



Display #30 - *An Offering (collectibles of Jan Hoet)*, 1992, H 92 1/2" L 127 1/8" D 127 1/8", Wood, neon lights, objects

## Jan Estep on Haim Steinbach

### More and less: Haim Steinbach's Dialectics

Simply put, Haim Steinbach assembles objects of all sorts into small groupings of two and three kinds of things. They are straightforwardly presented on hand-made wood and laminate wall-mounted shelves and freestanding cases. His objects include hobby horses, ethnic artifacts, digital and analog clocks, Lava Lite lamps, exercise equipment, free weights, aluminum and cast iron cooking pots, pre-Christian clay vessels, African sculptures, ceramic mugs and pitchers, Victorian photos, latex dildos, and rubber masks resembling vampires, Bart Simpson, and Yoda, among other things. The objects are historical and contemporary, refined and crass, unique and mass-produced. They exhibit neither the pure anonymity of Andy Warhol's Coca-Cola bottles or Jeff Koon's chrome bunny, nor the exhaustive specificity of Christian Boltanski's *Inventory of Objects Belonging to a Young Woman of Charleston*, 1992, or Joel Ross's *I Borrowed My Mother's Bedroom*, 2001, in which the artist transplanted every item in his mother's jam-packed bedroom to an identically framed-out room in a gallery. The objects are not as politically charged as those encountered in Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*, 1992, or as anthropological as those discovered and rehabilitated in Mark

Dion's practice. Steinbach's use of objects avoids the charged psychosexual drama of Mike Kelly's found objects and the mysticism of Joseph Beuys's. An autobiographical strain runs through some of his works, particularly strong in his early object groupings situated in people's apartments and in periodic exhibitions of collector's belongings; for example, *An Offering*, 1992, presents the entire collection of objects found in Jan Hoet's office, installed at Documenta IX the year Hoet curated that exhibition. But since 1984 Steinbach has primarily employed the more minimal shelves and larger case displays that eliminate the pressure of overt sentiment and personal anecdote. Without this obvious backstory, the objects maintain an in-between status. Whether they come from someone in particular or are intended for a specific function is not the only issue; they are presented as objects with a concrete material meaning but also as relatively unfixed, dynamic signs open to interpretation. Steinbach underscores this point with a mixed use of store-bought and thrift-store, previously owned and newly purchased finds.

Given the abundance of shiny new commodities, Steinbach's work can easily be read as a critical response to

the surging advent of modern capitalism. As Guy Debord, among others, describes, the social shift from agrarian societies tied to the earth and direct bartering methods of trade to practices of exchange that abstract us from the creation of the goods we need to survive created a gap that allowed capital to become the primary determinant of one's sense of personal and social well being. Under these conditions, consumption permeates existence to the point where image and ideal exert more force in shaping our desires than other, real or non-spectacular forces.<sup>1</sup> In Steinbach's case, the juxtaposition of oddball objects with mass-produced goods introduces the idea of desire revealed by consumption. This tags along with the way his work in the 1980s was grouped with the commodity critique of Koons and Ashley Bickerton, et al. By putting popular culture on display in all its commercial glory within the critical context of the art world, questions were effectively raised about the increasing value society was placing on commodities and consumption, as valuable or in some cases more valuable than art itself had traditionally been. The appropriation of everyday consumer goods added a strong economic twist to Marcel Duchamp's recontextualization of found objects. Where Duchamp put art on display in its conventional, formalist assumptions, artists in the '80s put culture on display in its ever encroaching, totalizing sweep of consumerist values. These values were supposedly populist, a populism defined by a "democratic" ability for everyone to (aspire to) consume. Koons's enthronement of Hoover vacuum cleaners in stacked Plexiglass vitrines or Bickerton's self-portraits built out of corporate logos define a moment in art history, as institutional critique was turning outward to a somewhat cynical social critique.<sup>2</sup> This moment coincided with Steinbach's earliest sculptures, and given the latter's frequent use of purchased goods and minimalist display, one can see points of overlap. Consider a few of the artist's more commercially loaded groupings: the combination of twin silver Nautilus machines with multiple rows of Lava Lites in *Spirit I*, 1987, Cornflake cereal boxes with primitive earthenware in *stay with friends*, 1986, or toilet bowl scrubbers with beer-can-toting plastic caps in *exuberant relative #2*, 1986. Consider also his occasional act of appropriating found advertising slogans presented verbatim as wall text: e.g., "big brown bag," "more or less," "why did I ever change?" Here too are the questions, how are we defined through what we (are urged to) buy? How are value and style related to one's purchasing habits? And, to what extent does culture influence our decision to embrace the objects we do?

