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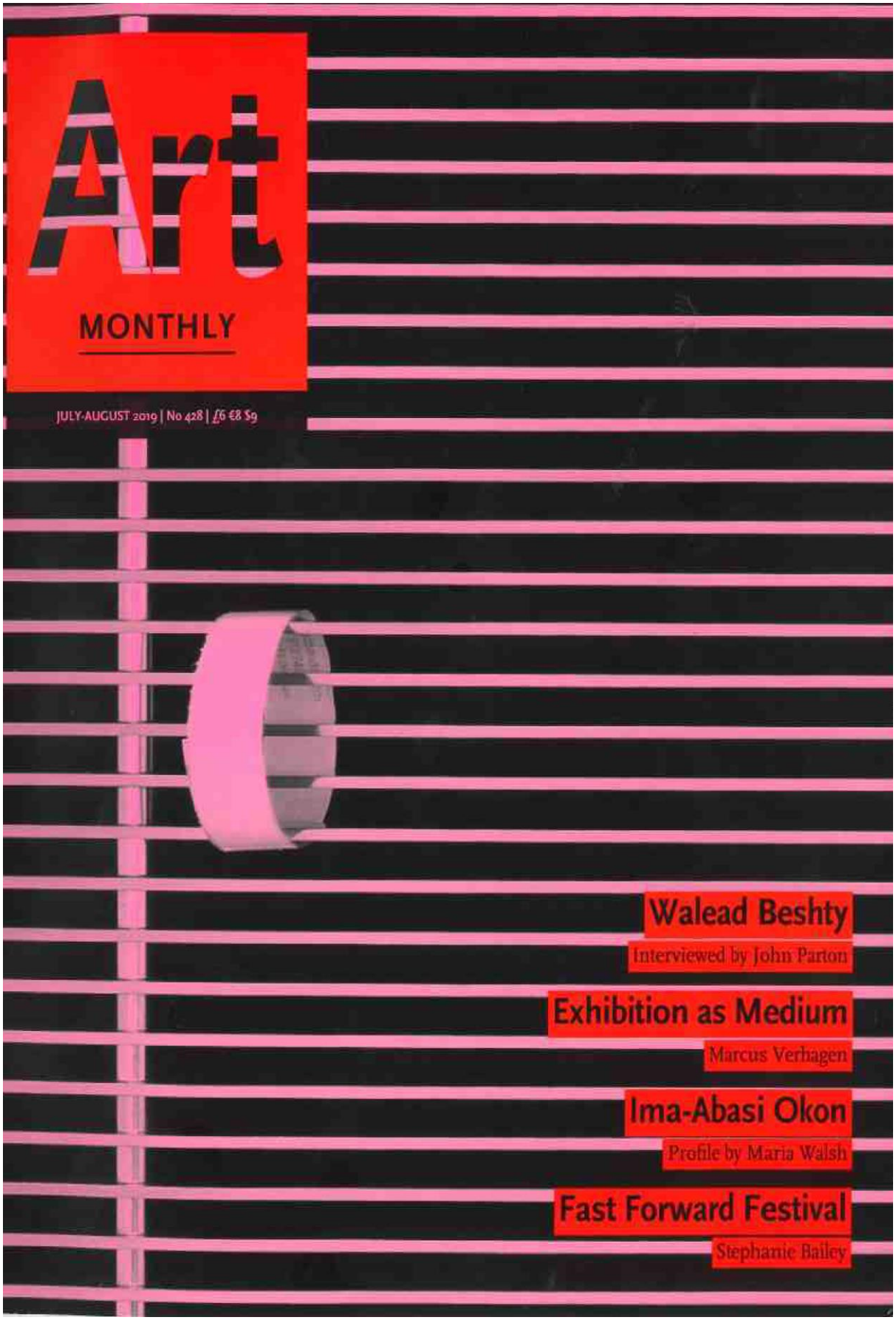
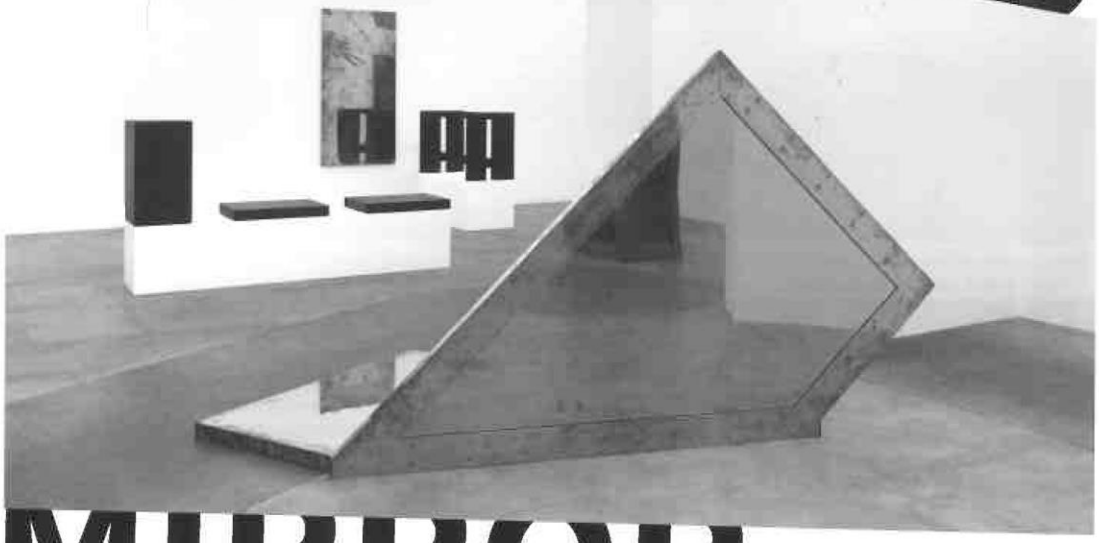


