

HAIM STEINBACH

AROUND 1983, I was working as a guard and caretaker of *The New York Earth Room* by Walter De Maria, whose office happened to be on the floor above the work. One day Walter came downstairs and said to me, "You should put a sheet of slides of your work between two slices of bread and bring them to Ileana Sonnabend." The Sonnabend Gallery was nearby in SoHo, on the third floor of 420 West Broadway. Ileana's office was a small room just off the main gallery, and from that space you would often see her sitting behind a big desk. Forebodingly positioned behind a high counter opposite Ileana's lair, however, was Nick Sheidy, her long-standing employee. Walter continued: "When you get to the gallery, avoid the guy at the entrance and head straight through the door to her office and say, 'Ms. Sonnabend, I have brought you your lunch.'"

I could not bring myself to follow Walter's advice to the word. So, instead, I made a photography book comprising 8-by-11-inch pictures of objects I had arranged on 10-inch-deep wooden boards mounted on the wall against a backdrop of different wallpapers. With book in hand, I walked past Nick, through the office door, and introduced myself. "Please take a seat," Ileana said. After flipping through the pages, she remarked with seeming interest, "I like them. Where is your studio?" I was elated. Of course, it wasn't until three years later, early in 1986, after having seen my most recent work at the Cable Gallery on Broadway, that she finally took a cab all the way to my Brooklyn studio and proclaimed on the spot that she would like to purchase a shelf piece, titled *ultra red #1*. Within days, other major art dealers would follow—but it was too late. She was the first!

Trying to look deeper into how and why things turn out as they do—things like ending up in a partnership for twenty years, as I did with Ileana—one wonders what is coincidental and what is predetermined. I had personally approached Ileana with my work; when she reciprocated a few years later, she had no recollection of our initial encounter. Yet she had responded to my work the first time, and, later, it was the art to which she connected once again. It was not easy material, I knew, since for years hardly anyone had been interested. These were, after all, shelves featuring everyday objects—not handmade objects but rather things borrowed from friends or bought at flea markets and department stores. (As another gallerist told me in those years: "This is very good work, but I can't sell it!") But objects are things to hold on to, things to interact with. And Ileana understood this, because when you are a refugee, what you've

got in your suitcase or bag is all you have. It is your luggage that contains your heritage, your world; and objects are like language, the glue that connects. And as it has come to be that we are more global, so have objects taken the lead as vehicles for connections: Ileana's artists—whether Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Hilla and Bernd Becher, Joan Jonas, Barry Le Va, Robert Morris, or Robert Rauschenberg—have all related to language, image, and object as figures of community and speech. What is essential to grasping Ileana's vision is that she understood that quality of art better than anyone else.

My strongest memories of direct and personal encounters with art, where it existed almost on the level of life—and marked the beginning of my own rite of passage into the art-world community—belong to the 1970s at the Sonnabend Gallery. For instance, there, standing in the midst of a crowd, I witnessed an early performance of Joan Jonas's *Upside Down and Backwards*—an almost mythical event. In the same space, I saw Gilbert & George standing on a table one quiet Saturday afternoon, singing "Underneath the Arches"; and I walked over Acconci doing his *Seedbed* body piece. Sonnabend was a happening place, but for a unique reason: More than in any other commercial gallery at the time, the works presented there generated a discourse focused on the art object not as a means to an end, but rather as a vehicle to generate meaning. □

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