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

Haim Steinbach's artistic development can be traced back to the early 1970s, when his project began as a reflection on the limits of Minimalism's postulates. From his first one-person exhibition in 1969 until the mid-1970s, Steinbach produced paintings that were modeled after the reductive theories of Minimalism, eventually singling out a square format of a dark brown monochrome surface as a way of revealing the codes underlying pictorial language. But onto these uniform backgrounds that had until then been the mainstay of Minimalist painting, Steinbach grafted structural relations in the form of short, straight bars of various colors, painted at right angles to the edges of the surface. The bars built a framework of constantly varying intensity — the visual equivalent of a musical phrase — and introduced a dialectical tension between a constant and a set of variables.

In 1975, Steinbach began to arrange these bars in an arithmetical system with progressively wider gaps between one and the next, creating an apparently discontinuous yet secretly coherent rhythm, a rhythm he clarified as the key to the works' inner dynamic when he began painting all the bars white. This particular effect of the structural method is of significant interest, because it raised the question of the space, of the environment that contained the work, and of the possible extensions of this dimension. In Steinbach's subsequent research, this structural method combined with his urge to go beyond the limitations of painting.

By 1976, Steinbach's interest in the commonplace began to emerge in an enigmatic body of works on square panels of particle board, which he selected because of its everyday use as a construction material. He pencilled parallel lines following the exterior edges of the panel and then, using these lines as guides, rubbed small, precise geometric shapes into the surface with black oil-stick. The placement, size and rhythm of these shapes was now determined by a logic based on typological relationships.

During this time, he also produced a group of works entitled *Linopanel*. With these works, Steinbach abandoned painting altogether and began constructing pictures with 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 color of linoleum tend to imitate those of the materials it is meant to substitute. 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 clarified and gave 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 behavioral clichés, had in the end taken away.

Hence linoleum marked the return of expelled ideas which the artist then pitted against the radicalism of the Modernists, at a juncture in history when Modernism was beginning to prove inadequate for the cultural demands of the times. In one sense, Steinbach chose to overturn Modernist radicalism by staging a parody of it. "Geometrical-constructive" abstraction is downgraded to the level of decorative pattern (two linoleum triangles facing each other in the linoleum 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 center stage.

The linoleum panels, like the particle-board panels, embody the portrait of a social background that becomes the theme of Steinbach's works. His aim is to forge an organic link with our social lives. 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-centered axioms of the purist avant-gardes.

It might be said that Steinbach, along with many other artists of his generation, 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 organized movements like Surrealism and he hypothesizes that there may be a line of continuity linking some of their aims to Postmodern 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 Postmodernist stream as a specific system of values, 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 theorized the need for such a critique. Each of these theoretical standpoints takes 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, Postmodernism envisages a form of art that speaks critically of the socio-cultural environment of which it is part. Art responds to mass standardized 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 entertainment", 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 in the real world is identified with the objects used to fit and furnish it. It is within this dimension of furnishings and fittings, which followed the abstract linoleum works, that he embarked towards the new work with objects. Now, Steinbach powerfully recalled the domestic milieu in installations that made use of wallpaper, objects and items of furniture, with almost mimetic effects vis-à-vis real living spaces. For instance, at Artists Space in New York in 1979 he made use of the room which normally served as the reception area. Here he "adopted" the box-like counter used as the desk and painted it blue, turning it into an exhibit, together with the brochures and other materials that were 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 a chrome kettle resting on a white wooden box built by the artist, which was visibly too large to serve the purpose of providing the pedestal for a piece of sculpture. The following year Steinbach produced *Changing Displays* at Fashion Moda, in which he filled the walls, floor and storefront windows of the space with a chaotic assembly of boxes, strips of wallpaper and other objects, re-arranging the display every day. Other installations played on incongruity in the juxtapositions of various elements, as in the case of *red cross*, produced for a group show in 1982, where a ledge built into the wall and supporting a family of innocuous woolen snowmen dolls was hung in front of 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 installations (many were put up in the artist's studio and not shown publicly), underscored 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 put on view; displayed, positioned, classified, and 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 device for relations between objects and as well as the condition without which they would not be visible.