WALEAD BESHTY INTERVIEWED BY JOHN PARTON

The Los Angeles-based artist discusses destruction that doesn't destroy, not concealing rather than revealing, and the importance of collectivism, misusing systems and disobeying instructions.

CRACKED MIRROR



'Walead Beshty' 2019 installation view, MAMCO Geneva

John Parton: Your show at MAMCO Geneva opens with a mirrored glass floor installed at the museum's entrance, which is a neat way of introducing lots of themes found throughout the exhibition. First, it's an unfinished work, one that constantly evolves as the show goes on – visitors walk on the floor and crack the glass, and so create the work as the exhibition continues. The audience, in combination with the artist and the material, complete or activate the work. Second, there is a sense of destruction, in that the mirror is slowly cracking. Finally, conceptually speaking, the work is so simple – and I mean 'simple' in the best possible way – in that everybody understands that glass is delicate and will break if stepped on. Can you tell us more about the work?

Walead Beshty: When Dan Graham was describing his work for magazine pages from the 1960s and 1970s, he made the observation that a work of art doesn't exist until it has been written about or photographed. In other words, art doesn't exist until it is in circulation in public. Visitors are, of course, one way in which a work is circulated and distributed. They carry their experience with a work with them and, by doing so, they disseminate it, animate it, give the work of art life. I don't think this is merely a secondary effect, but central to the work of art. In my own work, I try to make this dependency clear.

I would also say that a work of art doesn't exist until it is put into use, so I try to make that necessity quite transparent. I'm also interested in material transparency, a simple, straightforward procedure that doesn't create a mystery about where it comes from. In other words, to let the medium be apparent – to lay everything on the surface – and not somehow conceal itself.

And what about this notion of destruction in the work?

I really don't think of it as destruction. Things accumulate meaning over time, and that can happen in a material sense or a social sense. As things are moved through the world, or used, they acquire a kind of patina, a trace of this use. I think of it as additive. This notion of destruction has an implication of negation – that something might no longer

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be. The way I see it, before the glass has been walked on, it's nothing, it's just a mirror, it's meaningless. It only has meaning because people have used the space for one thing or another, either to walk around the artwork or in this case to interact with people at the ticket counter.

