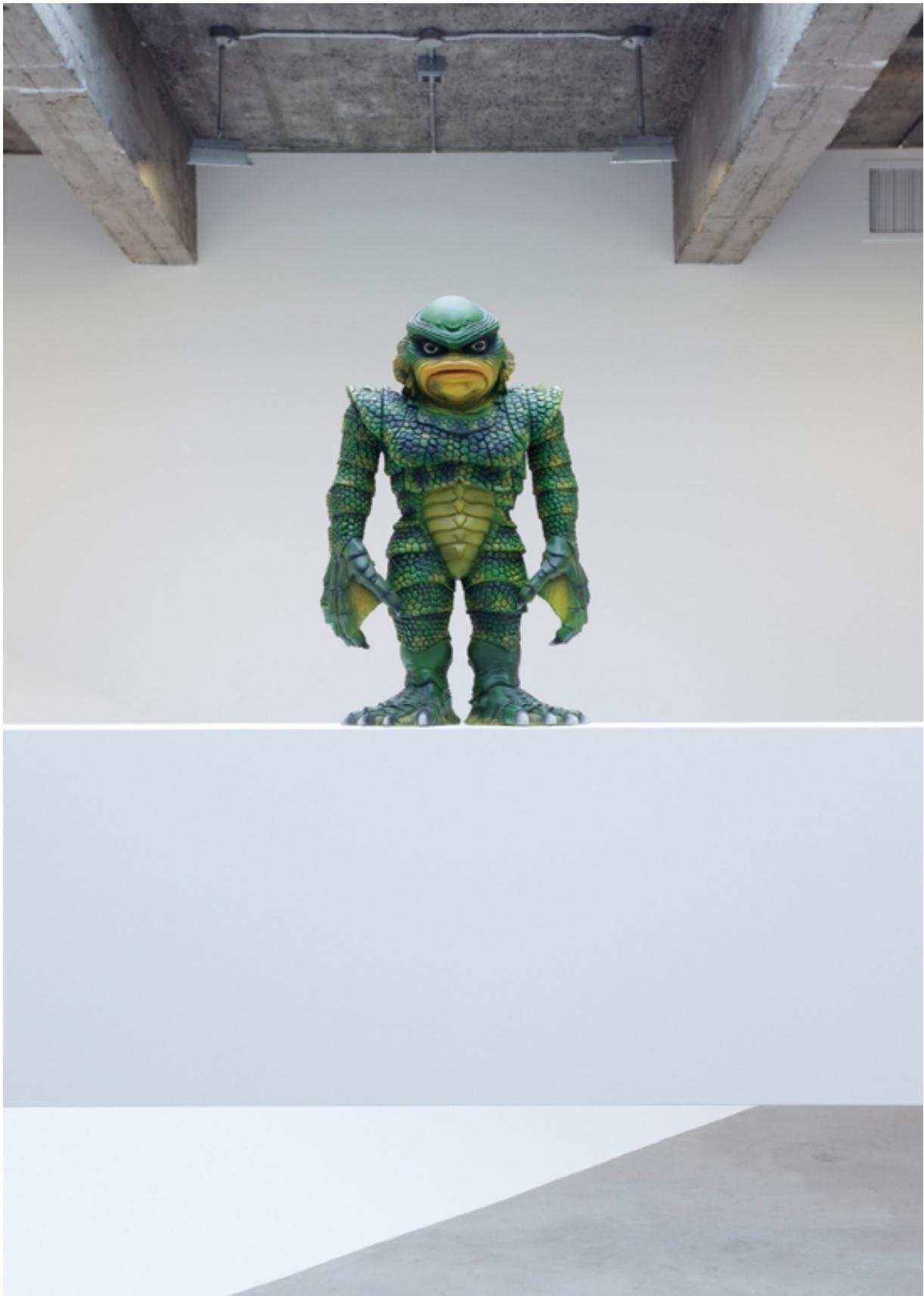


**BOMB :** 'Haim Steinbach', by Peter Schwenger, Fall 2012



I saw my first Haim Steinbach a few days after seeing Haim Steinbach. I interviewed the artist for BOMB in July, flying into New York City from a cabin in the Nova Scotia woods, and then shuttled back to the cabin long enough to do my laundry before flying to Minneapolis for a family gathering. But putting my family on hold for the moment, I went straight from the airport to the Walker Art Center, where a Steinbach piece was on view as part of the exhibit *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s*. In a typical Steinbach format, it was called *Untitled (cabbage, pumpkin, pitchers) #1*. As it happens, I had talked about that very piece in my book *The Tears of Things*. Steinbach's title is misleading, I had observed, evoking as it does a rustic still life. The cabbage, however, is a ceramic soup tureen masquerading as a vegetable; the pumpkin is an orange velour Halloween decoration with a cartoony face in black; and the shiny black pitchers, rounder than the cabbage, are minimal and modern. My point at the time was the discrepancy between the names of objects and the multiple aspects of their actual presence. I had made this point, though, based on photographs of the installation rather than its actual objects, and now they took me by surprise. I was abashed to realize that I had misidentified the material of the pitchers, which were not plastic but ceramic—this is something Steinbach has had to endure repeatedly from critics who write from reproductions. Also, the piece was larger than I had expected. Finally, its presence was vivid in a way that no photograph could have prepared me for. Even as the objects remained uncompromisingly themselves, connections, contrasts, and connotations seemed to buzz between them.

The '80s show is intended to make us look again at what was happening at that time. And Steinbach's work invites that second look, a long and lingering one—for the rise of object studies in the last decade has encouraged us to see this work with new eyes. Opening in September at the Artist's Institute of Hunter College is a series of five exhibits devoted to Steinbach, running until the end of January 2013. Its purpose, as is always the case with the Artist's Institute, is to raise wide-ranging questions about artistic practice. So the exhibits are centered around questions of display, the relation of objects to human subjectivity, arrangement as a language, the physicality of text, and Steinbach's place within the larger group of thinkers about objects. All of these topics are touched upon, if not exhausted, in the interview that follows.

