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Walead Beshty in Conversation with Bob Nickas

BN: If you walked into a gallery and saw your work—thinking it had been made by someone else—what would your first reaction be?

WB: I don't know. Probably that I should stop making that work. I think it would be a nice feeling, since I'd be freed up to do something else. Maybe that's not what you're asking. An assistant I had while I was teaching at the School of the Art Institute told me that there were a handful of people who had started making folded paper photograms after I gave a talk there. He seemed annoyed, and I think he expected me to be annoyed by it as well, but I found it exciting that someone borrowed something from the work. It meant that there was something to it that was worth borrowing and could be put to someone else's use. I mean, once you make something and put it into the world, it isn't really yours anymore. It's part of a larger conversation, and the best-case scenario would be that it would be expanded upon, applied to other circumstances or thought processes.

BN: That's a rather generous position, I have to say. And it's a good thing that I'm not an artist—in many ways—because if I saw someone who had copied me I'd probably tell them that their work was terrible, and I'd mean it. I may have it backward, but I do believe that flattery is the sincerest form of imitation. Of course, what I'm wondering is if you, like me, think of photography as an assisted readymade, that the medium has been an extended experiment since it was invented over two hundred years ago. Lots of people are in their darkrooms/laboratories running experiments all the time, and periodically making their findings public—brought out, quite literally, into the light of day.

WB: I guess I wouldn't think of it as someone copying my work, but as the circulation of tools, as someone taking hold of a proposal within the work and applying it, building on it. ... I think there is an invitation within all of my work to consider objects in a certain way, a possibility for making certain types of objects, at least, that's the hope. That's part of why I like it to be simple, I don't want it to be something that claims it's special by concealing how it's made.

... and I'd agree that photography is an assisted readymade, although I haven't thought of it in quite that way. That's what Duchamp said about painting, right? That the tubes of paint and canvas were readymade, so painting was an assisted readymade? Photography is an even more extreme case; the materials are corporate, mass produced. They are the result of a major industrial operation. You can't produce the materials yourself, you have to work within constraints, and I'm drawn to those constraints precisely because they are imposed by expansive bureaucratic forces. Playing within them links up to larger questions, because it's part of a broader negotiation with power. We are constantly negotiating to find our place within large structural orders, working and living in their margins, and I think this is where the possibility for autonomy arises, in our ability to make choices or subvert the conditions offered by consolidated power centers—be they corporate entities or the state—and the institutionalized conventions they assert.

Duchamp is most useful for me in thinking about this sort of negotiation and its relationship to convention. He pointed out that all artists work within conventions and, most importantly, that at the center of art is a social agreement, a tacit agreement to start the conversation about an object within a certain set of parameters, which is framed by everything from language to the architecture of the gallery to economic exchange. Objects activate these conventions, either by design or by accident, and it doesn't really matter which. It's only when the context and the object are taken together that we get the whole story. What's brilliant about the readymade is how central Duchamp made that social agreement in the understanding of the work, how he saw the work's life in the structure around the object, because that structure allows certain discussions and relationships to happen that wouldn't occur otherwise. That's not all the readymade was about, of course. There were inside jokes about functionalism, Cubism, and abstraction, about the technological fetish in modernism, about

originality perhaps. But to me those sides of it were just the icing on top.

BN: All so-called readymades today actually seem to be produced. They aren't already in the world. I was just in Paris, and as I was walking in the street I came upon a bottle rack that immediately reminded me of Duchamp's readymade. Today, to my mind, if an artist saw that and decided to make something from it, the bottle rack would probably be cast in some material or other, or painstakingly reconstructed by way of an arcane method. In effect, Duchamp's readymade unknowingly reinstated the idea of craft, of transformation—"take an object, do something to it, do something else to it." In its pure form, the readymade is an object to which nothing has been done, save for its displacement to a gallery. A photograph, even if it takes on an object-type form, even a photograph of a photograph, at the end of the day is still nothing more than a sheet of paper.

WB: It sounds stupid in retrospect, but it took me quite a while to understand a photograph as being multiplicitous—like what you said about it being just a piece of paper—and to see all objects this way, as having different statuses depending on the context. I think that's part of a realization one has as one becomes fluent with aesthetics, with plastic objects. To see an object's ability to slip into multiple understandings, even if they sometimes contradict one another, and then to consider what the implications of that might be. But what I love about your story is that it gets to the heart of what Duchamp was doing. He underscored the flexibility in the coding of objects, how the meaning of an object can change, while the object itself undergoes no physical change. Through the readymade, Duchamp made the context of the object, and our decision to participate in looking at something in a certain way, integral and conscious. In concrete terms, Duchamp made it possible to aestheticize everything, which is a powerful tool, and reaches beyond the exhibition space, or art, and into daily life. It's a transformation that can be enacted anywhere, all one has to think is the word "art," and this also brings about some problematic implications, because the readymade, contrary to what seems to be the case, turns the division between art and daily life into a chasm, it speaks of disjunction. In other words it tacitly asserts that looking at something as an aesthetic object, as an art object, jettisons its functionality, its use, the object is always inert and mute and the logic of the readymade stops there, it doesn't move beyond the point of denaturalizing or alienating meaning. I think that the true transformative potential kicks in there, that contextual slipperiness isn't an absence of one type of meaning, but the possibility to simultaneously traffic in a multitude of meanings.