As a social object, the role of the shelf has as much to do with appearance as it has to do with function. From a purely functional point of view, shelves serve as convenient repositories for objects to be used; but a shelf also often functions as a place for arranging objects on display. Elisabeth Lebovici, in the essay she wrote on Steinbach for the exhibition at the capc Musée d'art contemporain in Bordeaux in 1988, pointed out that the shelf was an eighteenth century invention and that it was born "at the time when the sphere of art was undergoing a transformation. It was the century of the Salon, the coffeehouse and the private collection (as opposed to the very public person of the King or 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 domain.²

Steinbach hand-crafted all his early shelves himself, mostly using fragments of furniture and decorative household material. The shelves came to have the oddest shapes, incorporating plastic frisbees, oil-painted canvases, wallpaper, branches and even Spiderman masks stapled onto the wood. The low-cost, recycled aesthetic of these shelves recalled the creative explosion of the youth and alternative cultures of the

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

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 common range of products and gadgets from everyday walks of life. The titles of the individual works, while translating what they consisted of into words, played at role reversal: the shelves, however "personalized" by the creative crafting of the artist, nonetheless remained 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 identification in which the shelves play a vicarious role: *Shelf with Ball*, *Shelf with Globe*, *Shelf with Mirror*...

This theoretical and visual approach to display, on occasion would translate into explicit theatricality. This has occurred on two occasions, each time in the context of a show in collaboration with others. The first occasion was with dancer and choreographer Johanna Boyce in 1981, the second was with artist Perry Hoberman in 1986. In these 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 music as if they were apparitions. And since private homes themselves are venues for performances – our own – the artist endeavored to install his shelf arrangements in the houses of friends. He photographed the installation thereby treating the context as a theatrical scene.

In 1985, with his one-person exhibition at New York's Cable Gallery, Steinbach at last gave form to what was to become his most typical work that, in a matter of a few years, would be seen as his distinguishing model. In this exhibition, several of the decisive connotations of his work changed definitively. The shelf now takes on the form of a triangle or wedge, with three standard angles at forty, fifty and ninety degrees. It is constructed of plywood covered with plastic laminates of various colors and textures, or at times with a chrome laminate, 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. Furthermore, Steinbach's shelf reveals the way that it is built and pieced together, leaving at least one end open to allow the viewer to see its understructure. Yet this sculpture belongs to the world of functions, and its geometrical form seems to ironically echo and contradict the purist axioms of Minimalism: from now on we are dealing with a shelf, a furniture object on which other objects are placed.

The objects are arranged both singularly and in groups, making up various sets, positioned in precise order as in a classification by genus type alongside other groups of very different kinds. They 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 all have in common, the fact that they serve in a social, ongoing daily activity, what Steinbach has defined as "the commonly shared social ritual of collecting, arranging and presenting objects."

Each object is both an object and 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, inasmuch as it forms part of our daily lives and inasmuch as we turn to it in order to perform

certain actions or to satisfy certain needs, becomes, Steinbach says, vital to the construction of our identity.¹ It is not so much the nature of merchandise that he 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 as 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 real objects as fetishes, in the psychoanalytic sense, i.e. fantasy substitutes, odds and ends of reality, a reality that is transfigured by desire. In many titles of the works there is a reference to the fantasy relationship that we have with the more workaday aspects of reality. Often 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 put to use as if they in themselves are objects, always cited in lower case letters to emphasize 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 high top sneakers and a lamp; *conversation group* (1985), two wooden mannequins and a plastic telephone in the shape of Kermit the Frog. And even when the objects are specified once again, as in the *Untitled* titles, 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 woolen figurines that imitate them; a "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 maché* imitations; "battleship" is indeed a sailing vessel, though the title fails to specify that it is in miniature; 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 sculpture and two wooden medieval style statuettes.

We may experience a 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 which relate to the everyday, and this emotional value ultimately overcomes any 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 openly without having to invest ourselves in 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 are sufficiently well off and 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

¹ Conversation with Haim Steinbach, unpublished, Brooklyn, July 1995

emotional value. 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 itself – collecting is for Benjamin an attitude similar to revolutionary activity.⁴

For Steinbach, “to save” the object means being able to interpret it as a decoder of a social problem 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 solely 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 venues he encounters, 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 structure, 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.”⁵ 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 pitchers in *supremely black* (1985), the four Alessi kettles alongside the pair of chrome-plated trash cans and the latex horror masks of *pink accent*² (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 originates in industrialized mass production, Steinbach makes explicit what Minimalist sculptors left implicit and restores a social aspect to the context that generated serialization. In no way indifferent, the artist’s choices hinge on forms and signs relating to specific and recognizable value systems. Steinbach makes this point 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 plays and referencing, value systems manifested in objects are inverted and rendered unstable.” The so-called Lava Lamps, lamps containing colored wax that gradually melts when they are switched on, and then floats around in an oily liquid, frequently recur in Steinbach’s work. These are transhistorical objects that resonate with cultural identities from different periods of time: from the psychedelic culture of the 60s when drugs were seen as a means of access to a spiritual life, to the campy reiteration of 1950s decorative ambience that came into fashion in the late 80s.