**Peter Schwenger** Do you remember what impelled you the very first time you put an object on a shelf, on any kind of shelf? Is that a moment in time that you can recall?

**Haim Steinbach** So many things led me to it. But, for one: In my parents' home in upstate New York, there was a shelf about ten inches above the kitchen table, which was pushed against the wall. On that shelf was everything from a small calendar to knickknacks and a flower vase. There were also other little objects there, like the figure of an Israeli boy wearing the typical Israeli hat—a *kova tembel*, which means "silly hat"—and a napkin holder with a

lozenge-shaped piece of wood on it. Some things were exchanged for others from time to time. Every time I sat at that kitchen table I would look at that shelf and I would ask, What are these objects doing here? I would question the decorative details, the cultural associations, the functional reasons for these things to be there.

And so in 1975, as I was turning from painting to sculpture, I made a simple shelf and put a few plastic miniature objects on it. In a way I was just doing what people ordinarily do with the objects that they like. But, at the same time, I was asking myself, What am I doing? What does it mean to be doing this as an artist? This eventually led to my first installations. By 1979, this practice became my work's structuring device. I was placing objects on shelves, on prefabricated shelves or ones I made. Nothing was manipulated to interfere with the function of the shelf or the function of the objects. They sat the way you would normally see them on a table or any piece of furniture. Whatever the objects were—food containers, plastic or wooden figurines, etcetera—their design and form was inherent to them. I didn't design that representation, I was just presenting.

**PS** But you do choose the objects, and you arrange them. You once said that the objects on a shelf are arranged the way words are arranged in a sentence.

**HS** We communicate through objects just as we communicate through language. We see objects, we have feelings about them, and we feel them when we touch them. We know what material they're made of. Sometimes we are not sure: Is this glass or plastic? We touch it, or even lick it. So when you arrange objects, you're talking, you're putting them in a certain way that's part of a conversation. And that's a language; the ordering functions like language in that it allows us to communicate and to get things done. The way I arrange objects in one line is like the way that we arrange words in a sentence.