Your story also reminds me of another aspect of the readymade, that the readymade is also a form of preservation. I think the first time I ever saw a bottle rack was when I saw Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* (1914). It was a completely alien object to me, it wasn't common. The same for *Fountain* (1917). It didn't look like any urinal I'd ever seen, not only because of the power of the readymade to decontextualize an object, but for the mundane fact that the object had ceased to be useful out in the world. I came to know these objects precisely because Duchamp used them. In this sense, the "violence" of the readymade, its being premised on wrenching an object from its natural context, is also an act of preservation. It made someone care for a common bottle rack, or a urinal, or a shovel, and this side of it is most pronounced when time has passed, when fashion has changed, or when objects have passed from their moments. It's hyper-museological, but also romantic. You could think of appropriation this way as well, like Richard Prince's cowboys, or Jeff Koons' vacuum cleaners. Artists who appropriate are saving things that wouldn't have been saved. So the negational side of appropriation always has this element of preservation wrapped up in it. I think of Benjamin, when he said that the collector is driven by the desire to make a world, "in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful," meaning that they are also freed from being evaluated, or judged, based on their immediate use; in the end they are liberated from the garbage heap, from cycles of forgetting. I think of my work as, in part, trying to reconcile these two competing aspects of art objects that the readymade brought forward, i.e. the art object's contingent and variable meaning, and the work of art as a preservational gesture.

Anyway, what I initially took from the readymade is a consciousness about how artworks activate conventional interpretive schemas, how they participate in these conventions, and how they require a viewer to complete the deal. Most importantly, it's how this is realized in a social field, in particular contexts. The person who interacts with and considers an object participates in its meaning, contextualizes it, produces the work. I'm not suggesting that it's all subjective. What I'm suggesting is that the production of aesthetic meaning is social, temporal, and it has political stakes, and Duchamp put that all on the table in a modern sense.

BN: Duchamp believed that it's the viewer who completes the work.

WB: Right, though it doesn't end at activating that relationship but in questioning how the convention is used, making it present in the room, considering how it could be manipulated or modified, seeing the social agreement that constitutes the art object as dynamic, rather than static. I started working with the materiality of the photograph because it seemed like a way out of what I felt were suffocating conventions. It allowed me to rethink my approach and to rethink the history of photography, and to work within what I perceived as a gap in that history, a possibility that seemed open, while simultaneously solving some immediate problems that I was confronting with regard to images. So much photography embraces convention alone, as though certain pictorial forms are inherently meaningful and the only task at hand is to learn how to reproduce those conventions. The problem happens in art in general, as with art that just looks like art, whose goal is simply to signify its status as art. Which is fine, but at best it's dully tasteful, and at worst it's cynical ... maybe it's the other way around.

BN: The problem is that an artist may see something in the world that piques their curiosity, but they can't leave it at that. They feel like they have a job to do, and they have to do something that hasn't exactly been done before. Take a common object and make it bigger. That's Claes Oldenburg in the 1960s—the dolls' house in reverse. How about making it smaller? Duchamp did this when he included miniature replicas of some of his readymades in *Box in a Valise* in 1941. Or re-make it exactly the same size. That's Charles Ray's fire truck. If you think of the readymade in terms of something found and not made, you can extend this notion to pictures made without a camera, pictures that are abstract, offering images in which something recognizable is not represented. Your camera-less, abstract pictures are always seen in relation to those that you take with a camera, pictures that are representational—landscapes, portraits, interiors, and so on—placing the viewer in-between one kind of picture and another. And you intermingle these images in exhibitions and in publications, like this one.

WB: I think showing pictures made by different means together emphasizes that all of the decisions about the work are in play, that they all consist of a set of choices which are made present in comparison to what surrounds them. For me, it makes the terms of the work more specific, because I see all of the work as being part of the same constellation of ideas. It's also a way to disrupt generalities, like sculpture and photography, or abstract and representational. I don't see photography as inherently abstract or representational, or some photographs as objects and some not, and it's really how the work prompts a questioning of these features. Part of the reason why I started working nonfiguratively was because I felt like that opposition between something called "abstract" and something called "representational" was arbitrary, and even an impediment, so it was important that a photograph might invite the term "abstract" but simultaneously refuse it, since the works are quite literal or concrete (i.e. not abstract). In essence, pictorial images are truly abstract, they are literally abstractions of 3D space, according to an invented formula. In general, I believe these categorical divisions stop people from looking closely, myself included, and throwing a wrench into these distinctions causes a reevaluation of the approach to a work of art, makes these unconscious assumptions conscious.

BN: I'm not sure about that. My experience is that people are either going to look closely or they're not, and terms really don't make a viewer more or less focused, more curious, and less impatient. There are things that are sculptural, things that are photographic, and those that are hybrid in nature.

WB: I don't see those categories as discrete, or particularly meaningful. They're highly elastic and contingent, and yet they are treated as though they are definitive. I find it rather archaic, dusty language. I do think a viewer's process is slowed down if their expectations about what is definitive are disrupted, say an assumption that some things are representational and some things are abstract, or some things are objects and some things are images. It's all much more messy than that.

BN: I can't disagree with you, and of course I have no vested interest in upholding definitive categories, but the physical and pictorial descriptions of things aren't dissolved by our hopes for the potentiality of artworks to transcend distinctions. Because the real problem as I see it is the imaginary ideal viewer, who rarely exists. The ways you look at and think about your work, and then I look at and write about your work, are quite distanced from how most viewers will regard and respond to what they encounter in a gallery and, even worse, in a museum. How ludicrous are wall labels, and how

head-spinning the comments of docents and the pre-recorded tour can be. We simply can't believe what we're reading or hearing, and yet that's exactly what's on offer for viewers every day of the week. When I had to write wall labels at P.S.1 there were times when I read back what I had written and was horrified, and immediately changed the text to be more plain spoken and direct. Imagine that you work too long in a museum and at some point you stop being horrified by institutional ventriloquism.

WB: I don't worry about the ideal viewer; I just try to propose a circumstance for viewing or engaging with a context. It removes the need to speculate on who this public is and, moreover, public institutions construct the public as much as serve them. The public is not a static thing, it is defined by the conditions that are offered. Wall labels like those you describe tend to conflate two functions of the museum, its educational mission of introducing the history of art to a mass public, and the mission of providing a place for contemporary artistic discourse. Institutions are often saddled with the obligation to sum up what they display, so viewers have a tendency to go straight to the wall label because that voice has become synonymous with the museum.