This idea of creative destruction also makes me slightly uncomfortable because it has neoliberal echoes. There are the classic Joseph Schumpeter theories about capitalism and disruption – these have been portrayed as a catalyst for change, it justifies violence in the name of progress. Yet the concept has nevertheless been taken up by the hubris of different corporate entities, like Mark Zuckerberg at Facebook, who famously restated this idea as 'move fast and break things'. However, while there might be a set of forces at play in some of my work that unconventionally affect materials – mirrors aren't generally something that you break and a TV isn't something you usually drill a hole through – this is simply using aspects of the material in a way that doesn't adhere to the assumed convention.

Is the mirrored floor work ever in a state in which it could be declared finished?

Emphasising that the experience of an artwork is constantly evolving is important to me. It's not that it is necessarily unfinished, but that it is always in a state of becoming. Things become more over time. For example, the glass floor is also very reactive to the changing natural light at different times of the day. So you not only have this patterning as people move through the space but there are also different types of light reflecting on the wall, which almost become kaleidoscopic. A lot of the pieces in the show reject this idea that there is an idealised form of each work that somehow needs to be maintained or that there is one true moment to the work, or only one way of seeing it.

works from the series 'FedEx Glass Works' 2007- installed at MAMCO Geneva

'Walead Beshty' 2019 installation view, MAMCO Geneva

Going upstairs, visitors immediately walk into a room where the FedEx works are on display – the 'FedEx Glass Works' series you started in 2007 and the 'FedEx Copper Works' series you initiated two years later. There's a link, for me, between the glass floor and the FedEx works in that there is again such a clear process in evidence. The FedEx shipping process is familiar to most people – an object gets picked up and placed in a system, and then it gets delivered and comes out at the other end of that system. But there is this huge space between pick-up and delivery that you normally don't see. You can think of it in terms of a theatre, which has frontstage and backstage. So with these works, where you ship glass boxes through the FedEx courier system and display the damaged results, are you making transparent something that is normally obscured?

In relation to this idea of frontstage and backstage, I wouldn't see them as so much of an opposition. Every performance requires the mechanisms of backstage. I think of them as integrated, to not think of them in terms of one being in service to the other, but as interwoven.

But the work did come from an idea that although this network was often concealed, the productive forces of it are integral to the meaning of the work. FedEx is a system that operates to a particular end and I was interested in putting that to an alternate use by using it as an aesthetic producer. I was also interested in the notion that the logistics of that system have their own aesthetic implications. There are airway bills, for example, and specific sizes and forms of box that are integrated within FedEx's system. So there are ways in which the system is an aesthetic producer already and the work is simply using it in a way in which all the forces that come into play between point A and point B become manifest.

That said, the point of the work is not to 'reveal' something that is going on backstage, it is about choosing not to conceal and to be sensitive to how those mechanisms that are supposedly external to the work are actually deeply integrated within it. In large expansive structures – including social structures, corporate structures or the structures of the state apparatus – even though they seem to be locked up, or to prevent individuals from tinkering with them, actually they can be porous. They're not as monolithic and oppressive as they might seem.

If we don't adequately question these systems then we can be lulled into this idea that there is backstage and frontstage, and that the backstage is closed to us. Instead, though, these systems are more porous than we might imagine – if we question them, can we gain some sort of agency over them?

Well, remember that they're all equally dependent on our actions. The one advantage that individuals have, or subjects have in their relationships with larger organisational systems, is that institutions always have to play by the rules or else they don't exist, but individuals don't have to play by the rules and they can improvise. This is in contrast to the classic construction of dominance and subordination of the passive individual facing monolithic authority, which encourages paralysis in the face of injustice.

The message that dominant systems are always going to offer is that the only position you, the individual, have is to be subordinate to the rules. But there is an agency and a power that individuals have in relation to these organisations. They can cheat, lie and improvise! They can misuse the systems, and, in fact, they do so all the time, it is just not discussed.

Skipping forward in the exhibition we find the dismantled machines and physically altered television screens, the 'Machines' and 'Televisions' series you began in 2014. You have taken a MacBook, for example, and completely dismantled it, and drilled a large hole straight through a television screen. But you have allowed the devices to still be, to some extent, operational. Does this link with the ideas of transparency, or revealing things, that we have also spoken about, but this time in a very literal sense?

