

REGEN PROJECTS

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.