BN: We've all seen that before.

WB: I think that it's just part of what the museum has tasked itself with, so viewers have come to expect it; it's a vicious cycle. On the other hand, critics are often the most vociferous purveyors of condescension in the name of populism, and theirs is harder to justify. Populist claims are usually made by the most die-hard connoisseurs; they seek to preach a certain idea of culture, wrangle it, repackage it for a public, as goalies and interpreters. Viewers are adept at understanding what's before them, even if they can't articulate it. If lay viewers are interested in art, they also have to expect that making it is a serious endeavor. It doesn't mean that a viewer is assumed to think of the work the way I do. Certainly one can have a completely viable experience with an art object without understanding it in the same terms as the artist or a curator. I use a computer all the time and I certainly don't understand it like an engineer or a programmer does, but it doesn't mean I can't have a complex understanding of how it functions as a tool and make use of it, that I can't engage and evaluate it, or respond to it intelligently. It doesn't mean I have to take a computer science course before I can have a productive relationship with a computer, or that computer science is necessarily the "right" way to understand it. It's absurd to think of art differently. And I think this relates to certain puritanical ideas about art, either that it is all formal seduction or surface, with no political implications, or that seduction is antithetical to politically salient art. I think "useful" art seduces, it causes you to engage. But as a producer, thinking through the broader implications is important. The political questions are in the room, not somewhere else. A depiction of a political circumstance is not inherently political, in most cases it simply aestheticizes politics, conceals the political stakes of aesthetic address. Being didactic, as much so-called political art can be, is politically regressive. In the end, that presumptuous and condescending mode subordinates a viewer, reifies the problem implicit within public address, and reinscribes authority, often the same authority that such work claims to question—say a critique of media that speaks in the tongue of stereotypes, or a critique of the museum that speaks in the voice of the museum, or a critique of class structures that pretends the context of the museum is neutral. I'm repulsed by self-validating authority and prescriptive voices. I don't want to instruct viewers, I think of my work as propositional. I'm most concerned with the work constructing a site of reception that doesn't trade on alienation or domination.

BN: One of your folded pictures was included in the show that I organized in Vancouver, *phot(o)bjects*, which addressed the kinds of abstract, camera-less, and object-type photography that has been re-invigorated over the past 20 years. There was an online review of the show in which the writer quoted Wolfgang Tillmans: "A photograph is always seen through its content and rarely through its presence as an object in itself, whereas when confronted with other art objects one always deals with both aspects." So I don't know if terminology is the real culprit here. Rather, there needs to be a more thorough consideration of, as Wolfgang says, the content and the object itself. When we look at a huge monochrome or abstract painting by Olivier Mosset, for example, we understand that scale is part of its subject matter. With photography, on the level of the image, we have to at least concede that some pictures are unrecognizable, except as representations of space, while others are not. When we say the word "pictures" in relation to photography, what's implied is that something recognizable will sit on that surface, that our gaze will go toward something known or be returned. You organized an exhibition in 2005 with the title *Pictures are the Problem*. Can you talk about the show's

premise, and how the kinds of works you included—and that you produce—open up, in your own words, "a space of autonomy for the viewer."

WB: I'd agree with Wolfgang, although I don't really know what "content" means with artworks, does it mean something is inside of them? I think it's a confusing metaphor. I'd probably substitute "depiction" or "subject matter" for "content." Anyway, you show someone a photograph of Grandma and say, "Look, it's Grandma," and they say, "Oh, she looks nice," or whatever, and the photograph as a construction, as an object, as a form, is ignored. In other words, it's not "grandma," it's a photograph! So I would say language is part of how this problem that Wolfgang is talking about is manifest. But I agree with you that it's more than just language alone, and it's more than the object alone for that matter. Again, I would say that it is the material, its form, how it circulates, how it is distributed and forms a relationship with the audience that is the site where the work exists, where the real stakes are. The show *Pictures are the Problem* was the beginning of my identifying some of those questions, and it helped immensely to engage intimately with other people's work that I admire. That show was really how I came to understand all pictures, all images, as abstractions in a technical sense, and this opened up my own production. I continue to get a lot out of working with art in ways outside of direct production; it forces me to remember all of the potential outlets for artworks, all of the other ways they traffic and have meaning, and all of the individuals who play a part in that process.

BN: Can you talk about some of the artists in that show, and how their works address the limitations of pictures? When you talk about being outside of direct production, it makes me acknowledge that in addition to having an art practice you also write, teach, and organize exhibitions. We worked together on *The Gold Standard* at P.S.1 in 2006, and now you're joining forces with Kelley Walker to organize a show at Paula Cooper. All of the things you do seem interrelated. And I can't help but mention, in terms of being outside of production, that when I've been in your studio I get the feeling that it's more of an office, the site where your work is managed rather than produced.

WB: The backbone for *Pictures are the Problem* was a 1980 work by Lawrence Weiner, *TAKEN FROM HERE TO WHERE IT CAME FROM AND TAKEN TO A PLACE AND USED IN SUCH A MANNER THAT IT CAN ONLY REMAIN AS A REPRESENTATION OF WHAT IT WAS WHERE IT CAME FROM*. The Weiner outlined the commonplace understanding of pictures as a kind of displacement, as being "about" something else, its missing context, but incorporated how the viewer and their expectations could be, and were, drawn into the room as an active process by his piece, pointing out that this process is always in the room. That work made the act of looking conscious, and it also addressed the idea of an exhibition, of bringing things together to make meaning, and how that meaning is contingent on circumstance. It also changed my negative idea of displacement (as in something losing its "natural" context) into the positive idea of placement, in the sense that the context is always in the room, that is where things are happening, it's not a representation's distance from what it is representing, but what it causes to happen in front of it, the experiences at the site of reception. It's akin to the discussion of negation in art objects. I think it's strange to talk about negation with art objects. You can't negate with a thing, you can't produce negatively, production is an active, cumulative process. Negation is simply a perverse form of preservation, of reifying what is already present. All the works in the show resonated with this aspect of the Weiner piece—transforming displacement into an affirmative term, taking a moment of misrecognition and allowing it to unfold, filling up the room.