In *Spirit I* (1987), a considerable number of these lamps are placed on a shelf in an installation that also features two large nautilus machines made of steel, equipment that became an object of fashion and narcissistic investment in the days of the Yuppies and is now ever-present. In *Untitled (breast mugs, Marilyn guitar) I-2* (1990), it comes therefore as no surprise to see a set of 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

⁴ See Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future, Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, Viking Press, 1968

⁵ Octavio Paz, *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*, New York, Viking Press, 1978, pp. 28-29

these are authentic communities, ethnically discrete or recognizable in terms of social class or historical epoch. Such symbolic objects may be pre-Christian jugs, the hollowed gourds used as vessels among the peoples of Somalia, the panier-baskets used by French farmers in the 19th century, painted 18th century porcelain plates from Capodimonte, 18th century wooden armoires, early 20th century dolls and prams, Art Deco glass necklaces, African masks, neoclassical urns, Burmese lacquer containers, items of Twenties design, photos from Victorian times, or wooden shoes and jackets made by a *tromp l'œil* artisan from 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 ceramic mugs, boxes of detergent and cornflakes, ghost-shaped statuettes, and drinking glasses printed with the image of Mickey Mouse.

More likely, it is an abstract community, which is only presumed to exist yet is perhaps real, and which embodies an affirmation of the dismantling of illusions in which it lives, accepting the confrontation with objects and the ambivalent tensions that they create. A subject thus conceived may recognize the inherent conflicts and ambiguities of present-day reality constructing his own identity. Steinbach's consideration of "ambiguity" in relation to this "community" emerges with heightened clarity in his body of work using media language statements. For more than a decade, Steinbach has been collecting and cataloguing statements and titles that he finds daily in magazines and newspapers, and has amassed a real trove. Those he considers significant or meaningful are kept in a collection, after which they may be transferred to walls, like murals, in different scales depending on context. The operation of these slogans is that of an opening up of a text, an opening up to narrative and to the imagination of the observer; this decontextualization increases the evocative power of the words, but the transaction does not end in these possible opportunities for narrative. The language adopted by Steinbach, like his objects, is articulated in a taxonomy that refers yet again to the community that uses it: the mass of consumers. Statements like advertising slogans, both synthetic and allusive, constitute a sort of jargon, recognizable everywhere, that reflects a mentality, a way of being. They can be defined, to use a broad generalization, as typical of Western capitalist civilization. In any case, the use of slogans painted on walls signals an interest in rendering the exhibition space meaningful; and although, as we have seen, this interest has always been present in Steinbach's work, it has become more urgent in what he has been doing since the late eighties.

The artist elaborates on the mechanism of display and the valorization of objects, starting from the geometric construct which functions as a paradigm of framing, articulation and distribution both internally and externally. Going beyond the shelf as a unique form, he takes large containers and places objects in or on them — objects that may be fairly sizable, like armoires, mattresses, or design objects.

In 1993, Steinbach produced a group of rectangular cabinet like units hung on the wall, the largest side facing the viewer and covered by a mirrored or white plastic laminate, the other sides remaining bare wood. They resembled Minimalist sculptures even more closely than the usual wedge-shaped shelves. There is nothing to indicate

that their formal purity has been in any way transgressed — nothing, with the exception of small rectangular compartments that are visible at their bottom side facing the viewer. These indicate drawers that the visitor may open, and in which he may find scissors, money, or handkerchiefs. A similar structural relationship also governs works from the same period formatted like large chests of drawers, filing cabinets, or exhibition cases. These works also incorporate a relationship between objects that are visible (from towels to dildos) and those that are hidden within the drawers.