Admittedly, Steinbach's works troubles the relationship between capital and the psyche. However, such a reductive take on his assemblages is shortsighted. It truncates the aesthetic response to a fairly didactic transference of a singular, critical message about commodity consumption. It reduces the notion of contemporary subjectivity, suggesting

we are only a product of culture and never an active agent. And it doesn't let the objects in all their lived history do their work as a part of material culture. In Steinbach's sculpture the mandate of self-seeking, self-fulfilling capital—its need to continually reproduce itself at the expense of the individual—as expressed in the commercialization of culture always plays against the vicissitudes and idiosyncrasies of personal attachment. Subjectivity is both collectively and individually defined, not immune to social pressures but also not given over completely to capital.

This ability to sustain a conversation between two poles is central to Steinbach's work. In this regard, it is radically dialectical; radical in the sense of never resolving beyond the back-and-forth play of the dialectics it sets up. To clarify what I mean, there are a number of ways to think about dialectics. There is the teleological dialects of Plato and Hegel. Here dialect leads to a certain end, be it Truth, the Good, or Spirit manifesting itself as pure Idea; for both philosophers the dialectical process is essential in our search for the highest forms of knowledge, a hierarchical undertaking moving us from thesis to antithesis, and resolved in an ever broadening synthesis. To engage this dialectic, one studies the seeming contradictions presented by two opposing ideas or sensations until a more complex understanding arises that accommodates them both. Such dialectics create a unidirectional, linear and progressive system that has a definite end; it ultimately does away with itself as soon as the end is reached. This closure may take a lifetime or even decades of human thought to achieve; nonetheless, a fixed goal is posited that ultimately closes the process of knowledge off.

Another way to think about dialectics, and it is a danger pointed out by Plato, is as a rhetorical strategy for disabling an opponent's argument.<sup>3</sup> The goal here is not toward some higher good or further learning, but a demonstration of one's intellectual superiority and sophistication. It is the dialectical process of exposing contradiction and inconsistency, performed for the sake of political or public one-ups-manship, and thus an abuse of dialectical criticality.

A third way to think about dialectics is not as an ends-oriented means that ultimately does away with its own instrumentality, or as a performative game, but as a process that sustains itself indefinitely. This mode of dialectics seeks to extend the seeming contradictions of thesis and antithesis without resolving them, that is, without conflating, collapsing, synthesizing or eradicating difference. All possible meanings sit aside one another laterally rather than stratifying along a "worse and better" or "true and false" hierarchy. Where the former dialectics are closed and certain, this third version remains open and uneasy. Haim Steinbach's work is dialectical in this third sense of the word, a model for how art functions best. It introduces a slue of oppositions materially and conceptually but never resolves them; in this way our

engagement is prolonged and our thinking complicated by the combinations presented.

