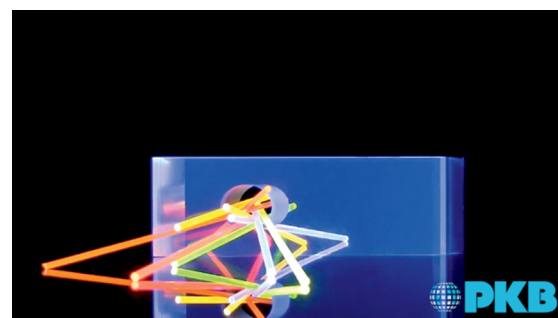


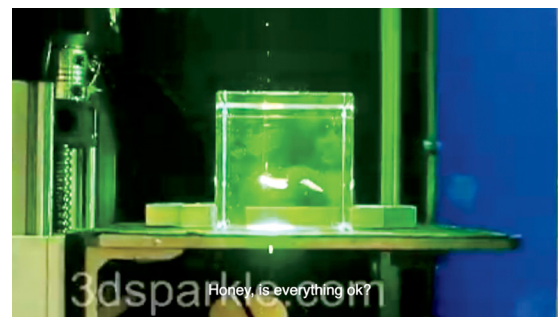


Three stills from Beny Wagner's *Invisible Measure*, 2013, HD video, color, sound, 36 minutes 15 seconds.



Above: Two stills from Beny Wagner's *Vision Contract*, 2013, HD video, color, sound, 4 minutes 40 seconds.

Below: Beny Wagner, *Light Politics*, 2013, HD video, color, sound, 4 minutes 13 seconds.



shift from revolutionary emblem to politics of control: the invention of Plexiglas in the 1930s. If Scheerbart argued that glass was “like virtue itself, pure, unyielding, readier to break than to bend,” the pliability of Plexiglas functions as a material correlative for the transformation of transparency from an inherent physical property to a radically dematerialized status. This is not a linear process, however, but a dialectical exchange wherein material and idea are subjected to reciprocal interference.

Wagner explored the ductile nature of Plexiglas in several sculptures, each titled *Without Seams*, 2013, and made up of two perpendicular sheets of the material, simply arranged as freestanding vertical structures. Their surfaces are predominantly blank and just barely perceptible, although most are also imprinted

OPENINGS

Beny Wagner

ALEXANDER SCRIMGEOUR



The End of Windows

WE SPEND A LOT OF TIME looking *through* transparent surfaces—windows, screens—but far less time looking *at* them. After all, such objects are typically taken for granted; their ideal condition is a form of invisibility. And yet despite—or perhaps because of—this elusiveness, transparency has acquired a powerful symbolism, imbued with the moral values of openness, truth, and purity. Berlin-based artist Beny Wagner peers into just these paradoxes of transparency, particularly its complex and shifting interchanges between material and metaphor. In video, sculpture, sound, text, and performance, Wagner posits connections between the solid and the limpid, between hard stuff and immaterial ideology. The first results of this investigation were on view

at an exhibition of Wagner's new work this past fall at Import Projects in Berlin. Here, the video *Invisible Measure*, 2013, juxtaposed our present-day world of glass and screens with an earlier vision of ubiquitous transparency. Contemporary footage (of shopwindows, tour buses, a bulletproof-glass demonstration) is accompanied by a voice-over in which a narrator reads from the 1914 book *Glasmarchitektur* (Glass Architecture) by writer and architectural theorist Paul Scheerbart, whose work captured the admiration of Walter Benjamin, Reyner Banham, and, more recently, the artist Josiah McElheny. In poetic axioms, Scheerbart dreams of a new age of spectacular colored-glass buildings that would bring about a reenchantment of the world.

The exhibition set Scheerbart's delirious, altermodernist utopia against a more contemporary project, equally motivated by the idea that transparency can change the world. The multimedia work *Through It, Appearance*, 2013, is structured around a recording of an interview with Peter Eigen, the founder of Transparency International, an anticorruption lobbying group set up in the 1990s with the aim of formalizing the ways in which we measure another kind of transparency—that of governments and corporations—by introducing new statistical metrics for ethics and accountability. Unlike Scheerbart, who was obsessed with physical transparency, Eigen pursues an idealized abstraction, albeit one that maintains an uneasy reliance on the connotations of visible clarity, as emphasized by the many material references Eigen uses in describing his enigmatic subject.

