Haim Steinbach
*once again the world is flat.*
Hessel Museum of Art
June 22 – December 20, 2013

Helen Marten
*No borders in a wok that can’t be crossed*
CCS Bard Galleries
June 22 – September 22, 2013
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College Presents:
Haim Steinbach: once again the world is flat.

Curated by Tom Eccles and Johanna Burton

On View June 22 through December 20, 2013 in the Hessel Museum of Art
Opening reception: Saturday, June 22, 2013 from 1:00 – 4:00pm

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, NY, May, 2013 – This summer The Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (CCS Bard) will present an expansive exhibition of works by Haim Steinbach in the Hessel Museum of Art. Comprising a number of the artist’s grid-based paintings from the early 1970s, as well as a series of reconfigured historical installations and major new works created in relation to a selection of works drawn from the Marieluise Hessel Collection, the artworks in the exhibition span Steinbach’s forty-year career. Known primarily for his paradigmatic shelves displaying everyday objects, once again the world is flat. offers a significant opportunity to reconsider the trajectory of this seminal artist’s work, through its evolution from early paintings to the later large-scale installations that have seldom been seen and are less known in the United States. In these installations, Steinbach privileges the mechanisms of display, a concept he has employed since the late 1970s: highlighting the selection and arrangement of objects, while providing new and unexpected psychological, aesthetic, cultural, and ritualistic aspects of the displayed works, as well as the context in which they are presented.

In a 2005 interview with Ginger Wolf, Steinbach stated: “I am sooner concerned with visualizing experience than thematizing 'Art' objects into categories of art movements and connoisseurship. My work questions how we perceive objects rather than prescribe a hierachical order of what you should see as art. Another way of looking at it is that I do not ‘curate’ objects, but put them into play” (InterReview, 2005). For the exhibition once again the world is flat, Steinbach will reconfigure the architecture of the galleries with standard architectural building materials including metal studs, sheetrock, prefabricated shelving, paint, and wallpaper - all of which will provide new frameworks to display works from the Hessel Collection in addition to everyday objects selected by the artist.

Once again the world is flat. continues the Hessel Museum’s invitation to artists to create exhibitions of works drawn from the Hessel Collection of more than 2000 artworks that in turn illuminates their own artistic practice. Previous exhibitions have included projects by Martin Creed, Rachel Harrison, Andrea Zittel, Nayland Blake, Josiah McEhleny, and Liam Gillick. This exhibition is curated by Tom Eccles and Johanna Burton.

Haim Steinbach was born in 1944 in Rehovot, Israel. He has lived in New York since 1957. He received his BFA from Pratt Institute in 1968 and his MFA from Yale University in 1973. Until the mid-1970s he produced paintings that, responding to minimalism’s limitations, examined the codes of visual language through a calculated placement of colored bars around monochrome squares. He abandoned painting for a series entitled Linopanel, using linoleum as a material that mirrored cultural traditions of flooring (Rococo patterns, Colonial wood, generic tiling, etc.). In the late 1970s his practice delved into spatial questions of visual syntax, honing in on the quotidian rituals of collecting and arranging objects through a continued engagement with the Display works. His presentation of found, bought or gifted objects alters the lens of cultural histories, mapping otherwise concealed bonds of attachment and desire between object, place and viewer.

Following his historic exhibition at Artists Space in 1979, Steinbach has had several international solo exhibitions at institutions such as Witte de With, Centre for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Castello di Rivoli, Turin; Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna; CAPC musée d’art contemporain, Bordeaux and Haus der Kunst, Munich. His work was included in Documenta IX and the Sidney Biennial in 1992, the 1993 and 1997
Venice Biennales, the 2000 Biennale de Lyon, and La Triennale, Paris 2012. Steinbach’s work can be found in numerous international public collections such as the CAPC musée d’art contemporain, Bordeaux; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Metropolitain Museum of Art, New York; Sigmund-Freud Museum, Vienna; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and the Tate Modern, London.

Haim Steinbach’s exhibition at CCS Bard is made possible with support from the Marieluise Hessel Foundation, the Audrey and Sydney Irmas Charitable Foundation, the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, the Board of Governors of the Center for Curatorial Studies, and the Center’s Patrons, Supporters, and Friends.

Also on view is No borders in a wok that can’t be crossed, an exhibition by Helen Marten, in the CCS Bard Galleries through September 22, 2013.

Guided public tours every Saturday at 1pm during the summer – for more information please contact ccs@bard.edu or 845.758.7598.