To list just a few of the dialectical relationships in his work, the objects are at the same time literal yet metaphorical, familiar yet strange, recognizable yet overlooked. They are pathetic and precious, high and low, secular and ritual, unique and multiple, empty of affect and emotionally loaded. Their meanings are coded and malleable, impersonal and subjective, univocal and polyvalent. Many of the pairings activate a discrepancy between the collective identity of the objects and the way they take on personal significance. They offer evidence of a life yet put an entire culture on view. They welcome projection but offer an inherent material meaning. They have mass-mediated value and idiosyncratic value. They reveal popular taste and personal style. The potential for individual use offsets the generic promises of advertisement. The force of industrial processes and packaging counterpoise the actual content of its ownership. These differences between the ideal and the real are further nourished by the play between art and life. The sculptures—part furniture, part art, part store display—elevate the status of ordinary objects as art and at the same time imbue art with the found materiality of objects. They create objects of aesthetic contemplation and formal design as well as objects of phenomenal experience and direct effect. The art offers protection—“don’t touch”—that the ordinary denies—“please take/buy/use.” Taking life up into art also reveals the unavoidable criticism of and complicity with the systems Steinbach invokes: the renunciation of capital and commodity value alongside their reaffirmation, the reliance on vernacular, natural reference along with the displaced reference of art, privileging the author-artist-producer’s intent while privileging the owner-viewer-consumer’s desire. All along there is the dialectical play of signs: the systematic order of an arranged narrative chain arranged just so on the pedestals versus the relations caused by poetic chance and unique metonymic associations. Like language, the objects are universal and particular.

At the center of these dialectics are the objects themselves. Kant famously argued for the *Dinge an sich*, the things in themselves, yet in his view we cannot perceive them outside categories of the mind such as space and time. Objectively things exist independently of us and are the cause of our

sensations, though we cannot experience them directly, confined to knowing the world subjectively. Responding to the major philosophical dilemma of his time—whether the world (sensations, facts) or the word (ideas, cognitions) comes first—Kant built a double ontology of parallel universes. Philosophically this enabled us to have our cake and eat it too; we could be rationalists and empiricists at the same time. This double universe repeats itself today. In the ordinary terms of everyday living we act as if things in themselves are present to us in a stable, predictable way. Similarly, we act as if reference is definite: our words corresponding to objects in the world in an observable and logical fashion. Even if established conventionally, we assume our world can be reliably known. And yet despite this practical belief in the efficacy of perception and communication, there is another side to the picture. When confronting objects we interpret with abandonment, projecting meaning infinitely, willfully, sometimes helplessly, with full disregard for any obvious reference. In fact it is a great source of richness to be able to infuse our world in this creative, imaginative way. The result is a double ontology: we are modernists—believing in the possibility of truth and progress—and postmodernists—believing in the utter relativity of our sign systems—at the same time. By now habit, we readily maintain the dialectic between empiricism and rationalism, objectivity and subjectivity.

Steinbach phrases this doubleness in terms of a person’s ability to “believe and at the same time withstand emotions of ambivalence.”<sup>4</sup> While referring explicitly to the confusing multiplicity that democracy allows, and our ability to establish a personal set of values within that, the comment applies broadly to his entire production. The simultaneous belief and ambivalence are shown in an object’s significance being decided by mass production and calculated intent yet still open as well to the vagaries of human spirit, in our tendency to abide by convention and collective meaning yet insist on the significance of individual desire, and in a person’s being able to act autonomously and freely yet still being determined by the society they live in. In each of these circumstances we walk a line between oppositional conditions, sustaining a dialectic of meaning that never resolves itself. It is the same dynamics of engagement that allow the objects in Steinbach’s work to be far greater than the sum of its simple parts.

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<sup>1</sup> See Guy Debord, Chapters III, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zone Books, New York, 1995. pp.11-46.

<sup>2</sup> See Hal Foster, Chapter 4: The Art of Cynical Reason, *The Return of the Real*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996, pp.99-124, for a description of this group of artists and the particular brand of cynicism to their critique.

<sup>3</sup> See Plato, Book VII, *The Republic*, translated Richard W. Sterling and William C. Scott, W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1985, p.233/Stephanus 539c, amidst a longer discussion of the dialectic.

<sup>4</sup> Haim Steinbach in Joshua Decker, “Interview,” in *Haim Steinbach*, Klagenfurt Ritter Verlag, 1994, p.103.