**PS** If there's a standard grammar of objects, of the way people usually see them, the way that you arrange them suggests a very different kind of grammar. You reinforce aspects of objects that are off to the side of the usual connotations, so that the sentence becomes an unexpected one. You're not "making a statement," as they say of some art, but doing something more complex than that.

**HS** Complexity lies within simplicity; isn't that what poetry is about? The idea is to find a way to get down to what is essential. If there is a vision in an artist's work that has any kind of weight to it, it's going to be complex. Are you suggesting that there is complexity in this kind of arrangement because there is a certain choice of objects that is not within a norm?

**PS** That's right. There's an accepted grammar of objects; we see objects in a certain context or in a certain way, and you displace that context.



Adirondack tableau (detail), 1988, Adirondack wood hog-pen boards, Adirondack wood furniture, hand-carved, painted wood American owls, 108×264 x 66 ½ inches. Photo by David Lubarsky.

**HS** The context is the institution. Hence the grammar that would make sense would fit within institutional norms. For instance, in the museum objects are segregated according to categories of style and period, and what is considered to be “art” or “design” or “material,” etcetera. In the home, a table lamp may be put next to a painting, while a toilet brush would most likely be found in the bathroom. My work with objects doesn’t fall within these norms but goes into a different terrain that’s more difficult to enter. It doesn’t make sense. It’s about both sense and nonsense. Complexity and nonsense can go together.

**PS** If we hear a hyphen in *non-sense*.

**HS** Or let’s change the analogy. What I’ve come up with for myself is a setup that will allow me to move my pieces around, just like a chessboard is also a setup. Once I begin to play with my pieces, there are certain predictabilities and certain ways of going beyond them. That’s where it gets more complex. It’s also hard to explain exactly what makes it work. The imagination is activated when you enter that territory where unpredictable possibilities might allow for new meanings or might mirror the way meaning is constructed with the different parts being used. In chess, it’s the pieces; and in my work, it’s the

objects.

**PS** You're describing the way a creative process happens and becomes unpredictable at a certain point, but I suppose that would also hold true for the people who view these works. They too can enter in ways they couldn't have predicted; the work is open enough that they can co-create it.

**HS** Yes, that makes perfect sense. However, what's interesting is that very often viewers enter the work in a predictable way, reflecting the way their minds work back onto themselves and projecting their ideology onto things. They don't enter the work neutrally or openly. There's another mechanism that gets ahead of them. My sense of the initial perception of my work was that it was destabilizing. There was this agitation; people either went "Wow!" or they got upset. Some were even hostile. The "Marxists" wanted to fix the work as stable and say, "It is *this*. *This* is its ideology. *This* is what it is doing to you. This is what it participates in." And that was a very rational, political language.

**PS** "Now we know what to do with it."

**HS** People were coming into the gallery and seeing a shelf with a group of objects that had been untampered with, unchanged, and their first response was: "Supermarket in the art gallery," or something like that. By *supermarket* they meant commodities, commodity art. This was said to be a violation of art, of the art space, even of a commercial art space like the gallery, which is a business meant to sell art. But the work is more about the meaning of art and about art being in many places and in many things—and about the non-hierarchical position from which to enter it. Of course, there are all kinds of ways that people will enter it.

You have the viewer who comes to the gallery—these are real experiences—and goes to the receptionist and says, "Did the artist make all of this?" They think that everything is handmade, that the Corn Flakes boxes are copies of boxes made by the artist. And when they're told, "No, these are all actual objects that came from a store or were borrowed by or given to the artist," the viewer gets disillusioned. It takes away the mystique. Here's another example: A kid walks into the gallery and sees a pair of Nike sneakers on the shelf. He goes to the guy at the counter and asks, "How much are they?" Later another kid enters the gallery. A few minutes later the sneakers are gone!

**PS** Really? This has happened?

**HS** This has happened. Of course, "Marxist" critics call it simulation, and so that brings another layer of complexity to the work and its audience. What is different between an art gallery and a store is that gallery-going audiences know you are not supposed to touch the art, and most of them respect that. But if you touch the objects you may find out what material they are made of, and also realize that they are not fixed to the shelf, and hence ask: What do we have here? And so that adds another layer of complexity to the work, one that most readers and observers don't recognize.

