

Tina Kukielski, "Walead Beshty: Petzel Gallery," *Artforum*, December 2014, p. 306.

## ARTFORUM

### Walead Beshty

PETZEL GALLERY

For his first solo exhibition at his new New York gallery, Walead Beshty brought back-of-the-house operations to the front, revealing the otherwise invisible systems of exchange that underpin Petzel's brisk business. By enlisting the gallery's staff in the production of his show's finished sculptures, Beshty, in "Performances Under Working Conditions," focalized the aesthetic economy that surrounded its making. The exhibition borrowed its title from a 1973 work—part video, part photo-novel—by photographer-historian Allan Sekula, in which the artist and two performers banter away while mimicking, in zany pantomime, the activity of working at a pizzeria for \$2.50 an hour. Beshty's exhibition, by contrast, was an impeccable, pristine reliquary that gave only the slightest impression of sweat spent.

Beshty organized Petzel's previous exhibition, the summer group show "A Machinery for Living," during which he performed an intervention that set in motion the production of this show: He swapped out the gallery's regular furniture—a set of slim, sleek desk- and table-tops designed by architect Jonathan Caplan—for to-scale replicas made of raw polished copper. With these surrogates in place, the gallery's staff went about their daily business—consuming meals and coffee, answering phones and e-mails, holding client meetings—but nearly every movement they made created a smudgy, indelible mark on one of the reflective metal surfaces; as the accompanying artist text puts it, Beshty's desktops captured "the immaterial labor of discourse, transaction, and negotiation." At the end of the summer show's run, the production of the work was complete; anyone handling the copper works from that point on wears gloves.

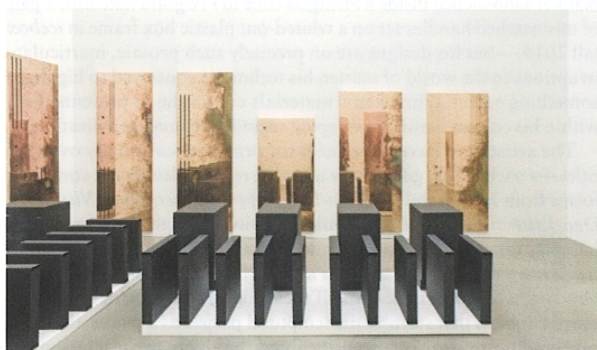
Alongside the copper desktops, Beshty presented another series of assisted readymades. The objets trouvés in this case were the gallery's filing cabinets and pencil shelves, reproduced by the artist in black powder-coated steel, serially arranged in two rows, and displayed on

two low plinths. Relentlessly absorbing light, these sculptures sat as staid Minimalist anchors to the lustrous desktops.

The gesture of inviting the staff to activate or collaborate on a work is becoming a typical Beshty strategy. Since 2007, the artist has been producing what he calls "Industrial Portraits," a series of straightforward black-and-white photos showing the studio assistants, FedEx couriers, technicians, designers, curators, and gallery directors who contribute to his work's production. In this exhibition, Beshty raised the stakes of his investigation of labor by calling attention to the legal protections (or lack thereof) that workers enjoy. A stack of posters, given away free at the gallery entrance, reproduced federal and state labor-law placards. Another placard, posted near reception, announced the minimum wage in New York State: \$8 an hour, a meager figure that has been the subject of intense protest.

Like Beshty's cameraless photographs, the "Copper Surrogates" are indexical. In raw polished copper, he has found the equivalent of the photograph's light-sensitive paper. But rather than record inscriptions of light, the material registers the elbow grease of the gallery system—fingerprints and the rings of water left by cold glasses on tables. The surrogates reveal unattested, too-often-anonymous forms of work, and in so doing, they question the currency of art. Here, anonymity is replaced by specificity; we know that these marks were made by this particular gallery's staffers—in fact, their individual names appear in the works' lengthy titles. In many ways, the show came across as Beshty's most concerted effort to realize the vision of institutional critique that he outlined in a 2008 review of Michael Asher's installation at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. There, he praised Asher's work for its "affirmative" (i.e., resistant to a criticality premised on the politically quiescent "reiteration of alienation") elucidation of an active system specific to the museum's history as a kunsthalle, arguing against a reading of the work as melancholic. In its own way, Beshty's show marked an equally affirmative but also radical gesture, in that it actively shared authorship with the system's necessary and essential producers.

—Tina Kukielski



View of "Walead Beshty," 2014.