



Haim Steinbach/MATRIX 217

What do the things we own say about us? From the objects with which we choose to surround ourselves, something about our private lives can be known: who our ancestors are, what our fantasies are, how much money we have or want. In 1979, Haim Steinbach had a show at New York's Artists' Space that launched his career. For that exhibition, he installed wallpaper in the gallery, borrowed everyday objects from friends, and placed the items on shelves. By the late 1980s, Steinbach was known for having radically redefined the status of objects in art and was recognized as one of the world's leading contemporary artists. But Steinbach was lumped together with artists ranging from Jeff Koons and Barbara Kruger to Peter Halley and Ashley Bickerton, with whom he shared method—appropriation—but not intention. The term Neo-Geo and the association of consumerism, simulation, and commodity were indiscriminately assigned to his work along with the other artists'. In a famous 1986 roundtable titled "From Criticism to Complicity," Steinbach distinguished his approach when he spoke of the role of desire in his work. In a recent interview in *Artforum*, he elaborated: "Desire translates into the things with which we ritualize our lives and into the way we communicate and portray ourselves through objects."¹

Steinbach works with existing objects, some found, others borrowed or bought, among them old mattresses, figurines, Nike shoes, and dustbins. However, his process goes beyond the Duchampian model to issues of display. Through the selection, arrangement, and perhaps most important, juxtaposition of objects, Steinbach explores their cultural, psychological, and ritualistic meanings. The associations, narrative or otherwise, are sometimes immediately comprehensible, at other times oblique, but in them myriad attributes of contemporary life are illuminated. We are what we own.

Steinbach "curates," or collects and presents, groupings of objects in large-scale architectural interventions; the viewer is invited to move through these environments. Essential to his arrangements are the structures themselves: hard-edged, minimalist shelves, immense industrial shelving units, or rooms to enter. These installations are as much about angles and spacing as they are about the objects selected and placed by the artist. A tension and bodily hyper-awareness arise from the way his structures relate to the existing architecture and how being within and among them makes us feel.

The language of Minimalism, and in particular the work of Donald Judd, has served as a platform of critique of Steinbach's work. Both artists have designed, and had fabricated by others, elements that straddle the furniture/sculpture divide. For Steinbach, the shelf as furniture/sculpture puts the objects that sit upon it into question, subverting any notion of authorship or originality of the object itself.² Questions of value naturally follow. When the artist included Air Jordans in a work made in the mid-1980s, people walking into the gallery sometimes lifted a sneaker from the shelf and inquired about the price. "Objects are three-dimensional and make the viewer want to touch

Cover: *Display #7*, 1979; painted wood box; chrome kettle; wallpapers on walls; wood boards on metal brackets; various objects; dimensions variable; courtesy the artist and Sonnabend Gallery.



or move them," Steinbach explains. "Whether they allow themselves to do that or not, the psychological dynamic is there."³ This kind of engagement with the everyday links Steinbach with Allan Kaprow and the Happenings of the 1960s, which he cites as essential precursors of his work. The connection is also evident in a shared emphasis on psychological and sociological dynamics.

In an artist's statement published in the mid-1980s, Steinbach wrote, "The cult of the individual, grounded in a passion for unique things [object, love, truth] has been replaced by a burning desire for multiplicity."⁴ In outlining a dichotomy between things that are unique and multiples, he pits the emotional or esoteric against the object-related and the tangible. The irony here is that his use of objects, while perhaps initially suggesting an affirmation of utility, actually highlights the implication of a higher ideal. We need objects, but also love and truth. We are placated by whatever else we can have: SWF 38 seeking educated gentleman with whom to share quest for the meaning of life, satisfied instead with a pair of Manolo sling backs and an active book group.

