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Object, Sign, Community. On the Art of Haim Steinbach

Giorgio Verzotti

The work of Haim Steinbach is, at source, a reflection on leaving behind the postulates of Minimalism. Of all the far flung offshoots of the modernist utopias it is this artistic trend that lies closest to his personality. The paintings Steinbach produced up to the mid 1970s, following his first one-man exhibition in 1969, were in the minimalist mould.

In this early work, Steinbach relied on the reductive processes typical of self-analytic painting, eventually singling out a square format and monochrome surface as a way of revealing the codes underlying pictorial language.

Once he had made the picture speak for itself. Steinbach grafted on to it structural relations between the uniform background: short straight bars, of various colours, painted at right angles to the edges of the surface.

The structural relations are based on the contrast between the monochrome area and the chromatic variations produced by the bars. The bars build a sort of framework of constantly varying intensity, like the visual equivalent of a musical phrase, introducing tensions in the work, a dialectic that is programmed (albeit not very strictly) between a constant and a set of variables.

In 1975 Steinbach began to arrange the straight bars in arithmetic progression generating progressively wider gaps, between one element and the next. Running round the four sides of the painting, the colored bars create an apparently discontinuous and secretly coherent rhythm that becomes the sole factor in the work's inner dynamic, when all the bars are white. In the end, this progressive rhythm extends beyond the material dimensions of the painting virtually transcending its physical limits. This particular effect of the structural method (the arithmetic progression) is of no small interest, as it raises the issue of space beyond the work, that is, of a transcendent dimension, not yet defined but which suggests that the work can only be fully completed by something outside of itself.

In Steinbach's subsequent research, this urge to go beyond takes on increasingly definite shape and emerges clearly as the range of themes and issues on which he has since focused.

With the series of works entitled *Linopanel*, dating from the mid 1970s, Steinbach abandons painting and begins constructing pictures using non-traditional materials taken from the most conventional "aesthetic" aspects of everyday reality. Linoleum is of course widely used in homes as a floor covering, where it often takes the place of more costly materials such as terracotta tiles. The decorative pattern texture and colour of linoleum tend to imitate those of the materials it is meant to substitute, in a process of simulation that has all the characteristics of kitsch. Each type of decoration is a cipher with some specific reference to the history of arts and crafts, for which kitsch provides a version reduced to mere cliché. Yet it is precisely by means of such debasement that Steinbach clarifies and gives substance to his intention of leaving behind both Minimalism and modernist ideologies in general.

What both transcends this work and at the same time emerges as its point of fulfillment is the space

it gives to ordinary, everyday things. Yet it is just this space that the modernist avant-garde, from early abstract painters to minimalist sculptors, in their striving for absolute purity, and in principled opposition to all formal or behavioural clichés, had in the end taken away.

Hence linoleum marks the return of expelled ideas which the artist then pits against the radicalism of the Modernists at a juncture in history when Modernism is beginning to prove inadequate for the cultural demands of the times. Steinbach chooses to overturn modernist radicalism by staging a parody of it. "Geometrical-constructive" abstraction is downgraded to the level of decorative pattern (two triangles facing each other in the square are a mocking memorial to significations that at the outset were quite different). Meanwhile its dialectical antithesis, the world that such Promethean art was supposed to redeem, takes on a concrete shape in the bad taste of kitsch floor coverings. This, however, is merely the *pars destruens*, the destructive side, of Steinbach's research and yet in these early efforts, there is at work a *pars construens* which in all his subsequent work takes centre stage. The linoleum panels embody the portrait of a social background that is the theme of Steinbach's works. His aim is to forge an organic link with our social lives seen as an indirect means of testing out his investigation. Put another way, Steinbach envisions a body of work for which social relations might provide the terms of a dialectical debate, constructed in a language far removed from the self-centred axioms of the purist avant-gardes. It might be said that Steinbach, along with many other artists of his generation, has opposed purist modernity with that other modernity that "was crossing its path", as Peter Bürger put it, i.e. the programmed impurity of those avant-garde movements which, though far from banishing the aesthetic from the work of art, were intent on breaking "down its confines and setting it free in the everyday sphere, as a potential element in the transformation of existence."¹ Bürger is referring here to such groups as the Dadaists or organised movements like Surrealism and he hypothesizes that there may be a line of continuity linking some of their aims to post-modern trends, given that postmodernism sets its sights on that which the purist avant-garde abhors: a relationship with everyday life rendered possible by resorting to a language that is founded in part on "popular and entertainment art forms," no longer felt to be foreign and inimical to high art.