For me, that means that this is an actual functional situation in time. It is functional precisely because whether at the art gallery, the museum, or the home, the objects on the shelf function in a temporal space. The pieces will be moved; the shelf and objects will have to be dusted. Yet so much art writing about the work says that it's not about function, that it's about simulation and things like that.

**PS** In other words, a viewer sees what they are prepared to see and not what is there. I find myself thinking about a text piece of yours that appeared most recently on a wall in the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, "You don't see it, do you?" Was this a found text?

**HS** Yes, it came from a magazine.

**PS** And were the words arranged in that format, vertically?

**HS** Yes. And originally they were white words on a black page.

**PS** The "it" could refer to all kinds of things, presumably. What is the "it"?



Untitled (cabbage, pumpkin, pitchers) #1, 1986, plastic laminated-wood shelf, ceramic tureen, foam-stuffed polyester pumpkin, three ceramic Hall pitchers, 54 3/16×84 x 27 1/2 inches. Photo by David Lubarsky.

**HS** Well, we *don't see it*, do we? We are programmed in that our minds get structured through our culture's conventions, traditions, and languages. We are conditioned, we have invented tools for ourselves to function in a more immediate and direct way without having to think about it too much—we sometimes forget to stop and ask ourselves: What are we looking at?

**PS** You've done a lot of works like *you don't see it, do you?* where you've reproduced text on the walls of galleries. That's a kind of reprogramming perhaps. The shifting of context makes us see language in different ways. You extract certain phrases that grab you, I guess you could say, and then put them up on walls—but you also do things to them. For instance, you expand the scale, as in the case of the gigantic wall piece reading "No Elephants."

**HS** Or I contract it.

**PS** Yes, or you reposition it. For that work you placed one of your favorite phrases, "And to think it all started with a mouse," on a wall in the gallery. It's not at eye level.

**HS** No, that was way up.

**PS** Why did you put it up there?

**HS** Well, it's a play with space, with white walls. We don't mind white walls anymore, but in the 19th century walls were always covered in pattern or color. If you come in and the whole wall is empty and white but there's something up high, your eye moves up there—it's being led up. That makes your eye scan the wall or experience the space in a different way. Then there's something opposite it and it's closer to eye level but it's bigger and bolder and just hits you over the head. It reads, "No Elephants."

It's a way to play with dimension and scale and with where the eye expects to go—like the game in the forest where one group of people goes ahead and places arrows on trees for another group following it. The first group must point the direction to the second group, but, at the same time, they also have to set them off course. Similarly, the way the lettering is displayed in the gallery plays with where the eye expects to go.

**PS** It plays, among other things, with the viewer's physical interaction with the work.

**HS** And it refers to the body. And to the body of the mouse and to the body of the elephant, because aren't we all elephants and mice, and so on? All the children's stories in which the animals talk to each other, all the animal toys we had—their bodies were our bodies, right?

**PS** Remembering all those stories about elephants and mice and then seeing those two phrases opposite one another sets up a vibration in the air between them, a resonance of narrative possibilities. There's a story element already in the phrase "And to think it all started . . ." Something started; there's a story