I always avoid the notion of the reveal, and simply think of it in terms of not concealing. Just showing something in this way – the inside of a television screen – in itself isn't what interests me. With the television screen, it was more about treating it like a common object or like an object that doesn't have the sanctity of its form. A lot of consumer electronics are anthropomorphised. They are viewed as though they are bodies, and therefore violating the parameters of their bodies somehow becomes this violent act, but actually it is important to remember that these things are just tools.

There is also an ideological structure surrounding the purchasing of consumer products that tends to tell us to leave them be and to only use them as we're told to use them. In contrast, I was more interested in again using something in a way that wasn't intended, and so to make the television work as a self-generating picture machine. In the context of the work, the screen is no longer simply a platform for conventional television programmes or movies to be displayed. Instead, the device can now make its own picture – a picture that changes over time and which is always in motion. In this sense it violates the original proscription for its use and opens up a very different kind of experience. I treat the television in and of itself as a device that has become able to auto-produce its own forms.

And by just looking inside the screen, through the hole, you can start to see it as a simple lightbox – there is no longer anything mystical about it as an object, it's just a device made up of a series of fresnels and a raster. So in this sense it solved a problem for me, which was how to create a non-static picture which was concrete but not representational.

And are you doing something similar with the 'Machines' works?

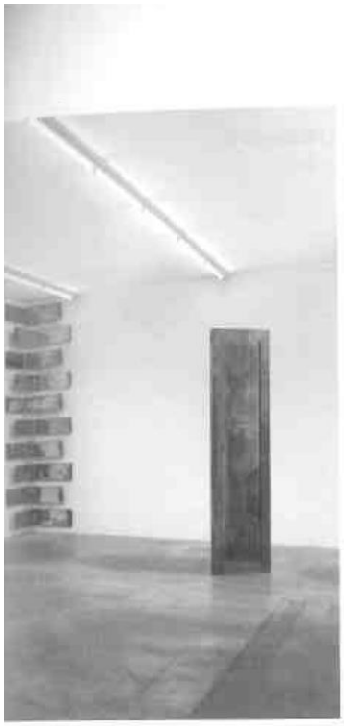
The 'Machines' came from the same place but the expression is a bit different. I got pissed off with this old MacBook and I drilled a hole through it, because what else do you do with an old MacBook? Otherwise you only really have the option to give it to a recycler who then ships it off to one of the many countries in Africa or Asia who will accept it, but where children will likely end up picking through it for precious metals, which is really horrifying.

I always use machines that are old and past their use, either my own or the gallery's. I was thinking about them as these intimate objects, but also as objects that have a kind of distinctly user-friendly or anthropomorphic aspect to them. These devices are all designed to have us treat them like a pet, a friendly servile object. So I wanted to play on that idea of anthropomorphism and also to display them like exploded diagrams, but to ask what an exploded diagram would mean if the device still functions.

You can think of it in a destructive sense, but in fact these machines are now very well cared for. Now that they are art objects they get conserved, whereas they would otherwise just have been ripped apart for parts and shipped off some place where we can't see what happens to them. They are also semi-animate, in that they continue to try to function – they try to turn on or to reboot themselves. There is a kind of autonomy that they have simply to try to keep working. I was playing with a bunch of those ideas, all together.

Going back to this idea that these devices are usually thrown away by most people once they have finished with them, and that they come to you as by-products from within your own environment – they originate either from your studio or from the galleries that you're working with – is it possible to see your studio as working as an ecosystem, in that you are making things from other things in what is almost a closed system? Your 'Selected Works' series is included in the show, and represents an even more literal expression of this idea because you're taking studio detritus, turning it into a paste and making new work from it.

