

Ginger Wolfe Interviews Haim Steinbach

Haim Steinbach's art is based on already existing objects. His work has been exhibited at the CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux (1988), the Guggenheim Museum (with Ettore Spalletti, 1993), Castello Di Rivoli, Rivoli, Torino (1995), Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna (1997), Haus der Kunst, Munich (2000) and MATRIX, UC Berkeley Art Museum, San Francisco (2005). He also exhibited in Documenta IX, Kassel (1992), Venice Biennale, Venice (1997), and the Biennale de Lyon, Lyon (2000). Haim Steinbach is on faculty at UCSD.

I thought we should begin by talking about the relationships and arrangements of objects that occur in your work. I was wondering if you could talk about how you selected them starting with the works of the early eighties before the Cable show?

It was actually earlier than the eighties. It was during the mid seventies over the period of a few years when I was a professor at Middlebury College and later at Cornell University. I was going through a transition in my work, thinking about objects and context, and also about the ideas of concept and performance prevalent in the 1970's. I was married to Nancy Shaver, an artist, who loved to go to flea markets. Her unique sensibility for objects expanded my awareness of them. These were cultural artifacts, of function or ethnological traditions; a pot, pin-cushion or Majolica pitcher. My inclination was more theoretical, coming from Duchamp, Fluxus and Minimal Art, art practices that straddled art and non-art, artist and non-artist. I wanted to consider looking at objects without presumption or prejudice, putting hierarchical judgments aside. So in the mid 70's I began to make shelves out of 1" x 2" pieces of lumberyard stock and put small objects on them. These pieces were like thinking sketches. By the end of the 70's, I was making installations in my studio. Wallpaper strips, say 2' or 4' wide were put side by side from floor to ceiling across the wall. A wood panel hung in front on metal brackets, formed a shelf and objects were placed on it. The wallpapers reflected cultural or ethnic backgrounds, Baroque, American Colonial, pastoral patterns, etc. These works were ephemeral because they went up and down. All that was left was a photograph.

Were the arrangements of objects ever random?

They weren't random because I was aware of the identities and sources of the material. However, contingency and coincidence were definitely at play. Like the way that John Cage had a structured approach to making his music, but incorporated the possibility of chance, of the inadvertent sound of an object, a thing, a context that was welcomed as a musical incident. Placing objects one next to another makes for a kind of sentence, or stages a scene of characters.

Your work often involved so much research. I was wondering if you could talk about how you carried this out in a project like *North East South West*?

In 1999, I was invited to do a show at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, a contemporary art center. The idea was to meet folks of various social backgrounds, gender, age, etc. and get them to talk about their objects at home. At first, I considered exploring attitudes towards collecting and arranging objects in East Berlin vs. West Berlin. The Berlin wall had already been down for about 10 years and I heard that soon after its fall, East Berliners would dump loads of items from the Communist period on the streets and replace them with their Western counterparts. Another story was that East Germans cherished Western products, like candy or soap boxes, perfume bottles etc. and put them on display in groups on shelves and in cabinets. But by the time of my arrival it became apparent that all that had changed and their attitudes to domestic life were not that different than the West Berliners. Furthermore I discovered that models of lifestyles like *House and Garden* magazine in the U.S. had an equivalent in the East German magazine *Kultur im Heim*. For the exhibition I transferred groups of objects directly off shelves in homes and reinstalled them as closely as possible to their original arrangement, in an architectural structure made of metal scaffolding and glass panels. This structure altered the modality of movement to enhance viewers interacting with viewers and the objects.

Is this field research method part of your practice in general?

In so far as observing and engaging the circulation of objects in social and artistic contexts, yes. But it's mostly about looking at things in and out of contexts. It's possible to draw a parallel with artists like Joseph Kosuth with his "Investigations" or Robert Smithson and his ideas of "Displacement" in the 60's and 70's. It's not only about selecting and arranging objects of my own choice, but presenting the objects chosen by others. As such I work as a kind of arbitrator or interlocutor.

Some of the materials you pulled from were actually other artworks. I'm wondering if you were trying to overtly engage in art-historical models?

Engaging the ideas and works of other artists is an important aspect of my work and involves serious consideration. This doesn't have to be overt, it may be subtle and poetic.

It does seem to me like you were engaged in ideas of craft and value, the prevalent model still involves the amount of time it takes to create artistic output.