The artistic trends within which Steinbach has assumed the role of protagonist fit this definition not only by virtue of their chosen strategies but also by their frame of reference and objectives. The aesthetic theories that have emerged in the United States since the mid 1980s, and that have been placed in the post-modernist stream as a specific system of values appear to narrow the gap between the work of the artist and the critique of ideology where the latter term is taken to mean a system for the legitimation of the existing order. This has been an issue for such philosophers as Ernst Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, who have theorised the need for such a critique. Each of these theoretical standpoints takes it for granted that only avant-garde art, in so far as it pronounces a negative verdict on the existing order and goes to work on its contradictions, is capable of taking on the function of saving the world by transforming itself into vehicle of truth.

Interpreted in this way, post-modernism envisages a form of art that speaks critically socio-cultural environment of which it is part. Art responds to mass standardised society and to the information system that turns it into spectacle by elaborating analyses designed to deconstruct their values and the means through which those values are conveyed, working from within the system and operating in such a way as to scramble its codes.

Far from distancing itself from "popular and entertainment" show biz, such art appropriates it, dragging it out to its own uttermost logical conclusions overturning its meaning and laying bare its ideological underpinnings.

¹ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984.

The direction taken by Steinbach's interest in the real world, in his case, is identified with the objects used to fit and furnish it. Indeed it was precisely within this dimension of furnishings and fittings that Steinbach used his first opportunities to place this aspect of his work on display.

After the ready-made abstract works with linoleum Steinbach produced a number of installations using wallpaper, recalling the domestic scene even more powerfully. They were soon used, rightly and properly hung on walls, in installations that also made use of objects and items of furniture, with almost mimetic effects *vis-à-vis* real living spaces. Artists Space in New York in 1979, for instance, Steinbach made use of the room which normally served as a reception area and office. Here he "adopted" the large solid wooden box used as the office desk and painted it a darkish blue, turning it into an exhibit, together with the brochures and other materials that were originally lying on top of it. He then decorated the walls with an assortment of wallpapers and shelves supporting a variety of outlandish knick-knacks (a vase containing pheasant feathers, cross-sectioned and framed rocks, a Chinese statuette...). The one discordant note, indicative of the intentional, nature of this *Display # 7* was the metal kettle resting on a white wooden box built by the artist, which was visibly too large to serve the purpose of providing the base for a piece of sculpture.

In the next year Steinbach produced *Changing Displays* at Fashion Moda. He packed the walls, floor and shopfront windows of the space with a chaotic assembly of boxes strips of wallpaper and other objects, changing the display everyday.

Other installations played on the incongruity of some of the juxtapositions of different elements, as in the case of *red cross*, produced for a collective show in 1982, where shelves of innocuous woollen snowmen dolls were backed by Steinbach's own silk-screened wallpaper which reproduced the front page of the "New York Post," its headline reading the *Assassins*.

But beyond the various formal solutions, the laconic and neutral title *Display*, chosen for the majority of these interventions (many were put on in the artist's studio but not placed on public display), serves to underline a constant feature of Steinbach's intent, i.e. to show us the act of showing, the ways in which what comprises our daily world is on view: displayed, positioned, classified, ordered, in accordance with its meaning and function or else jumbled together, like amorphous matter. From this point on, and for this purpose, the shelf-support becomes the emblematic item on which Steinbach focuses his attention, the object that is at the same time a creator of relations between objects and the condition without which they would not be visible. The shelf, however, is to be associated more with appearance than with function. Groups of objects that are picked up and used and then put back again are placed on shelves; but the shelf is more often used for arranging objects meant to be displayed and looked at.

Elisabeth Lebovici, in the essay on Steinbach that she wrote for the exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain in Bordeaux in 1988, pointed out that the shelf was an eighteenth century invention and that it was born "au moment où se transformait l'espace de l'art: le siècle du Salon et du Café, de la collection privée - par opposition à la personne très publique du roi ou à la cour-puis du musée" [at the time when the sphere of art was undergoing a transformation. It was the century of the Salon, the coffee-house and the private collection (as opposed to the very public person of the King of the court) and then of the museum].