Removed from their context and placed in such a way as to preserve their singularity, the most ordinary objects take on unexpected meanings, or at least the artist proposes that we look at them with new attention. For this purpose, Steinbach has diversified the various modes of display by means of which we are invited both to grasp possible new meanings in such objects and to contemplate the contingency of meaning. By doing so he facilitates the understanding that one of the roads to the Sublime starts from a grasp of the banal. This he explicitly demonstrated in his collaboration with Ettore Spalletti titled *Osmosis*, a two person show held at the Guggenheim Museum in 1993, curated by Germano Celant. Here Steinbach's *banal* was almost forced to live with Spalletti's *sublime*, to use the curator's terms in the catalogue text⁶, and each gave to the other something of itself. A chromed steel rack on which a row of dumbbells were arranged ran across a mirror wall which doubled the length of the exhibition space by reflecting it. At the opposite end of the space a large gray vessel filled with medicine balls was placed on the floor. On another wall hung a wedge-shaped white shelf upon which a small blue vase had been placed. A shallow circular white marble basin had been set on the floor and filled with water.

Because of the placement of Steinbach's athletic apparatus in relation to the mirror, it was not immediately recognizable, and could easily be seen as pure, abstract forms; while Spalletti's sculptures, which were already pure by virtue of his formalist intentions and process, were necessarily restored to their original functionality, and remained irremediably vase and basin, container and utensil. Their Apollonian perfection and self-expression made a further contrast with a pair of funhouse mirrors that Steinbach set into the walls. The mirrors not only reflected the viewer's physical body, but also distorted it.

Perhaps as a result of this process of abstraction from the thing in itself to its emblematic resonance, Steinbach's more recent works have turned their attention from the object as such to the context that it invokes, often assuming the encompassing aspects of the environment of the installation. As noted, the artist has been investigating the exhibition space as a significant function since his earliest installations, such as *Display No. 7*, of 1979, *announcing something*, of 1986, *Adirondack tableau*, of 1988, and *Black Forest wall*, of 1992, made for Documenta 9 in Kassel. In these instances, the specifics of the environment led the artist to create works whose meaning is specifically related to the site's characteristics; in Kassel, for example, an immense wooden wall blocked off the main point of entry to an entire room of art works from previous Documentas in the museum's collection. The works were visible only through a shuttered window positioned strategically in the wall.

In 1995 for his survey show at the Castello di Rivoli, Steinbach constructed a rough, wooden tower built under the high ceiling of the castle's largest hall. Looming in the center of the hall, the 7.3 meter tall, 4 meter square tower had a doorway cut into one of its sides, the Baroque shape of which imitated the doors throughout the rest of the castle. This doorway led to the interior of the tower, which consisted of a small sort

⁶ Germano Celant, *The Dualism of the Banal and the Sublime*, in *Osmosis*, exhibition catalogue, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1993

of anteroom with a niche in its foremost wall that contained two homespun miniature wells, and of a low tunnel-like corridor that led deeper into the tower, winding in a coil around its inner periphery until it reached the center of the structure. At the end of this claustrophobic spiral the ceiling disappeared, and an ambient light shot down from above through a narrow rectangular shaftway reaching the full height of the tower, revealing the center of the great cupola that surmounted the exhibition space. Up one wall of this shaftway a tall wooden ladder (the Italian word for which provided the title of the work, *La scala*), rose to the top of the tower, at once evoking the possibility of ascension, or perhaps an upward flight.

The work thus gave a context to the environment by contrasting its own distinctive architectural characteristics with those of the castle. This was true of the vertical thrust of the ladder, which suggested a comparison of scale, and of the dynamic course of the spiral construction inside the tower. The allusion to depth was constituted by the tall inner shaftway and the presence of the two little wells, which subtly referred to an ancient well inside the castle, which can still be seen, protected by a glass slab, in the floor of one of the rooms. This idea of an architecture containing another ephemeral one, which in itself contained a structurally elaborate internal space, became an intricate elaboration on the dialectic between private domestic space and social, institutional space which has always, more and less explicitly, animated the artist's work.

A comparable situation was also evident in the major installation at the entrance to the 1997 Haim Steinbach survey show at the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna. If at Rivoli *La scala* marked the end of the exhibition, in Vienna *the trial*, which was situated at the entrance hall in front of the actual exhibition space, was literally the introduction to the show. The entire frontal interior wall running from one side of the building to the other, was obscured by a scaffolding covered in a fine plastic mesh screen, a structure consisting of iron tubes and planks, similar to the one Steinbach made in 1995 for the group show *Fuori Uso*, in Pescara. On that occasion, the act of construction was explicitly evoked by a wheelbarrow and a stack of bricks laid one on top of another, forming a four-sided volume which implied an architectural structure in an ambiguous state of completion. Here that role, equally explicit, was played by gravel piled on the floor in front of the structure.