Until 1975 I was a "painter" and was working in a very reductive style coming out of the Minimal tradition of art. My work referenced Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly and Sol LeWitt. Their work was an example of a high standard of craft and value for me. I was making objects that were spray painted over very carefully taped lines, placed at the edge of a square format and the painted surface wrapped the sides. It was a "canvas" that was an object like a game board, a "chessboard," and the placement of the lines was sometimes based on a numerical systemic play. I was interested in how the eye was engaged by the object's field. With nothing in the center the eye would wander towards the periphery where the lines were placed. I was thinking about time in a musical sense, and also about the demarcation of space. In the mid 80s I would apply this craft to construct the wedge shelves. An inversion occurred in that the craft was now transferred from the work of art to the shelf, the device generating the artwork.

I was also wondering about this nostalgia, not autobiographical, but work that's perhaps about emotional investment and attachment, about desire and emptiness, it seems to me that's part of what I see in your work, what I have seen at Matrix Gallery?

I don't get what you mean by nostalgia, but emotional investment, desire and emptiness makes a lot of sense to me. On a personal autobiographical note, I've gone on quite a long journey of separation. Lets say I've led a rather nomadic life until recently. My parents were refugees from Nazi Germany and arrived in Israel by a stroke of luck. I was born in Israel in a context of stories of radical emotional upheaval in terms of attachment to place and state and so on. The general collective experience in my immediate background came from Jewish families, refugees from Europe and some from Arab countries as well, living in Tel Aviv. My relatives were always talking about the great culture of Europe because Israel was like a desert and they had to re-find themselves. When I was thirteen, my parents decided to move to New

York, for me it was emotionally difficult. I experienced a profound sense of loss. But it was also an exhilarating experience, seeing the world and moving out of isolated Israel surrounded by enemies. I think all this concerns an experience of loss rather than nostalgia. With it comes a certain detachment, a distancing that allows for some perspective on possessing and dispossessing, being and nothingness. Your idea of emotional investment and attachment about desire and emptiness is to the point. It's in the work, and if there were an underlying narrative in my work this history would be it!

What I'd like to get at though, is I think perhaps on a perceptual level of presentation, you must have been concerned with the formal relationships these objects had to one another like light, weight, mass, volume which allows viewers to initially perceive works. Were you thinking about that?

Form and formal relationships are at the core of visual experience. I wonder how a child comes to comprehend the physical nature of reality. So many objects and pictures offered to children are based on elementary geometric shapes and forms? I think that the triangular shelf in my work has something to do with this. It is a device that underscores the objects in terms of their structure and powerful presence.

Decentralizing space is a tactic you use. You said that in a conversation with Tim Griffin that it caused your work to lack narrative and to me that is an interesting technique. Is it one that you still use in your new works, where your involving media like video monitors- how do you balance formal and conceptual arrangements now using new media- media which has its own kind of weight?

These are two separate points I was making in that interview. First the idea of "object," any object and for that matter also any document or work of "art." The video monitors are vehicles for stories and histories, and as mentioned already, in the work *North East South West* documentaries of individual stories of people's relationships to their personal objects were involved. In Western culture it's assumed that for an object to have integrity it must have a center that holds it together, therefore the concept of "icon" and "iconography," is what gives it a focus and identity. However when presenting a group of objects, one next to another, sometimes in repetition, a linguistic relationship is established. The notion of "icon" like a crucifix, a sculpture or a painting, is relativized and the comparison of an "art object" to a non-art object is replaced with a comparative structure that allows for relationships of aesthetic, social, and cultural values of any and all objects. The result is an effect of defocusing. Second, a narrative is another traditional structure

that gives a work meaning. However, when the objects are presented without the support of a narrative thread, a theme or a story, or one that animates them with theatrics like sound or mechanically generated movement, they seem to become dumb and a sense of emptiness prevails. I believe that this feeling of absence accelerates the desire of the viewer to project meanings unto them. This strategy also applies to works that incorporate architecture, video, etc. When I do an installation, like the one last summer at Matrix Gallery, UC Berkeley Art Museum, I study the layout of the space. I take photographs in advance in order to better understand the viewer's relationship to the space and the work. At Matrix I put together a survey incorporating "fragments" of recent installations. The plan pivoted on a new work, titled *Influx*, a shelving unit measuring 45' in length and dividing the space in two at an angle. It contained gravel, clay figures of a Chinese monk, 19th century hat molds, pine cones, etc. Also included were objects of a young man from Oakland, CA. One evening as I was installing the work a friend invited me to a party at Joseph Bay's. There I saw a collection of his videotapes spanning 20 years of viewing, stacked on a shelving unit in his hallway. There was also an assembly of skateboards nearby. I asked him to lend them to me. And so they were transported to the *Influx* piece just as he had them and became a collection within a collection or play within a play. The video interviews on objects belonging to four people from Munich, Germany were also incorporated in the exhibition.