Thus loaded with significant historical association, the shelf represents, in Lebovici's view, the advent of display (as a category, one might say) in the private sphere². Steinbach himself hand-crafted all his early shelves, mostly using pieces of painted wood, onto which a variety of different materials were then attached so that the shelves themselves came to have the oddest shapes. They might incorporate plastic frisbees, oil-painted canvases, wallpaper branches and oil cloth or

² Elisabeth Lebovici, *Haim Steinbach*, in *Haim Steinbach. Oeuvres récentes*, exhibition catalogue, Musée d'Art contemporain, Bordeaux, 1988, p. 29.

Spiderman masks clipped onto the wood. The materials used are always low-cost and the way that they are aesthetically recycled using a highly imaginative handicraft recalls the great creativeness of the youth and alternative cultures of the 1970s which by 1982, the year of the first exhibition in which shelves appeared as works in their own right, was still quite fresh in people's memories. The objects displayed on the shelves, on the other hand, belonged to the most disarmingly normal range of products and gadgets that everyone uses. The titles of the individual works, while translating what they consisted of into words, played at role reversal: the shelves, however "personalised" by the creative intervention of the artist, nonetheless remained trapped in an indeterminate state, being invariably defined as "shelf"; whereas it was the objects on the shelf that had the right to a name and an individuality, the real protagonists in the process of spectacularisation in which the shelves play a vicarious role: *Shelf with Ball, Shelf with Globe, Shelf with Mirror...*

This art of display may slip easily into explicit theatricality. This has occurred twice, each time in the context of a show in collaboration with others. The first such occasion was with dancer and choreographer Joanna Boyce in 1981, and the second was with artist Perry Hoberman in 1986. In both instances, the very same objects that appear on Steinbach's shelves, became part of the stage scenery. In the performance with Hoberman at New York's The Kitchen, these objects stood out against a dark stage set, lit by spotlights and accompanied by the sound of snatches of opera and muzac as if they were apparitions. And since private homes themselves are venues for performances - our own - the artist endeavoured to install his shelf arrangements in the houses of friends and clients. He photographed the installation thereby treating the context as a theatrical scene.

In 1985, with his one-man exhibition at New York's Cable Gallery, Steinbach at last gave form to what was to become his most typical work and which, in a matter of a few years, would be seen as his distinguishing trait. In this exhibition several of the decisive connotations of his work changed definitively. The shelf now took on the form of a triangle or wedge, though still constructed at three angles, of forty, fifty and ninety degrees, and it was now made of wood covered with sheets of laminated plastic or treated with chrome or aluminium of various colours or, at times, given a mirror effect. The length of the shelves might vary and the structure might be developed in several interlocking sections, though not to the point of contradicting the overall structural plan which obviously recalls the geometrical simplicity of minimalist sculpture. Indeed, like minimalist sculpture, Steinbach's shelf reveals the way that it has been built and pieced together, leaving at least one end open, to allow the viewer to see just how it is constructed. Yet this sculpture belongs to the world of functions and its geometrical form seems to ironically echo the purist axioms of Minimalism: from now on we are dealing with a shelf, an object on which other objects are placed.

The objects themselves are arranged in groups, making up various sets, positioned in precise order as in a classification by genus type alongside other groups of very different kinds. Steinbach's objects range from functional or merely decorative, mass consumer products or antiques, or even items fit for museums of ethnography. Whether precious, expensive or devoid of any real economic value, they are all placed on the same level in order to bring out something they have in common, the fact they all serve in a social ritual, what Steinbach has defined as "the commonly shared social ritual of collecting, arranging and presenting objects."³

Each object is a sign associated with a specific social dynamic, a token of exchange with which we weave our interpersonal relations and by virtue of which we leave behind traces in the world marking our passage. An object, in as much as it forms part of our daily lives and in as much as we turn to it in order to perform certain actions or to satisfy certain needs, becomes, Steinbach says,

³ Joshua Decker, in an interview with Haim Steinbach, forthcoming.