As for my studio being like an office, I suppose it is in some way. Luckily, because of teaching, I usually have access to school facilities so a lot of my production happens there. I see management as part of production; there's not really a division for me. Mostly the studio is used to look at work, spend time around it. The mirrored floor was in the studio for a year and a half before I ever showed it. Some works are produced in the studio, but I work everywhere. I write and make objects while traveling, in hotels, at home, at school. I try to make use of whatever circumstances present themselves. The studio is often where things are collected together, where I think through what I've done, but I work everywhere and anywhere I can. Sometimes it feels compulsive, but I feel like every moment needs to be reframed within the larger project of the work ...

BN: Funny how the idea of a post-studio practice seems most frequently identified with those artists who made earthworks or exterior/locational body pieces, such as Hans Breder and his dis-figurative mirror displacements, Michael Heizer's motorcycle drawings in the desert, Richard Long's marking of places along his extended walks, Ana Mendiata's performative merging

with landscape, Robert Smithson and his non-sites, James Turrell's crater. I suggest that the first post-studio artists are actually the Impressionists, painting *en plein air*. Although On Kawara would probably insist that the earliest artists, those who made cave paintings, are the first studio artists, and I know that Verne Dawson's opinion would be that caves were the first studios.

WB: That makes me think back to the idea of experimenters tinkering in darkrooms, i.e. caves, which evokes the title of a talk Hollis Frampton gave called "The Invention Without a Future," a reference to the famous quote by Lumière—that cinema was an invention without a future. Along with it he offered a title for a talk he didn't end up using, or didn't give, "A Partial Disassembling of an Invention Without a Future: Helter-Skelter and Random Notes in Which the Pulleys and Cogwheels Are Lying Around at Random All Over the Workbench." It's an engaging image for me—the way it evokes labor, machines, and a sort of making do with found materials, of disruption and intervention, finding solutions that fit a specific context. The idea of the bricoleur making use of what is at hand is central to how I think about production. I had been fascinated by Claude Lévi-Strauss' idea of concrete science, which proposes this idea of working within prescribed conditions as a viable political model, a mode of resistance to dominant orders that doesn't rely on diametric opposition, but emphasizes re-use, the recombination of dominant scripts to produce outcomes that a dominant order hadn't intended. This is how the thought process about the *Transparencies* (2006–) and the *FedEx* (2007–) boxes began, but it's present in all of the work. I had been thinking of ways to get around static models of opposition, to use these potentially repressive systems instead of rejecting them, but use them in a way that doesn't fit into their program. One doesn't have to overthrow the dominant structure—doing so usually replicates the original problem anyway, just think of all the revolutionary regimes which are as fiercely totalitarian as the governments they usurped—but one can change bits, contaminate and misuse its rules; that seems the most viable way to transform the apparatuses around us, perverting them rather than opposing them, using their rules to reach different possibilities.

BN: We often articulate our ideas by way of images. As you're speaking of Hollis Frampton and the apparatus, I'm reminded of a picture by David Robbins of a completely disassembled camera, which I've always associated with the title of his first collection of essays on photography, The Camera Believes Everything. That title could easily generate innumerable essays on the medium, and from different and contradictory angles. With camera-less pictures, you'd never manage the formulation: the darkroom believes everything.

WB: I suppose a camera only "believes" what it is set up to "believe," which has little to do with any conception of reality that exists outside of its own parameters. A camera doesn't "believe" things that happen in the dark, for example, it doesn't register most forms of radiation, like microwaves, or UV. I think the darkroom, or any other element of a photographic apparatus, or any apparatus, would have a similar set of conditions or "beliefs." "Beliefs" it is ready to accept. In this sense, it's tautological, it reifies the conditions it is designed for, which is why I think that so many artists from the 1960s and 70s were obsessed with tautologies, Robert Morris' *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (1961), Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1969). When these works were at their best they began to transform the systems they reflected by restating them, deforming and perverting them through repetition, the way a word begins to sound unfamiliar if you say it over and over. Doing this unlocks other possibilities that were hiding in plain sight, by estranging things that have become naturalized, that we assume have fixed meanings.

BN: You've photographed me on a few occasions—with the emphasis on a few since I don't like to be photographed—and I always wonder whether how a subject doesn't completely, or with any full satisfaction, recognize themselves, corresponds with how we never hear our recorded voices the way that we hear ourselves speak. The eye and the ear, sound and vision, aren't interchangeable, and yet it's worth considering that there's a perceptual discrepancy that can't be accounted for in terms of the equipment or other viewers/listeners. In fact, our friends always seem to insist that we don't hear our voice the way that they do. Is there any relation to pictures? It's a question I raise because for a number of years now you've been taking portraits. How do you see them? And how do your subjects see themselves?

WB: I think it's always alienating to see some aspect of oneself taken out of context, but only if the assumption is that the photograph is meant to "represent" the person. I don't think of my portraits as representing people, or the whole of the person. It's a type of schematic, and this extends to the organization of the photographs. It's

more about inhabiting a photographic genre and a way to try to account for the physical, social, and emotional conditions of making my work. I don't photograph people who haven't had an impact on my thinking as an artist. I only photograph people whose voices are imbedded in the work, to whom I feel indebted. I also photograph objects, scenes, and the series is called *Industrial Portraits* (2008–), so in a way, people are just one element in the production of the work, one part of the voice, even if the influence is on the level of conversation or consumption, or if it's on the literal level of how a particular tool affects the ideas behind the making of the work. I was thinking about Albert Renger Patzsch's Die Welt ist schön [The World Is Beautiful] and his original title, Die Dinge [The Things], which also included portraits alongside images of factories, street scenes, and plants. His publisher hated the title and changed it. I think photographs emphasize thingness and surface, but they can also puncture this, they can speak about larger organizational systems, even personal systems. The portraits are celebratory for me; they come out of affection, out of the community that I access because of my work, the people, places, and things that have entered my life because of art. So it has both the typological, sociological aspect like August Sander, but unlike Sander I have a direct relationship with everything that is photographed, I'm directly implicated within the photographs as more than just the person who made them. So there is also this element of connectivity on an emotional and professional level that implicates me and anything I make. The portraits are neither authoritative revelations of production, nor are they simply diaristic.