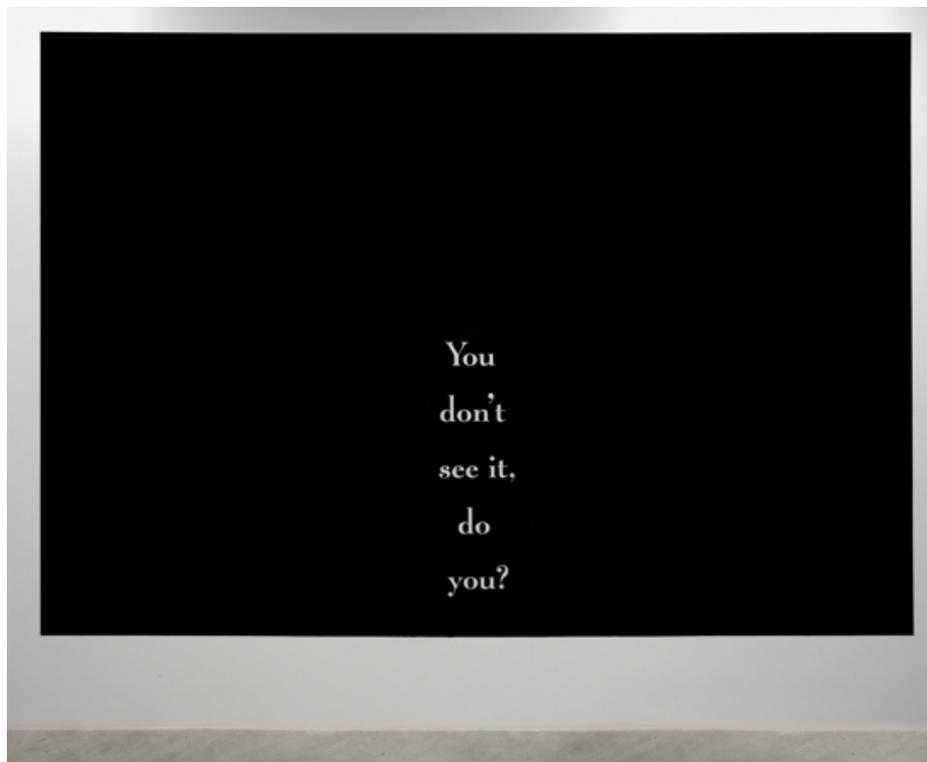
there. We don't know what story it is, and you don't tell us what story it is either. We're just left there with a range of possibilities. Perhaps this resonant space isn't that different from the space in between your objects, where there are also many possibilities.

**HS** The phrases *are* objects. They're found objects. And while the material objects I find or buy are fixed in size, a graphic text may be shrunk or blown up at will, but the typeface remains constant at all scales.

**PS** In 2002 and 2003, the words came down off the wall and into several artist's books: one called *Infinity/Non*, another called *Or*, and a third called *Non*. What is the relationship between these and the text works on the walls?

**HS** I collect words, phrases, sentences, and statements that I see as objects. So these small artist's books I've done are basically a play with pieces from my collection. Each page may have an objectified word or sentence laid out in a certain size; it may or may not repeat on another page, in the same or a different size. It might also be interrupted by another such object.

**PS** The repetitions are interesting to me. When I turn the pages of the book and I see a gigantic "&," and then I turn the page and there it is again, and I turn another page and there it is again, it seems to work against the expectation of a book—the expectation that we're getting somewhere, that we're following some kind of sequence. You use repetition quite a bit, of course. How is it working here?



you don't see it, do you?, 1994, text in matte white vinyl letters on a black rectangle, dimensions variable. Photo by Jean Vong.

**HS** Well, musically, for one thing. You know, there's repetition in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony: "Da da da *dum*, da da da *dum*." Repetition also has to do with timing, and timing in a rhythmic way has something to do with counting, spacing, and memory. These all play into each other and prompt us to think. Thinking is not just falling back on some kind of structure that you've learned. You can learn and do something by rote, but that's not thinking. Thinking is knowing how to move in between the standard rules that you need to know, and how to play and mess around with them. Then the question is: How far are you willing to play the devil's advocate or to take that chance before you drop into the abyss?

**PS** You've sometimes used panels of wallpaper or constructed freestanding walls, like the *Adirondack tableau*, so the walls themselves can become works. Then there are also other architectural constructions that you have made. There was one architectural intervention that I wanted to ask about, and that's the beam that you constructed right across the Bonakdar Gallery. You placed a rather large figure of the creature from *Creature from the Black Lagoon* on it, and you also introduced a kind of triangular false perspective that just rolled up off the floor and into one corner.

**HS** *Adirondack tableau* was a freestanding wall made of hog-pen boards with a window that had two handcrafted owls sitting on its ledge. It was installed in a skywalk at the World Financial Center in 1988. Also, on each side of the wall there was a vernacular bench made of branches from the region. The front of the wall faced the Hudson River and the back, the Twin Towers. The owls also faced the river and beyond. With the installation at the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in 2011, the triangular plane you mention basically covered a corner of the room—it hid that corner, canceled it.