One thing I pick up in reading your past interviews and also the criticism about you was that there was this really highly charged academic conversation, perhaps debate even, going on about commodity. Perhaps you feel you have been misrepresented? I think it would be nice for you to talk about the perceptions surrounding your work.

I believe that around 1985, when the work became public it was often seen as a provocation. Within the context of academic art world audiences, the predictable happened. I presented actual everyday objects,



Haim Steinbach
related and different, 1985

mostly, but not all, bought directly from the store and transferred to the art gallery context. They were arranged, playfully toying with color, shape and content in ways that subscribed to as well as contradicted notions of composition. They were objects of the present, the now, however art is supposed to transcend the present. And so the label "commodity" became a convenience to deny these objects their objecthood. For "commodity" suggests a means to make money by manipulating the public, just like advertisement. This is a rejectionist term, not different than simply saying "this is not art". It became an alibi for not having to deal with it. The work arrived at the art scene but the critics wished it to be elsewhere, in another market, the vulgar market of money, the stock exchange. While they had to contend with it, this was an easy way to dismiss it and avoid having to deal with the real issues the work was addressing. As the work reflected rituals in exhibi-

tions more than a personal or cultural narrative it had a kind of mirror effect. It reflected a “naked” reality that is part of a collective awareness in our culture. As with the story “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” viewers saw what they wanted to see and projected their own desires onto the work. The recent publication “Art Since 1900” by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves Alan Bois and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh provides a good example of this. The writers are discussing a work titled *related and different* as follows:

“A 1985 piece titled *related and different* displays a pair of Nike basketball shoes alongside five plastic goblets, as if to suggest that Air Jordans were a contemporary version of the Holy Grail. This is typical of his work: to set selected products on simple shelves or pedestals in clever juxtapositions of shape and color in a way that shows them to be “related and different” – related as commodities, different as signs. Steinbach frames art objects in these terms too: they are presented as signs to be appreciated – that is, consumed – as such... He positions the viewer as shopper, the art connoisseur as commodity-sign fetishist, and celebrates the idea that our “passion for the consumerist code” (Baudrillard) seems to subsume all other values—use-value, aesthetic value, and so on. With Steinbach this code of consumption is first and foremost a matter of design and display, and its logic appears total, able to absorb any object, however bizarre, into any arrangement, however surreal. In his work such options as functional and dysfunctional, rational and irrational, which structured the definition of the modern object since the Bauhaus and Surrealism, appear to be collapsed, which is indeed one “endgame” played out by this kind of “commodity sculpture”.

The above interpretation is a typical example of the work’s effect on a viewer trapped in a mirage. Looking at a photograph of the work *related and different* the writers mistook a pair of basketball shoes for signs of “Nike” and “Air Jordans.” They also mistook five brass candlesticks of Indian origin (designed after the motif of the Lotus flower) for “five plastic goblets.” They fabricated an “endgame” fiction of signs, projecting the Christian myth of the “Holy Grail”. They suggest that I frame art objects when in fact I present mostly common everyday objects drawn from our socio-cultural environment. They identify the work as “commodity sculpture” and explain it in terms of a closed system of signs as if that were a natural given. I find this reading of my work very strange and am only reminded of Roland Barthes’ idea that the signs included in a work of art are not determined by a single interpretation, but rather create an infinite chain of interpretations. But the writers insist on following through their interpreta-

tion all the way to the end by quoting Benjamin H.D. Buchloh who proclaims that I:

“pretend to engage in a critical annihilation of mass cultural fetishization,” and “reinforce the fetishization of the high-cultural object even more: not a single discursive frame is undone, not a single aspect of the support systems is reflected, not one institutional device is touched upon.”

To me the term “annihilation” evokes a horrific period in recent German history. I am suspicious of the motivation behind this kind of statement.

Let’s shift gears right now. I’d like to talk about your perceptual ideas. When I talked with Michael Asher a year or so ago he spoke about a curatorial idea which he used in creating a work which was relational display. I thought about you at the time because I wondered if you are interested in this academic model which regards presentation. Is that something you think about?

I’m not versed in academic art historical curatorial practice. I do feel some affinity for Michael Asher’s work, but I find it more innovative than academic. However, regarding the concept of “relational display,” which indeed is at the core of my artistic practice, let’s consider looking at my work *related and different*, 1985 in terms of its physical and material presence. To one side, a crescendo of five metal candlesticks rising from very short to very tall, and to the other a pair of high top sneakers, same height, right and left. Two to five having a very different logic to their measurement as well as in their relation to one another. Both are receptacles, the shoes for feet, the candlesticks for candles. It is interesting that in several publications over the years (e.g. *Art Since 1960*, by Michael Archer) an image of this work has been juxtaposed with *Untitled*, 1991 by Robert Gober, a work showing the lower part of the male body, wearing black pants and shoes, with erect candles protruding from the legs and cutting through the pants. Two different functions are suggested by the shoes and candlesticks in my work; the shoes are meant to hold the lower part of the body, the candlesticks for light or a spiritual ritual. While the Gober work narrates a story of transformation and transcendence via body and candles, *related and different* is a testament to what is present and absent.