BN: How do you describe them? How do you make them?

WB: The portraits are just part of a negotiation, an intermediary between parties, the sliver of a stable relationship to them. They are, in a sense, a physical manifestation of a contract between parties, a kind of deal predicated on transitory interdependence. There is a lot that is outside of this sliver, that is external to it, but there is a single trajectory that is shared, and becomes stable in the portraits. I try to wait until the time is right, until I know them well enough to make the portrait, but also that I don't know them too well, or the context is a bit unfamiliar, so the relationship is consummated in that moment. I figure if I feel too embarrassed to take the picture, it's the wrong time. But if it's just a tad uneasy, a bit tenuous, if the portrait is a negotiation between equal parties, then it works. So there is a certain type of intimacy that's needed. I've tried to force it in the past, or push through this feeling, but it never works. The portraits occur in a state of equilibrium, when it seems like the person and I are exacting a similar control over a situation, when I need them, and they in turn need me. It doesn't work when this isn't the case, which is why the portraits that do work usually occur in the middle of a working situation, installing a show, working on a project, discussing a work of art—all in the middle of negotiation.

BN: There seems today to be almost no "anxiety of influence" for many younger artists. Either they know and acknowledge their sources, sometimes engaging in an exchange after-the-fact, or they don't know—and don't much care. You also teach, which seems an important element in your practice, so you have first-hand access to this situation, and of course you had to work through historical figures and precedents when you were younger. Who are some of the artists who most influenced your visual mind, and how are they present in your thinking, and how are they apparent, even as traces, in the pictures?

WB: Teaching is very important to me, it reminds me of how ideas evolve as they circulate, and the importance of contexts for open exchange. In working with students, one of the goals is to help identify influences, make it something that students can examine, consider, and make use of as the raw material of their work. I don't think I've ever felt any anxiety about influences on my work. When I think about artists, I'm most interested in how their ideas are interconnected, in how artists influence one another, borrow from one another, transform and inflect each other's approaches, and I cherish those connections. School offers a microcosmic view of that process. My earliest points of reference were artists who had strongly political and systematic approaches to their work—I think it was a reaction to the expressionistic models that seemed to pervade the student work I was around—but that I could also understand through my background in photography. Artists like Ed Ruscha, Lee Friedlander, Stan Douglas, Dan Graham, or Lewis Baltz opened me up to more hybridized practices, like Michael Asher, Isa Genzken, Sol LeWitt, Felix Gonzalez-Torres or Sigmar Polke. Looking back I see a strong sense of generosity in all of their work, a kind of thoughtful lack of preciousness, things I continue to admire. I suppose, the strongest influences on my work have been the artists and writers I've known, especially in academic contexts, first as a student, and

later as a teacher, but the transition between the two happened in less than a year, and it felt almost seamless. The teachers I was lucky enough to work closely with instilled a deep respect for the intellectual freedom that educational institutions are premised upon. I'm thinking of Stephen Shore in particular; I think my admiration for him and his work made teaching seem like something I wanted to do. When I first moved to L.A., I spent the first few years teaching at several different schools at the same time. I got intimate with different methodologies, and got to know artists through these varied contexts. I wasn't showing much then, just digesting what I had been exposed to, so teaching gave me a structured way to think through ideas and experiment with lines of thought I might not have otherwise. Now the situation is a bit different, I have a permanent appointment, but I continue to draw a lot of inspiration from academic contexts, it still pushes my thinking forward. Academia is one of the few places that this sort of open exchange is allowed to occur. It's part of why Los Angeles has been an important place for me, because the schools are at the core of the art community here, which creates a uniquely open culture around art.

In graduate school, Catherine Opie, Roni Horn, and Mel Bochner were deeply influential. I never studied with James Welling, but I learned a great deal through our relationship, and he has always been extremely generous with me. Knowing Morgan Fisher and Olivier Mosset was similarly formative. In every case, the influence had to do with the person's work, respecting and admiring it, but the real revelations came from understanding the context that they were working within, how their work and approach to the world was interconnected, and studying that. Beyond that, I think my attitudes about art were as strongly influenced by art critics as they were by artists. Craig Owens and Benjamin Buchloh both opened up ways to consider art objects that were revelatory to me, it gave art real world stakes, and there were many others, but I stumbled into their work in particular during what was a deeply impressionable time. Of course, artists who write were deeply important, like Dan Graham, Allan Sekula, and Martha Rosler, among others.

BN: You also worked at *Artforum*.

WB: Right. After undergraduate. I was there for a year. It was an intense education and I learned a great deal from the people I worked with. It was also demystifying, it made the art world seem smaller, but also more permissive and comprehensible. I worked under Jack Bankowsky's tenure, and the climate was extremely open and nurturing. Thinking back, it's amazing how accommodating people were to me as a dumb kid. This was when you and I first met, and running around with you to see shows and hear you talk about art transformed my thinking about how one could understand and work with objects and ideas; it opened up organizing shows and writing as a means to participate in a way I hadn't imagined as an option before. The whole experience taught me a lot; I'm not sure it would have occurred to me to write or organize shows otherwise, but what I experienced there was a community around art that was serious and passionate, that contributed as much to the conversation as artists did. I guess these experiences removed any anxiety about someone seeing my work or not; afterward I knew that if you wanted to participate you could find an outlet, and if the existing ones weren't interesting, it was possible to invent new ones.