**PS** Why did you want to cancel that corner?

**HS** Well, again it's a play with space, with walls. And this was a very specific space; there was a long triangular skylight in the ceiling. When we enter a space, we immediately measure it. It's inherent to us because we know the language. We understand that it's a rectangular space that we can walk into without bumping into things. But when there is something that doesn't belong, it will make us question it and go, Strange, what's this doing here? So that is one explanation of what it's about. It's a trap. In your book *The Tears of Things*, you talk about *La Vie mode d'emploi*, by Georges Perec. What is the title in English?

**PS** *Life: A User's Manual*.

**HS** That's right. And you mention that he wanted to set out a sequence of traps. So mine are architectural traps meant to stop you in your tracks. And what tracks are you going on? Well it's your mind, your eyes, your nose, your ears, your skin—these direct you as you move through a space. You are already on a trajectory to be somewhere, or you're looking for something.

Bourdieu, the sociologist, reintroduced the concept of habitus to refer to the things that we do out of habit every day that provide us with what we need and, in fact, protect us. It's things like brushing your teeth or having to eat your meal a certain way, needing to have your kitchen in a certain order, arranging your objects or dressing in a particular way.

So when I canceled the corner at the gallery, I distorted the room to stop you in your tracks—the tracks being your history and your old set of habits and defenses. It's about using the architecture in such a way that it keeps waking your sense of space and place. It is no longer a trap, but an aid, as it awakens you to the specific architectural details that were there before, as well as those that are newly introduced. That's also what I like about Perec, how he talks about the everyday and its rituals and makes us see it with new eyes.



charm of tradition, 1985, plastic laminated wood shelf, cotton, rubber, nylon, and leather athletic shoes, polyester, plastic, metal and deer hooves lamp, 38×58 x 15 inches. Photo by David Lubarsky.

**PS** Your work has a kind of continuity, but as time passes the way people are seeing it has changed. Can you talk a little about the differences between when you began doing this sort of work and the way it is now being seen as both historically important and important for the future?

**HS** My work surfaced in the public domain in 1985 and, as I said before, came off as a kind of shock or affront. I believe it hit the art world like an earthquake! By 1985 Marcel Duchamp had become sanctified by art history and

contemporary art's institutions. The high-low debate that began at the turn of the 20th century was finally "popularized" and "modernized," yet it was once again under attack, once again radicalized. I believe that my work shook up the ideology of the readymade, it demystified it. Any object I was presenting was generally identified as a commodity. So the object was hardly discussed as an object with its own story and identity; rather, it was considered as stereotypical of capital goods. It was seen to be a fixture of commerce, advertising, and capitalist power. In fact, the "commodity" chatter was a smoke screen.

However, there were exceptions, of course. In 1988 Germano Celant wrote a remarkable text about nomadism, object identity, and memory in *Artforum* titled "Haim Steinbach's Wild, Wild, Wild West." He makes a direct connection between the trauma of the Second World War and the history of my work with objects. He states that all objects (historical, fictional, virtual, etcetera) are destined to vanish, but he suggests that my work gives them their distinction and dignity. In fact, I saw my work as an engagement with the here and now, with the archeology of what exists and what we all participate in. It seems to me that currently the consensus on the meaning of my work is changing because a younger generation is looking at it more as a practice with everyday cultural objects.



tonkong rubbermaid I-1, plastic laminated wood shelf, one plastic and steel Tonka toy truck, plastic and metal wring bucket, rubber dog chew, 69 ¾ x 87 ½ x 23 inches. Photo by Lawrence Beck.

**PS** To use some terms you used earlier: Do you think the problem before was that people were expecting your work to represent something, when you were

merely presenting the work? But it's never just a matter of "merely," there is always something more complex (to use that word again) going on when we are presented with objects.