Looking at the shelf, it is clear that it is a functional unit. One side of the shelf has been left open to reveal the covering laminate surface, that functions like skin over the plywood body. Just as paint, oil or acrylic is an invention so are colored plastic laminates. They are employed

in order to protect as well to represent color and pattern, natural or artificial. As an art material they do not “simulate” more or less than any other type of material.

A relational play of measurement and number is implied between objects and shelf. The relationship between the left shoe and right shoe is mirrored in the left part and right part of the shelf, but the measuring relationship of two shoes same height to two shelf parts of different heights does not jive. Still the comparison of size between the two shelf units correlates to the five candlesticks of different heights. The work is a paradigm of function and placement. The shelf functions as a support for objects and both candlesticks and shoes metonymically reinforce this functional signifier as supports for candles and feet. The work generates a sequence of metonymical references of placement, position, material and color. While it may have a chameleon like effect implying camouflage and masquerade, every aspect of its materiality is integral to its originality and hence nothing is camouflaged, masqueraded nor simulated. Just as the objects are basically arranged, the shelf is basically assembled.

There was an article I came across, a newspaper article, which compared your work to that of a curator and although the article was not very interesting the core idea was that the general public could only possibly understand your gestures as that of someone who brings together objects from a curatorial perspective is to me very interesting because it lacks the crucial understanding that the critical questions you are asking are different and your inquiry is different.

I am sooner concerned with visualizing experience than thematizing “Art” objects into categories of art movements and connoisseurship. My work questions how we perceive objects rather than prescribe an hierarchical order of what you should see as art. Another way of looking at it is that I do not “curate” objects, but put them into play.

The French writer Michel Gauthier has written “...if the *raison d’être* of Steinbach’s ready-mades lies in what we might call the exhibitory equation – the equal exhibitory lot of artistic and non-artistic objects, then any curatorial practice which would formally legitimize the presence of objects risks appearing to be a confession of weakness.” He seems to suggest that what I am doing is something that an academic curator would never be able to get away with given the strictures of the profession. Or, if the academic curator misrecognizes my artistic practice for “curating,” for him/her it becomes a “confession of weakness.” And hence such mistaken identity may well point to the resistance my work encounters with many curators.

It does seem like something you would have had to combat, that people can’t understand your work as art because they can’t understand a critical model your positioning.

Or that the critical model is there, but they do not wish to acknowledge it lest they may be implicated with something that runs counter to the very essence of their profession. My work is direct in the way that it engages the viewer with objects. They are the real thing, people want to touch them and if they happen to own them, they become their custodians because they have to maintain them, by dusting them and protecting them. Doesn’t this put the museum establishment into question?

I’m thinking about perceptions, perceptions of viewing, how objects are placed together and I’m wondering if you’re also involved in the idea of relational aesthetics?

Obviously I am and have been for a long time. In *Display #5*, a work I did at Cornell University’s Johnson Museum of Art in 1979, I incorporated a sculpture by Herbert Ferber from the museum’s collection. The sculpture was placed on a white rectangular stand against a wall covered with three sections of vernacular wallpapers. To the side overlapping one of the sections a simple wood panel shelf supported an imitation Inca terracotta dog and a green rubber ball. The work addressed museum aesthetics in relation to commonplace aesthetics and put to question the “neutrality” of the museum as arbitrator of artistic values. In 1990 the Indianapolis Museum of Art commissioned me to do a work with objects from the collection. I selected objects from different departments of the museum; four American, Indiana Stoneware jugs from the late 19th century, an African mask, and a sculpture by the contemporary Belgian artist Pol Bury. I made a shelf for the selected objects and it was installed in the Contemporary Art wing of the museum. I proposed that a curator from another department could borrow any of the objects for a show. In this case my work would go into storage.

A few years ago the French Critic Nicolas Bourriaud wrote a book titled “Relational Aesthetics” that addressed the works of artists in the late 1990’s. This idea of “relational aesthetics” raised up in my work since the late 1970’s is the most prevalent development in contemporary art thinking since the 1990’s. Interestingly the writers of “Art Since 1900” considered this development in the last chapter “2003” of the book. They talk about “the rise of the artist as curator,” a practice of “informal discursivity” and “platform,” “station” or “place” as locations for the everyday.