When I arrived in New York in 1990 and commenced work in a SoHo gallery, the philosophical musings inherent in Steinbach's work had a great impact in defining my aesthetic. His influence extended to numerous artists emerging at that time, among them Keith Edmier and Doug Aitken, with whom I often discussed Steinbach's work. Edmier reflected on his encounter with the roundtable mentioned above and stated, "What was said about appropriation and process sounded like a whole new language...[subsequently] I started thinking very differently about making art."⁵

Steinbach's most recent projects circle back to his early practice of borrowing objects, as opposed to buying or finding them, and lately he has been interviewing the owners about their assigned personal meanings. For *Display #55 (North East South West)* (2000), he borrowed objects from people in

charm of tradition, 1985; plastic laminated wood shelf; cotton, rubber, nylon, and leather athletic shoes; polyester, plastic, metal, and deer hooves lamp; 38 x 58 x 15 in.; courtesy the artist and Sonnabend Gallery.



Berlin and Munich and installed the interviews along with them: he showed videotapes of the objects in their original settings in the people's homes on television monitors in the gallery, and viewers could listen to the lenders' narration on headphones. He is currently working on a similar project in Vienna titled *Objects for People*. [His titles also are almost all "found," as are his texts, based on pieces found on signs, in ads, on book covers, and presented in the same vernacular, font, and idiosyncratic spacing and punctuation as the original.]

His Berkeley project, *Work in Progress: Objects for People—Snapshots*, fuses with previous themes to increase our awareness of how the objects that form our lives mandate our daily rituals. The installation as a whole is made up of "short stories"/fragments which the artist classifies as snapshots, or visual insights into the lives of the people from whom the objects were borrowed. The installation is a large-scale, unique work comprising twenty-one shelving units lined with objects and organized into three groupings; a table with four video monitors, headsets, and chairs; and three mirrored-glass and steel-frame architectural elements. Some of the objects are new while others are from prior works. Their placement on the shelves recalls objects sorted for an inventory or maintained archivally according to a classification system. The videos on the monitors, like some of the objects, are from a past project, *Display #55 (North East South West)*. The exhibition also includes two autonomous works from 2004: *Untitled (bathroom fixtures, pitchers)* and *Untitled (baby)*. In 2004 Steinbach became a father for the first time and completed a related major home renovation. Can we read self-portraits in these two works?

Portraiture is in fact a significant, if critically unacknowledged, element of his work. His sculptures are portraits of the people from whom he borrows objects, the neighborhoods in which he finds them, and the culture that

*pink accent*², 1987; chrome laminated wood shelf; latex masks on styrofoam mounts; chrome trash cans; chrome tea kettles; 55 x 110 x 23 1/2 in.; collection of the Milwaukee Art Museum.

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Work in Progress: Objects for People—Snapshots

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**University of California
Berkeley Art Museum**

MATRIX



consumes them. His MATRIX project is his most poignant portrait, a portrait of the audience. As you approach the installation, the monolithic mirrored-glass panels reflect your image. You, the art audience, become the object that the artist is choosing to display in a museum context. As you enter the corridor and begin to view the more conventional objects placed there by the artist, you can also observe others watching their own image as object. What role does desire play here?

When Walter Benjamin wrote about the aura of art objects and the failure of mechanical reproduction to capture and sustain that essence, art was defined as painting and sculpture. As art objects become objects that have past lives, alter egos, or future uses, the quest for aura is further complicated. Steinbach augments his portrait of contemporary society, in which desire is reflected in its object-bound container, with a reflection of desire as the image of the desirer. In a type of blissful circularity that graces great artists with the opportunity to return whence they came armed with knowledge gained over twenty-five years of art making, in Steinbach's MATRIX work the burning desire in multiplicity (tangible and object-related) is affirmed by a passion for the unique in the double that is both abstract and emotional.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

Haim Steinbach was born in Rehovot, Israel, in 1944 and became a U.S. citizen in 1962. He received a B.F.A. from Pratt Institute in 1968, and an M.F.A. from Yale University in 1973. He currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York, and San Diego, California.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2004 Gimpel Fils, London
Sonnabend Gallery, New York
GBE (Modern), New York
- 2002 Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna
- 2001 Galleria Massimo Minini, Brescia, Italy
- 2000 *North East South West*, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin; Haus der Kunst, Munich
- 1999 Haifa Museum, Haifa (with Joseph Kosuth)
- 1997 Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna
Sonnabend Gallery, New York
- 1996 Galleria Lia Rumma, Naples
- 1995 Castello Di Rivoli, Rivoli/Turin, Italy
- 1993 *Osmosis*, Guggenheim Museum, New York (with Ettore Spalletti)
- 1992 *no rocks allowed*, Witte de With, Centre for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam
- 1988 capcMusée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux
- 1987 Sonnabend Gallery, New York
- 1979 *Display #7*, Artists Space, New York