BN: I agree with you about the impact of teachers and artists and critics with whom we have direct contact. There has to be a vast difference between reading an essay of Robert Smithson's and having a beer with Ed Ruscha. But what about historical figures who were influential or are present—in spirit at least—in your work?

WB: I don't know that I can answer that. I see myself speaking to certain artists, responding to them in some way. Sometimes this is conscious and sometimes not. I didn't realize Duchamp was important to what I was doing until I looked back and realized that he was central to much of what I was thinking about. At times this is literal. Moholy-Nagy is important for me, and he became a part of my work in the sense that *Pictures Made by My Hand with the Assistance of Light* (2006–2009) was inspired by a story about a missing body of his work, and developed alongside my research into that work, which I found out had most likely not existed in the first place. *American Passages* (2001–) was a kind of synthesis of Dan Graham, George Romero, Victor Gruen, Jane Jacobs, Richard Matheson, and Eugène Atget, all of whom I was thinking about obsessively. It was built out of the connection between pictorial images, urban theory, and apocalyptic horror films, which I saw as revolving around a similar set of narratives. *Excursionist Views* (2001/2005) was titled after a quote from Jacob Riis, the social documentarian who made *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), and they used the abandoned section 8 housing of architects such as Paul Rudolph and Charles Moore as a kind of stage set.

BN: As stage sets for what?

WB: In the case of their buildings, I think they were intended for an idealized lower class, one that would accept the structures as "good for them" and conduct their lives within them accordingly. Of course this didn't happen, and the projects failed for one reason or another, usually because of the adaptive tactics of the public they were meant to contain, and its resistance to the prescribed roles they were meant to play. It was not only behavioral, but also biological. For example, the Rudolph structures were damp and moldy, causing illnesses in the tenants. So the structures sit in the landscape, waiting to be activated by the idealized tenants who will never show up. They remain as they began, as models, as aesthetic arguments, like monumental sculptures to an idealized future. They act like holes in the landscape, out of time and out of place, discontinuous with the urban context that surrounds them, in both architectural and social terms.

BN: You've just mentioned Dan Graham and George Romero in the same breath, which is a fairly unexpected pairing, and now the idea of a modern ruin. This puts me very much in mind of your photos of abandoned and desolate shopping malls, the series *American Passages*, which you originally titled *Dead Malls*. In one of Romero's films, I believe it's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), the zombies make their way to a mall, where a number of people have found refuge from them, and one person asks, "Why do they come here?" And another says, "Some kind of instinct. Memory, of what they used to do. This was an important place in their lives." You don't normally think of a zombie movie as a vehicle for sociological commentary, although as a contemporary genre it couldn't be better suited, and in the current economy I would imagine that many people going to malls have been reduced to window-shoppers, walking around without buying anything—in a sort of zombie-like state or trance. How did this series start, and how has it evolved, or continue to evolve?

WB: Part of the reason why I admire Dan Graham is because he was able to make connections between seemingly disparate phenomena through aesthetics, whether it's rock 'n' roll and the Shakers, or suburban tract development, the magazine page, and Minimalist aesthetics. He provided the tools to think these ideas together, to see historical and aesthetic resonances between them. Romero is compelling to me because he did a similar thing, he saw the zombie film as a political allegory. He was something of a rustbelt Marxist. On some level, they are both allegorists. Romero used the horror film, which is historically the most conservative genre, and Graham used distributive forms, such as the magazine page, which usually contained or presented art but weren't art in and of themselves. And I see in Romero an allegory for the inability of the dominant or natural order to comprehend new political formations. I think that was a rather radical idea. He refers to his zombies as "blue collar monsters" that "represent change." The zombies are the return of the repressed—both in a political sense, and in a psychoanalytic sense. They are communal, they don't fuck each other over as the humans do. They're at the mall, but they don't go shopping; the people there still do, but the zombies don't. They have a purity about them, and because of this, they are also unfathomable to the human population. They look like monsters, or pure id, to the protagonists, because the protagonists are stuck in an antiquated idea of individualism and capitalism—which is what brought on the zombies anyway—an observation that was timely in the 1970s, with the death of the American industrial machine and the move of the country to the Right. The film inverts the usual equation. The monsters are the protagonists, and the humans are the real monsters. Both Graham's and Romero's work seems to combat a form of forgetting by drawing analogies between genres and forms. Certainly both have blind spots. It's telling that, as a friend pointed out to me, Graham's history of rock 'n' roll ignores blues, jazz, and gospel. Essentially it's a white history of rock 'n' roll, a kind of white fantasy, but it's important, not as history, but as a construction, one of many, and it makes a certain type of thinking possible that wasn't before.

BN: The mall also symbolizes the "white flight" of the 1960s. Once the city and Main Street have been left behind, they must be reconstructed in some other form and at a safe distance. The sort of "town square" you have at regular intervals in malls, with their fountains and cobblestones, is somehow meant to recapture the Old World, and yet it's a false memory.

WB: Right. The malls, and the death of the mall, are part of this cycle of overlaid competing histories that are often forgotten. They are material remnants of a transformation of the idea of the American city, and they are cities unto themselves. They are echoes of a past idea of progress, and yet in their abandonment they are a site of possibility, i.e. they begin to be used for things other than shopping and start operating more

like the public space they displaced. *American Passages* is something of an archival project. The pictures are tied into the history of photographic depictions of ruins, the history of democracy—the arcade came on the scene in France around the time of the French Revolution and signaled a shift in the idea of public space, of modernity in general. The mall is a Cold War phenomenon. Victor Gruen, the Austrian immigrant who, driven out of Europe by the Second World War, was the progenitor of the American mall and it is a throw back to a European idea of civics, a place for the people. So there is a funny cycle that the mall is a part of, developed in conjunction with the French Revolution, itself modeled on the American Revolution, and then filtered through Europe, brought to the states and then exported again.

