London, England, 1976) creates tantalizing photographs and sculptures that blur 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 photographs 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 photographs 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 cameraless and 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. These photographs are 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 reputation 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 it is finally developed.

By contrast, László Moholy-Nagy, a Hungarian artist who taught at the Bauhaus and who coined the term photogram, described the 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 an artwork’s condition influences its commercial desirability. Not only does each successive corrosion and the correlation damage add to the boxes’ visual complexity, but with each exhibition the sculptures accrue additional critical attention and publicity, which can impact the works’ stature in the eyes of collectors. Displayed alongside their shipping containers, Beshty’s glass boxes give visual form to the trajectory 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 persuasive historical touchstone 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 other 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.” 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 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

Notes on Process and Titles

The photographs featured in the Hirshhorn’s exhibition begin in the darkroom, where the artist cuts pieces of photographic paper from a large factory roll roughly the size of a 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 specialized crates handled by international shippers that are used to transport works of art. With each shipment, the sculptures acquire cracks, dents, chips, and other abrasions, which produce a visual trace of their movements from the artist’s studio to various exhibition venues and storage facilities. Indeed, it is only once they arrive at Beshty’s studio (and control) that the objects are transformed, through unretouched 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 an artwork’s condition influences its commercial desirability. Not only does each successive corrosion and the correlation damage add to the boxes’ visual complexity, but with each exhibition the sculptures accrue additional critical attention and publicity, which can impact the works’ stature in the eyes of collectors.

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°/360° directional light sources), June 5th, 2008, Annandale-On-Hudson, Foma Multigrade Fiber Grade II, FedEx boxes, shipping labels, metal, silicone, and tape. Courtesy the artist and Wallspace, New York. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen.