The architecture of the scaffolding seemed to converge with that of the museum, whose structural elements, both internal and external, are visible due to the use of iron beams and glass in the tradition of International Style architecture. In a way, the scaffolding mimetically articulated the elements and structures of the space. Owing to the short circuit between internal and external features which the artist had set up, it instilled in the viewer a feeling of displacement; although the structure of the environment was simple, its meanings became intricate.

This sense of displacement was reinforced in an adjacent room by *Jacob's Ladder*, an installation consisting of an aluminum ladder set inside a pre-fabricated aluminum-shelving unit running along another large wall in the exhibition space. Each shelf in the unit was covered in a layer of gravel, the effect was so incongruous that it seemed almost surreal. In installations of this kind, the object (the utensil, the gadget, the unit, etc.), lost its centrality and was replaced by material, from the most amorphous to the most structured, which became symbolic of social dynamics, or referred to particularly fertile areas of collective and cultural memory. However, the implicit rhetorical and metonymical power of these particular materials also demanded interpretation in the

context of Jewish cultural tradition. If the gravel recalled the custom of placing stones on a grave as a sign of mourning, the title of the work, *Jacob's Ladder*, alluded, in its turn, to the story of Jacob in the Old Testament. By contrast, *the trial* echoed the famous novel by Kafka, the dominant figure of twentieth-century Central European literature. The structure of the scaffolding can be visually summarized as a grid, and one could say that Steinbach, in his progressive mastery of Minimalism — understood as a formal system — has not renounced the use of his most emblematic device, but has rather treated it as an irreducible linguistic element to be employed in multiple ways. In fact the grid became the scenographic basis for the Strenesse Group fashion shows in Milan (1995 and 1996) and also played a role in his important installation *Mothers, Daughters, Children* (with '37 Stories About Leaving Home' by Shelly Silver) at the XLVII Venice Biennale, in 1997. In the Venice installation, the grid took on the system of large-scale industrial warehouse shelving, a structure very similar to scaffolding, which referred not to the act of building but to that of storing, cataloguing, and preserving. This large structure was placed on a diagonal, interfering — an incongruity, almost a visual disturbance — with the linear layout of the space at the Arsenal, which is long and rather narrow, like an extended corridor. After pedestals and tables, shelves and cabinets, drawers and generic containers, this use of pre-fabricated steel shelving, which Steinbach had already adopted for his one person show at the Lia Rumma Gallery, in Naples in 1996, has become his latest favorite device for exhibiting a vast diversity of objects and materials (cans of tomato sauce, playing cards, and bricks in Naples; school desks and chairs, sand, cinder blocks, a balloon and a video by Shelly Silver in Venice.) More recently, in Pesaro in 1998, the grid model completely overtook the exhibition space of the Franca Mancini gallery. A grid of scaffolding literally filled the gallery from floor to ceiling, leaving free only a few walkways through which the visitor could enter the space. The installation, entitled *Rossini at 4:00 a.m.*, was created in association with the Rossini Opera Festival, which takes place every summer in that city. Steinbach wanted the installation to have some relationship to the work of the composer Gioachino Rossini, and decided to use costumes designed by Dario Fo for his production of *L'Italiana in Algeri*, presented at the festival the preceding summer. The visitor who stepped into the intricate cage of scaffolding observed the characters of the lyric opera represented by costumed mannequins lying on glass panels, thus evoking the sleep alluded to in Steinbach's title. Intensifying this suspended and ambiguous atmosphere (the metal tubing and glass panels also made one think of an eerie mortuary) was a swimmer, an incongruous presence identifiable by his outfit of bathing suit, goggles, and flippers, who seemed to be eyeing the viewer standing below. As in Vienna, so in Pesaro: Steinbach set up two types of reflections. On the one hand, his installation confronted the modalities of display and valorization of sculpture, in particular figurative and anthropomorphic sculpture (the mannequins), turning the traditional canons upside down and making the familiar disturbing. On the other, by having recourse to Rossini and the characters of *L'Italiana in Algeri*, whom he staged again, it recalled in a certain sense the relations of power that the characters embody, though filtered through the playful irony of opera buffa, and also the colonial era that provides an implicit historical background for them. In other words, the work no longer investigates only the space that it inhabits in order to extract from it signs that reconstruct an identity; it also casts a probe into time in order to reconstruct both a story and a history.