**HS** Your question is about the distinction between a thinking that's representational and a thinking that is presentational. Are these different fields, or do some among us see them as being, if not the same, at least treading in the same territory? As being intermixed? There's a way of thinking in which everyday objects that have multiple functions and meanings are presented in relation to each other as opposed to in relation to some kind of a superstructure or metastructure of representation that is being foregrounded. What's being presented does involve certain structures, as I mentioned earlier, for instance repetition: an object may repeat once, or two times, or even multiple times. But that is not representation beyond the fact that it represents a repetition of two or three elements. In other words, it's not necessarily a representation of an ideological or political message. In fact, the meaning that's being constructed there is really about something else that has to do with the way we encounter objects physically in everyday spaces.

**PS** Can that meaning necessarily be articulated fully? We're back to the limits of language, I guess. It would seem to me to be a meaning that is inchoate, is not able to be fully expressed in words, and is valuable for that very reason.

**HS** Duchamp said that artwork is incomplete until it is received. And of course that's very true, because the audience does complete the object when chattering about it. You have this chatter noise that has an angle or a certain flavor. Once in public, the work is completed in the way that it's interpreted during the time of the chatter. That doesn't mean that there is a final word. The chatter may change 20 years later.

**PS** Chatter may of course change, but that doesn't mean it gets better or worse. I'm wondering if there is a response to a work that is simply silence, a silence that might be the most adequate response to the otherness of the object.

**HS** Silence is a very private and personal thing. It's a space of reflection and, in a sense, one has to trust that space, believe in it. If we're talking about an arrangement of objects, no matter what they are—whether it's three Milk-Bone boxes on the supermarket's shelf, whether it's three pieces of driftwood on the beach, or whether it's three pieces of driftwood and one Milk-Bone box on a shelf—in all of those relationships there is the space of silence, the space of the unknown. And in the space of silence there may be peace or turmoil, misunderstanding or generosity, and reaction or counterreaction. So the problem is that silence can be intolerable within a group and within the individual too.

**PS** So you have to fill it.

**HS** Often what is not silent is more determined.

**PS** Do you think we're coming to understand that, and with it, your work?

**HS** I think that what has changed has to do with what we know of as globalism. People didn't talk much about globalism in the mid-1980s, when my work was getting recognized. Then we had a revolution in the '90s with the advancement of computer technology and computer imagery. All that overlapping information already existed in magazines and newspapers, but now it was instantly and infinitely accessible. Within a second of pushing a button on a computer you could now get any information that you wanted juxtaposed with anything else. In a sense, it was like the revolution of Cubism around 1908, except this time it was practiced in a universal way, engaged in by millions of people.

There's a connection between that and what has been going on in my work—it's more comprehensible to a younger audience that is more accustomed to objects functioning on multiple levels. And that too has to do with presentation versus representation, because the interaction with the material is so fast— instant juxtapositions imply a new kind of thinking. Similarly, in my work you are engaged with objects that rely on the contingency of their placement. They are autonomous pieces that can be moved and even rearranged instantly. With a newspaper or magazine, things are fixed according to the way the editor has placed them. The Cubists went into the newspapers and the magazines and they began to cut them up; they were beginning to change the placement of things and to present another possible cultural model.



western hills, 2011, plastic laminated wood shelf, ceramic cookie jar, aluminum garbage can, wooden stacking toy, 41×21 ½ x 62 ¼ inches. Photo by Jean Vong.

This is happening now in a much more radical way. We have new possibilities of perception because we are constantly interrupting information and images.

And when I say *we* I mean *all* of us: everybody is montaging, collaging constantly. That sets up a completely different reality within the community of interrupters, a new collective perception.

**PS** It's an unexpected juxtaposition, the web and the solidity of the objects on the shelf. But you make a convincing case that there's something about the perception *between* things that allows us to move rapidly and not necessarily settle on one given meaning.

**HS** Within the arrangement there is a certain kind of structure, a repetition or movement. From work to work, from object to object, and from movement to movement, there's an ongoing play of shifts. And so if the work is being received a different way now, it means that there's a discussion about those shifts that was not there before. Before, a particular representation was being read into the work, which was always explained in the same way. Now it's not always the same, there are multiple readings, and that is what has changed.