vital to the construction of our identity⁴. It is not so much the nature of merchandise that Steinbach explores, although the use of the shelf as a display device has meant that consumerism which reduces everything to the level of merchandise has been spoken of a specific theme in his work. What Steinbach highlights, beyond this intrinsically rather hackneyed issue, is the object as a focus of emotion, or of an involvement of the libido - to borrow from psychoanalytic terminology. It is in this sense that the shelf is linked to the world of appearances, because it shows us not so much real objects as fetishes, in the psychoanalytic sense, ie. phantasy substitutes, odds and ends of reality, a reality that is transfigured by desire. Even in the titles of the works there is a trace of the phantasy relationship that we have with the more workaday aspects of reality. In the great majority of cases, the titles no longer designate anything at all, since they in their turn have been borrowed from the texts of home furnishings and design magazines, books, movies, and billboards, and are used as objects, always cited in lower case letters to emphasise the fact that they are found, not invented titles. If anything, they make way for all kinds of free association: thus *dramatic yet neutral* in 1984, consisting of a wicker basket and two American footballs; *charm of tradition* (1985), two pairs of sheakers and a lamp; *conversation group* (1985), two wooden artist's models and a plastic telephone in the shape of Kermit, the frog. And even when the objects are specified once again, as in the *Untitled* series, where *Untitled* is followed by the names of the objects in brackets, the naming process occasionally stops short, giving rise to confusion, as if the artist intended to comment ironically on the rift between signs and their frame of reference, repeatedly telling us, after the manner of Magritte, 'ceci n'est pas une pipe'. *Snowmen*, for example, does not in fact indicate snowmen but woollen puppets that imitate them; *nurse* is evidently not a nurse but a wooden doll; *football* and *clog* do not refer to real footballs and clogs but their larger than life rubber and papier mâché imitations; *battleship* is indeed a sailing vessel, though the title fails to specify that it is in miniature; while until we actually see the works in question we cannot know that *erotic man*, *friar* and *sister* in fact indicate an (authentic) American folk art figure and two wooden medieval style statuettes.

We experience an unconscious sense of estrangement from the objects that is caused by their loss of use value to the advantage of their exchange value, which is an abstraction. Nonetheless, there is still an emotional value to them, as they are objects we use and thus relate to every day, and this emotional value ultimately overcomes the estrangement. Overcoming the sense of estrangement or of loss of reality by virtue of the emotional value (it matters little whether this is authentic or "induced"), means however that we relate to these objects without respecting either their functional criteria or any other hierarchy of values. This is precisely what Steinbach is doing when he shows us different combinations of objects which in reality may or may not bear any relation to one another.

Perhaps what Walter Benjamin, as interpreted by Hannah Arendt, felt applied to collectors is equally applicable to Steinbach. In her view, collecting is, as Benjamin was certainly the first to point out, the passion of children for whom things do not yet possess the character of merchandise, and the hobby of rich people who have sufficient not to need things that are useful and who can therefore afford to "make the transfiguration of the object a task of theirs." Herein they must necessarily discover beauty which in order to assert itself has to count on "disinterested pleasure," and in any case they substitute use value with emotional value. And inasmuch as collecting can set its sights on any object at all (not only artistic objects which in any case are already set apart from the everyday world of useful objects because they "serve" no purpose), and inasmuch as the object is at the same time saved as a thing - it serves no purpose, is a means to no end, has its value in

⁴ Conversation with Haim Steinbach, unpublished, Brooklyn, July 1995.

itself-collecting is for Benjamin an attitude similar to revolutionary activity⁵.

To Steinbach, "to save" the object means being able to interpret it as a decoder of a social problems and treating it as a semantic unit in a narration.

When we say that Steinbach destroys all hierarchy of values between things, we do not mean that their juxtaposition on a shelf, or inside the large wooden containers that he produced from 1988 onwards, is a matter of chance. Chance is involved, if at all, at the research stage, and consists in the fortuitous encounter between the artist and the objects that he unearths in the vast range of shops that he haunts, according to a practice that suggests shopping as a postmodern version of Baudelaire's *flânerie*. Even the most incongruous juxtapositions of objects are always motivated, whether in terms of form or content. In contrast with Duchamp, Steinbach's choices are not made with the most neutral indifference and do not insist on being reached "without the least intervention of any idea or suggestion of aesthetic pleasure," nor does he advocate that "personal taste" be "reduced to zero," nor are the chosen objects to be viewed only "by turning our heads."⁶