Other components of the work point to contradictions emerging from the term's purported neutrality, highlighting the Christian themes underlying Eigen's rhetoric. A photograph mounted on canvas depicts a painting in Eigen's office, given to him as a present during a trip to Africa, that evokes nothing so much as a Last Supper scene in which he is unwittingly cast as Jesus, a white messiah of truth. A wall-mounted sculpture, meanwhile, takes the form of a transparent green fig leaf, which plays on a comment made by Eigen in a discussion of companies flaunting an open book in some areas to avoid scrutiny of their misdeeds in others: “That is the allegory of the fig leaf, and I always say: I don't mind a fig leaf if it is transparent.” Even as an ideal, then, transparency always brings us back to questions of perception. There is a fine line between the appearance of transparency and its (allegedly measurable) reality.

The historical chronology in Wagner's exhibition pivots on an intermediary stage in transparency's

Wagner's decision to emphasize the breadth of his subjects' historical scope allows him to escape the fate of many of his peers, who are still (often unfairly) shoehorned into the specious, narrow category of post-Internet practice.



Beny Wagner, *A Little Bit Too Much (for wood, herringbone)*, 2012, MDF, sandpaper. Installation view, Future Gallery, Berlin.

with images of transparent objects, such as plastic desktop organizers or vitrines. So that they may be seen, the depicted objects are printed in a translucent gray: Ironically, transparency loses its defining property in becoming visible.

Simultaneously transparent objects and representations of transparency, these sculptures are dizzyingly doubled—a doubling that enacts transparency's binary status as both a material quality and an idealized symbol. Yet, as Wagner's works make clear, the materiality of transparency has become more mutable even as the qualities it is asked to represent have grown more intangible: This trajectory is at once exacerbated by and profoundly indicative of an era structurally determined by the intersecting abstractions of capital and data. Wagner understands this development not only in broadly cultural or technological terms, but also as posing specific dilemmas for his practice. In fact, one of the challenges to art that Wagner addresses in his work is that the visible realm is at a disadvantage in representing contemporary reality. Indeed, exchanges between the material and the immaterial were central to Wagner's 2012 exhibition at Future Gallery in Berlin, for which the artist covered the gallery's herringbone-parquet floor with different grades of sandpaper. The show offered very little to the eye, instead forcing visitors to interact directly with the space and demanding something physical of them—dust from the abraded soles of their shoes—in return.

The artist's project, then, can be understood as an expansion of institutional critique, but one acknowledging that disclosure—making the hidden visible—is no longer enough. Like many artists born in the '80s, Wagner is finely attuned to the inseparability of technological and cultural shifts. His decision to emphasize the breadth of his subject's historical

scope, however, allows him to escape the fate of many of his peers, who are still (often unfairly) shoehorned into the specious, narrow category of post-Internet practice. In the local context of Berlin, Wagner's work also seems a productive artistic response to the extensively researched “information exhibitions” of interdisciplinary historiography that curator Anselm Franke presents across town at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt—although Wagner shows no comparable tendency toward authoritative narratives.

Instead, Wagner seems to embrace a more speculative conception of historical interpretation. In a talk given at Import Projects during the show's run, Wagner described his central preoccupation in the project as “how to tell stories,” and one video in the exhibition, *Light Politics*, 2013, was explicitly fictional. Here Wagner imagines the boss of a Plexiglas company at home, unsettled by his meeting with the artist during the day, and making a confession to his wife. It was not the strongest work in the show, but it was striking for the way it proposed storytelling as a key component within an expanded practice of art as cultural-historical inquiry. The next phase of Wagner's project will involve a book (which the artist is planning to print on transparent material), again telling a story loosely based on the production of the show, no doubt with further fictional embellishments. The project thus veers from a historical essay into a task for the imagination—the artist's and ours—enabled by literary means, much as in Scheerbart's work. Rather than using art as a means of revealing truth or giving visual form to complexity, Wagner inserts the products of his work into a constructed narrative defined by the entanglements of personal, material, and ideological histories. □

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