It's not so much that it is just detritus. With any practice, there is always this tension between what is made public and what's not. Every choice to produce



works from the series 'Double Curls' 2016- installed at MAMCO Geneva

works from the series 'Surrogates (Modular, Art Handling)' 2014- installed at MAMCO Geneva

something produces a side effect. So the impulse behind those works was to investigate the accumulation of other works that I didn't want to show, store or archive, which are complements to those I do exhibit. I wanted to ask the question: if you don't think that work is useful in any of these ways, what do you do with it? You could throw it out, but this is only a way of ignoring the problem. So the 'Selected Works' are made by taking the raw materials from the works that I didn't want to show and simply grinding them up, putting them in a cement mixer with water then pouring the resulting paste out and casting it into a picture-type form.

In any productive process there are things generated for consumption and there are also things generated which are only considered side effects. And the 'Selected Works' are a way of taking all the results of a certain practice and finding a way to tie them back together rather than concealing the side effects.

Is there a form of institutional critique there as well? Although an ecosystem might be a closed system, there is the possibility for collectors or museums to acquire these works. Is there a joke in there, that collectors are buying something that conventionally might not be considered as the finished work of an artist, because it is made from discarded objects?

Well, firstly I don't see a hierarchy between the different types of results of a productive act. So, I think that even though we might privilege one thing over another, both are informative. Both contain legitimate meaning about the productive act.

I also don't buy the notion of critique within art in general – I don't accept that an object can be about something that it's not. I like the analogy that having chicken for dinner isn't a critique of beef for dinner! I have a strong affinity with a lot of artists who are involved in institutional critique, but in a lot of ways I think it is a misnomer, it diverts attention away from what I feel their practices really accomplish. I'm thinking here of Andrea Fraser and Michael Asher. Both of them are very important to me. Andrea Fraser actively uses the term Institutional Critique, but that's not what I find rewarding about her work. For me, it is more about how she uses social conventions as generative structures.

With the 'Selected Works', it's not so much that there is a game being played about collectors finding value in an object or museums caring for an object, it is more that it questions the conventions around caring for an object. As with the FedEx works – if you were to professionally artship them in the way that museums normally do with most work, carefully packing and crating them, then you would essentially destroy the work. You would disrupt the object's airway bills, which would disrupt how the work is designed to operate. These works therefore question these assumed rules about the conservation of an art object and what that means. There is of course a certain thought process that is required in order for work to be accepted into institutional structures, such as museums, but I'm not meaning to disrupt that process. I think that the way that many institutions work is informative and useful, and that reflects on how they operate and makes them all the more rich.

It's the same with my copper works – using gloves while installing them or cleaning them would essentially destroy the work. With most of my work there is no specified top or bottom and they can be arranged and displayed in any way. There are no predefined ways of exhibiting them, and this simply asks whoever is installing them to think about how they want to arrange them. So they have complete freedom to arrange them and that means that they have to think about them more. This can even teach me something about how other people think about art objects, because I get to see the works installed by different individuals in different ways.

So you are illustrating how you can work with a system in a productive, affirmative or creative way. You are seeing the aesthetically productive side of the process whereby museums interrogate how they hang or arrange work. The copper art-handling works from the 'Surrogates (Modular, Art Handling)' series you started in 2014, for example, end up owing much of their value to being expressions of that museum system. Their copper surfaces become marked with the handprints and smudges left by the museum installers and handlers, and those marks are what activate and make the work interesting.

Yes, and it also means that the works aren't just about me. There are groups of people who physically labour, or socially labour, to get the work into the museum. And, while the objects don't account for all of that labour, they do make note of the scores of people who handle the work and they recognise that it is those people who produce the work.

Those people set the scene for the museum visitor to see and interact with the work – in short, they bring the work into existence. And it is important to note that the process is collective by its nature. An exhibition is the coming together of people around a set of ideas, and about trying to extend that set of ideas. Institutions are just a communion of people trying to achieve something, and that is a positive thing. As with any societal collection of people, there are, of course, negative aspects, but in the end the impulse is affirmative and distinctly human. And I like thinking about it in this way. In contrast, I have frustrations with the tradition that emerged during the 1970s, after the adoption of post-structuralist and Marxist thought about art objects, which tends towards melancholia, ignoring the affirmative, purpose-driven and positive outcomes of human collective labour. ∎

Walead Beshty's exhibition at MAMCO Geneva continues until 8 September.

John Parton is a commissioning editor at Laurence King Publishing.