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2005 *20th Anniversary Show*, Castello di Rivoli, Rivoli/Turin, Italy (Haim Steinbach solo showcase)
Reverse Engineers, Carnegie Art Center, North Tonawanda, New York
Good Titles for Bad Books, Kevin Bruk Gallery, Miami
Threshold, Max Wigam Gallery, London
- 2004 *Intra – Muros*, Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, Nice, France
Domestic Archaeology: Boston and Beyond, The Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts
East Village USA, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
Specific Objects, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, San Diego
- 2003 *Artists' Gifts*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

- 2002 *Shopping*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt; Tate Liverpool, Liverpool
- 2001 *Postmodern Americans; a selection*, The Menil Collection, Houston
- 2000 *Partage d'Exotismes*, 5th Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon
DINGE in der Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts, Haus der Kunst, Munich
- 1999 *Over the Edges: The Corners of Gent*, Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Gent, Belgium
- 1998 *Fast Forward*, Kunstverein, Hamburg
- 1997 *XLVII Esposizione Internazionale D'Arte*, Venice Biennale
- 1996 *NowHere (Walking and Thinking and Walking)*, Louisiana Museum of Art, Humlebaek, Denmark
- 1993 *Viaggio Verso Cittera, XLV Esposizione Internazionale D'Arte*, Venice Biennale
- 1992 *Documenta IX*, Kassel
The Ninth Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1991 *Metropolis*, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin
- 1990 *Art et Publicité*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
- 1989 *A Forest of Signs*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
Horn of Plenty, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
- 1986 *Damaged Goods: Desire and The Economy of The Object*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York

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Display #55 (North East South West), 2000 (detail); steel scaffolding; glass; objects from the homes of local residents; video monitors featuring interviews with the objects' owners; dimensions variable; courtesy the artist and Sonnabend Gallery.

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Work in MATRIX

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| <p><i>Influx</i>, 2005
21 metal shelving units, 17 two-way mirrored glass panels, 4 video monitors, 4 interviews, 4 chairs, table, various objects
Dimensions variable</p> | <p><i>Untitled (bathroom fixtures, pitchers)</i>, 2004
Plywood box; glass; Royal Doulton Barleycorn Pitchers; miniature ceramic, wood, plastic bathroom fixtures
27 x 51 x 10 inches</p> |
| <p><i>Untitled (baby)</i>, 2004
Plywood box, glass; painted synthetic material baby
51 x 36 x 17 inches</p> | <p><i>you don't see it, do you?</i>, 1994/2005
Latex paint, wall text installation
Dimensions variable</p> |

All works are courtesy the artist and Sonnabend Gallery.

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Untitled (bathroom fixtures, pitchers), 2004; plywood box; glass; Royal Doulton Barleycorn Pitchers; miniature ceramic, wood, plastic bathroom fixtures; 27 x 51 x 10 in.; courtesy the artist and Sonnabend Gallery.

¹ Tim Griffin, "Interview with Haim Steinbach," *Artforum*, April 2003.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Jerry Saltz, *Beyond Boundaries: New York's New Art* (New York: Alfred Van Der Marck Editions, 1986), 127.

⁵ Keith Edmier, as told to Meghan Dailey, "'80s Again," *Artforum*, April 2003.

ABOVE LEFT: *you don't see it, do you?*, 1994/2005; latex paint, wall text installation; dimensions variable; courtesy the artist and Sonnabend Gallery. ABOVE: *Display #55 (North East South West)*, 2000; steel scaffolding; glass; objects from the homes of local residents; video monitors featuring interviews with the objects' owners; dimensions variable; courtesy the artist and Sonnabend Gallery.