BN: I think of Graham as well in relation to your mirrored, and eventually cracked, floor pieces. His pavilions are most frequently situated outdoors, having a relationship to garden structures and follies. Your floor installations are always wall-to-wall in the context of a gallery or museum space, a space they accentuate and destabilize. And so despite the inevitable disorientation, there is also a clarity of vision in a sense. Mel Bochner famously quoted [Émile] Zola in his 1970 piece, *Misunderstandings (A Theory of Photography)*: "In my opinion, you cannot say that you have thoroughly seen anything until you have a photograph of it." At the risk of suggesting that a photograph and a mirror have similar usage, I can see a work more clearly when it's reflected in a mirror. Can you talk about your floor installations?

WB: Funny, Oliver Wendell Holmes referred to a photograph as a "mirror with a memory"... In a sense, the work turns the exhibition space into a site of production; this was the impetus for it, to combine these two sites that are usually kept apart, so the piece gets made through the exhibition of it. But it is most compelling to me when it links the different areas of the institution, reaches into backrooms, lobbies, and offices, treats these all as moments of display and production. And the image that is cast in the mirror changes by walking on it and looking at it, so the floors work against the idea of a stable image, against the idea that this is even possible. There is a cumulative effect of the viewers in the space, and an effect of the person on the thing they are looking at. It's impossible to look at the floor without changing it, it's also impossible to just look at the floor, you always have something reflected in it, the *FedEx* boxes have that quality as well, and moreover, what's reflected is constantly changing. I wanted something that had an ephemeral, chimerical air, alongside a sense of material solidity; to have the spectacle of the mirror counterbalanced with the cracking and shifting of the panels as they are walked upon. I think of it as a kind of concrete spectacle.

BN: And what about the *FedEx* pieces? The inexpensive delivery of artworks via FedEx is a fairly recent phenomenon. Everyone does it, and everyone holds their breath when the package arrives at its destination and is opened, hoping it hasn't been smashed to pieces. I did a show and had a framed photograph sent from Paris to Boston. When we opened the box the glass had cracked and there were multiple cuts in the photo. It was destroyed. But your *FedEx* pieces, if they arrive safe and sound, are somehow failures. I'm thinking about how you use outside circumstances to make and unmake the work. There are the pieces based on film that was X-rayed at the airport and has been irrevocably—and intentionally—compromised. You certainly welcome this assisted readymade, or more accurately, assisted un-made. How did you arrive at this doing/undoing of your work?

WB: I suppose it's the result of trying to externalize production, to use a productive system as a readymade, situating it in structures that reach beyond the hermetic space of the studio and into larger social contexts, which are, invariably, how an art object obtains its meaning anyway, i.e. in its circulation and dissemination. The *FedEx* and X-ray works come directly out of this thinking, but I would say it's equally present within the photograms, or the mirrored floor. And I suppose as far back as *Eight Young Men of Approximately Twenty-Five Years of Age* (2002)—originally titled *Absent Self-Portrait #3*—which was made by sending off photographs to an expert in age progression. I think of the work as being made through a by-product of some form of labor, as indexical marks of a process that is meant to pass by without being seen, and also that the forces at play in these contexts, for example in transportation or inspection, can be made present or visible. The X-ray works (by this I mean the *Transparencies* and the *Travel Pictures*) and the *FedEx* boxes are complimentary in this sense. The X-ray works are the traces of looking inward, looking into a form, or an interior. They wouldn't be possible without the massive apparatus around air travel. They are the residue of vision, or inspection, and are made by dumbly juxtaposing two forms of vision, the photographic, which is concerned with surface, and the X-ray, which is concerned with the interior. Both of these

modernist industrial visual technologies propose a form of transparency, of naturalized realism, that is culturally accepted, but when you stick them together there is a friction, an alternate outcome. With the *FedEx* works, the forces exerted on the object in transport are registered. But in both cases the movement or transport of the object generates its composition. For these, I think of it as making an invisible and technologically sublime system directly manifest, to use its surplus energy to some end. With the *FedEx* pieces, the shipping label becomes its provenance, so its value or authenticity are its surface. This, coupled with the fact that it is a work that needs to be shipped in order to be made, links the material production of the thing to its symbolic value as an art object. The more it is seen, the more it changes, or evolves, the more it literally accrues meaning, or value as a cultural object, and the more its surface is layered.

BN: I hadn't thought of the *Absent Self-Portrait #3* in a while—it's from quite a while ago. But it brings up the fact that you incorporated yourself, or a surrogate for yourself, in a number of your early pieces. There is the whole series where you insert yourself into displays of merchandise in shopping malls, *Phenomenology of Shopping* (2001–2003), which perversely relates to the *American Passages* pictures, and the photographs that have a correspondence to those, the *Prone* (2001) series, the college kids passed out in bushes on campus. Those seem like the pathetic aftermath of a hazing or simply binge drinking. Those three series offer images of consumption, of spent energy, seen in either a poignant or absurd frame. Is it maybe because you were young when you made these, not in the sense of being your own subject, but in terms of an underlying tension, which is vulnerability. Because there's also early on a great piece that I've never asked you about—the double nude that is installed so as to mirror itself. Can you talk about this piece in particular, and these early works in general?