Their arrangement - in the majority of cases in numerical series at times placed in progressions whereby different versions can constitute more than one work - is not without its motivations. The three boxes of detergent paired with the two black jugs in *supremely black* (1985), the four Alessi kettles alongside the doubled pairs of chrome-plated trash cans and latex carnival horror masks of pink *accent2 #1* (1987), or the progression of glass vases from one to three in the three versions of *Capri suite* (1987), are constructed on a serial basis that recalls the minimalist module and its potentially infinite proliferation. While the theme of these modular procedures lay in industrialised mass production, Steinbach makes explicit what minimalist sculptors left implicit and restores an element of formal language, serialisation, to the social context that generated it, the mass manufactured of goods. In no way indifferent, the artist's choices hinge on signs relating to specific and recognisable value systems. Steinbach makes this point himself when he says: "political, economical and linguistic structures form a basis for value systems. I want to reveal the structures behind the value systems in objects. (...) Through metonymic games and references, value systems manifested in objects are inverted and rendered unstable."⁷ The so-called *Lava Lamps*, lamps containing coloured wax that gradually melts when they are switched on, and then floats around in an oily liquid, frequently recur in Steinbach's work, since they provide an echo of the psychedelic drug cultures, in which drugs were thought of as a means of boosting the spiritual life.

In *Spirit I* (1987), a considerable number of these lamps are placed on a shelf in an installation that also features two large body-building machines made of steel, equipment used in that particular form of narcissism so fashionable ten years ago, in the days of the Yuppies. In *Untitled (breast mugs, Marilyn guitar I-2)* (1990), it comes therefore as no surprise to see a set of three breast-shaped mugs juxtaposed with an electric guitar bearing a painted portrait of Marilyn Monroe.

Steinbach's work speaks of the collectivity, the various communities that have left their mark on the symbolic objects featured in his "arrangements". In some cases these are authentic communities, ethnically discrete or recognisable in terms of social class or historical epoch. Such symbolic objects may be pre-Christian amphoras, the hollowed gourds used as vessels in use among the peoples of Somalia, the panier-baskets used by French farmers, painted porcelain plates from Capodimonte, nineteenth-century wooden wardrobes, early twentieth-century dolls and prams, Art Deco glass necklaces, African masks, neoclassical urns, Burmese lacquer containers, items of Twenties design, photos from Victorian times, shoes and jackets whether wearable or ornamental

⁵ See Hannah Arendt, *Between past and future, eight exercises in political thought*, New York, Viking Press, 1968.

⁶ Octavio Paz, *Marcel Duchamp: appearance stripped bare*, New York, Viking Press, 1978, pp. 28-29.

⁷ J. Decter, *interview*.

found in some curio shop in Venice.

Alternatively, the community may be merely imaginary, a product of mass society, shaped by the mass media as merely another of its effects, a cloned community which (it is taken for granted) will want whatever advertising conveys and supermarkets contain. Those sign-objects capable of representing it appropriately include: masks of the Yoda character in *Star Wars*, dummy heads used by trainee hairdressers, gilt fabric cushions, shopping trollies, plastic bottle racks, picnic sets, decorated pottery mugs, boxes of detergent and cornflakes, ghost-shaped statuettes, and drinking glasses printed with the image of Mickey Mouse.

Or, again, it may be an abstract but, probable community, one only presumed to exist yet perhaps already in existence. A community that contains no trace of nostalgic humanism and embodies the positive value of dismantling all illusions; one that is living and ready to face up to objects and the ambivalent tensions that they create. Individuals thus conceived would see themselves as ambivalent and construct their own identity, accepting tension, prepared to define themselves in terms of the objects they lived with. Steinbach's most recent works conceal objects more often than they reveal them. They are closed containers fitted with drawers which when opened reveal such objects as scissors, dimes, handkerchiefs, the most ordinary things which, nonetheless, by the mere fact of appearing unexpectedly inside the only drawer of a strange and geometrical wardrobe take on a mysterious, precious, even sacred quality, fascinating for no known reason, as if you were standing before a sort of tabernacle.

Steinbach invites us to look at objects with fresh eyes, ready to catch other shades of meaning, or able to dwell on their insignificance. After all, one of the roads that lead to the Sublime starts from the point when we are prepared to take the common place to heart.