WB: The *Paired Adonis* (2002) works? I haven't thought of them in a long time. At the time I was thinking about Adonis as a term that stepped outside of conventional models of gender, of gender opposition. Adonis was masculine, had masculine beauty, but was hermetically sealed, he didn't go to war, he didn't define his sexuality through extroversion. Unlike Hercules, say, who went out into the world and conquered. So the idea was a double nude, blank nudes that presented themselves in an open way but faced inward like an open book, as though the viewer didn't matter, two figures that were actually one, that seemed to stare through a viewer ... but those weren't of me, although initially I did use myself. Regardless, in every case, it may be my body, but it is not myself. I was exaggerating what I had come to feel was present in every portrait, the false invitation to project a self onto them based on extraneous and circumstantial elements. I had experimented with making works where there was no interiority to speak of, and *Eight Young Men...* probably came the closest to achieving this. In grad school I made a work where I drank beer until I completely blacked out, and had given a friend instructions to make a portrait of me in this state, to lift me up and place me in a chair I had set up beforehand. Essentially it was a portrait of a person who was just a body, who had no thoughts, or at least no memory, and I would argue that we construct ourselves through memory, we link together the fragments of our actions, reformulate them so they seem like one continuous self. Anyway, I woke up with the taste of vomit in my mouth and no idea whether or not the photograph had even happened. I think these were the only photographs I made that had my face in them. In all the others, *Phenomenology of Shopping*, or the eye photographs, or *Eight Young Men...*, my face was turned away, or concealed under makeup, or transformed by some process. I wasn't consciously thinking of this at the time, I didn't see the work as being 'about' me. It was actually a student who pointed out to me that I was in much of my work, but my face was always obscured. I think I was actively trying to avoid the trap of placing myself, as the artist, in the role of the subject to vicariously experience the world through, and also to question the idea that a person could be "captured."

Eight Young Men... started with images of me from school, from standard yearbook photos that I sent to a guy who does age progression for the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. I told him they were photographs of brothers, and provided him with family photos. So these were extrapolated from my adolescence, from an indeterminate state of maturation. I don't really recall my adolescence. I remember things I did, but I don't understand or relate to how I thought. I was just a pile of discontinuous actions, fragments. I remember this used to really disturb me, that whatever subjectivity I had was a black box, a roll of the dice. So I thought of those photographs as blanks, and the age progression specialist then extrapolated from the blankness, making a set of portraits of people that didn't exist, photographs that were uncorroborated by any outside reality, but still had to be understood as "real."

BN: Of the eight images, the first one does really look like how I'd imagine you as a child. There's definitely a resemblance, but the others could be almost anyone. You mention that this man works for the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. The notion of "missing" and "exploited" seems appropriate to so much of your work, from the *Absent Self-Portrait* to the recent *Selected Works*, which have the double date of 1998/2008–. These are pieces made from older pictures that you have totally recycled and compressed. I think you even used the term "mulched" to describe their making. They have a photographic visual analogy to particleboard! Sam Samore made a great sculptural piece in 1999 that was a pile of 16-gallon clear plastic trash bags filled with photographs of his that had been run through a shredding machine. There was no way of knowing what the images were. The images had been reduced to so much confetti. Not a very festive occasion for photography, to say the least. The same could be said of your *Selected Works*. Even the title proposes a neat reversal. "Selected Works" usually suggests that a specific selection has been made to be exhibited. In your pieces the photos serve as merely so much grist for the mill.

WB: I find it disturbing that any of those images actually look like me. What I found interesting was that the age-progression expert made decisions about the person in socio-economic terms, based on my physical appearance at the time. He gave the fat one a slovenly shirt, the thinner one a well kept appearance. He gave one guy a tan. They all look like generic white dudes to me, but that sociological typing was the extra unforseen byproduct that the process produced. As for the *Selected Works*, they are a selection that happens in the margins of all the other selections that make up what I do. I try to embrace all the outcomes of the work, not repress any of it, to let it all bubble up in some way. Those works were the invisible supports for the other work, so it seemed important to figure out a way for them to play a role, and reconstituting them into a mass was a way to do this. I think of my work as a kind of ecosystem, a set of internal relations that are all in relation to their display or traffic, so the discarded or leftovers are as important as what's on view. Throwing away failed or "unshowable" works felt like a lie, a repression, so I needed to try to account for them in some way. Again, it's a way to externalize all of the processes of the work, to adapt to the byproducts the process produces.

BN: There's Gardar Eide Einarsson's comment on the emotions of his fellow Norwegians. He once said to me, "We like to repress our repression." Isn't there a little of this going on if you're making art out of older pieces that you're uncomfortable with, and that, as you suggest, don't jive with your current practice? My so-called advice to students in art school is to look at the early work/late work paradigm that can haunt any career or retrospective, and to somehow not make any of that work: no early work to be hidden away, no late work to be embarrassed by. Unless you're Willem de Kooning, dead at the time, and museums and dealers conspire to greatly elevate the opinion and prices of the works you painted while you suffered from alcohol dementia. The hope is that, when all is said and done, there is "only the work." There probably isn't a single day that I don't think, thank god I'm not an artist, because it's not easy. Your sense of your work as an ecosystem, I have to say, is really brilliant.

WB: I think the difference is for a practice to be self-organizing, to be constantly refiguring its own past in relation to its present. All artists, all producers for that matter, do this in some form. When I realized that I did this in indirect ways, like in this conversation when I narrate the past, refine it, or in lectures or studio visits, it made sense to literalize this process. If parts of past ideas were playing into the work, why not allow the failed pieces, the false starts, the dead ends, to materially comprise the recent works? I often do this with texts, repurposing old fragments in new essays. I published a text that started out as "White Cow in a Snowstorm" under several different titles and in different configurations. Each version becomes an index of what was happening at the time—the editor or editors I'm working with, and the particular restrictions on the text. I've done this with interviews also, pasting in previous answers, previous ideas, snippets. That was the idea behind the *Press Release* (2008–) I've been using, which is simply made up of quotes from reviews of my previous shows arranged in rhyming couplets. It's actually a form of poetry from antiquity called "cento," which means "patchwork" in Latin. I'm drawn to the anonymity of forms like this. I think this is what I'm always left to do, piece things together, find some logic to connect things, and then excrete that logic, to do my part and then send it off, give it away to be digested again.