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The Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College Presents:
Helen Marten: No borders in a wok that can’t be crossed

Curated by Beatrix Ruf

On View June 22 through September 22, 2013 in the CCS Bard Galleries
Opening reception: Saturday, June 22, 2013 from 1:00 – 4:00pm

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, NY, May, 2013 – This summer The Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (CCS Bard) presents the first U.S. museum exhibition of British artist, Helen Marten. Titled No borders in a wok that can’t be crossed, Marten’s exhibition is curated by Beatrix Ruf. It is the first major collaboration between CCS Bard and the Kunsthalle Zürich, a configuration of which was presented as part of the inaugural program of the Kunsthalle’s newly expanded Löwenbräukunst complex in 2012.

For No borders in a wok that can’t be crossed, Marten has created a group of works, which interweave the diversity of her work in terms of media – from sculptures to wall pieces and videos – in a comprehensive installation including many new works created specifically for the CCS Bard exhibition.

Marten’s work offers a disconcerting experience of material, symbolic and linguistic collapse. Entwining real surfaces with implied linguistic scenarios, Marten pokes humorously at questions of ownership and dishonesty in materials, the relationship of object to artifact, and of package to product. Interested in the grammatical approximations made in workmanship, Marten’s exhibition weaves constant conversations between counterfeit and camouflage. The idea of tracing around the outlines of substance – of hinting at recognizable information through disrupted form – is one that gives authority to the wonky, to the drunken and the misaligned. Image is continually tripped up by language, by a deliberateness of error that postures with all the concrete certainty of cultural recognizability. All plausible facets of the gallery space are treated with equal consideration, with emphasis on the thought that the speed of delivery of an object might reveal different formal relationships.

Marten assigns importance to physical reality and craftsmanship in her work. In her selection of materials she explores the questions as to how expectation can be translated into material language: how material could be used for its specific location in a narrative; which materials are associated with which characteristics; and, correspondingly, already “belong” to a fixed set of associations. She selects everyday materials from the “warehouse” of the present – walnuts, particleboard, steel or chicken bones – and turns their intended roles on their heads. The idea of touch (or lack of it) is visible in every work: drippy glue, improvised joints and split seams hold equal pace with perfect corners or obviously mechanized labor. Stone and metal can be given a humorous levity or shy weakness, whilst a raw surface that has been welded at a high temperature is made well behaved through the additional treatment of powder-coating.

Marten handles reality codes, visual idioms, and their exaggeration with a freedom that lends conventionally humble or overlooked ideas a new symbolism and grandeur: carbohydrate, pasta, or the pavement are all inflated to newly meticulous study. The uncanny is lent familiarity and vice versa; where there is failure, it is cultivated; models and expectations are stripped bare, or given new levels, new meshes of meaning; things are too big, too flat, too lethargic. There is comedy, but it is thrashed out, analyzed and deeply sincere. With many of the works in the exhibition, there is tension in the surface, a seething erotic play where the electrifying forces come from the missing or the overwrought: puffy pretzels, droopy bronze entrails, swollen bundles of matches, off-cuts and out-takes. Raw surfaces meet edge to edge with hi-gloss polish, flat dry wallpaper holds oily suggestion, and the wipe-clean or static free are forced into a reactive agency.
The titles Helen Marten gives to her works are also pervaded with puns. The series *Hot Frost* (2012) plays with the paradox of “hot frost” but also with the label “hot”, of the complications of posture, and the collision in temperatures between pace in making and consuming. This work consists of multiple male profile silhouettes made in Corian, a calcareous, heavy, and seductive material conventionally employed in the production of kitchen worktops. Colored in frosty pale blues, pastels, and cold whites, all figures are adorned with hats, spectacles, or beards. Caricatures, their foreheads morph into the outlines of mountains and become snow-covered peaks, while the oversized heads are made to falter under threat of melting from the heat of the matches blobbily bundled onto their surface. There is something erotic in this absurd elongation of the heads into engorged peaks, a pictographic suggestion of desire, of a bodily swell in a statically slapstick action of melting and freezing, pooling in and out of legible shape.


This exhibition is the third and final iteration of a joint project with the Kunsthalle Zürich (September-November 2012), the Chisenhale Gallery, London and CCS Bard. In Zürich the exhibition was titled *Almost the exact shape of Florida* and at the Chisenhale, *Plank Salad* (November 2012-January 2013).

The exhibition is accompanied by Marten’s first monograph with texts by Michael Archer, Ed Atkins, Kit Grover, Aaron Flint Jamison, Beatrix Ruf, Polly Staple and Richard Wentworth, presented by Kunsthalle Zürich and CCS Bard in collaboration with Chisenhale Gallery and published by JRP/Ringier.

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Haim Steinbach – *once again the world is flat.*

Image Sheet

*Display #6 - Studio Installation, 1979*

Wood shelf with metal brackets; wallpaper; polyester and glitter vest on metal hanger; wool dog; painted stones; ceramic vase; wooden box; cotton lion; lamp; sea shell; wooden candlesticks with candles (dimensions variable)

Image courtesy the artist
Display #7 - Artists Space, 1979
Wood shelves with metal brackets; wallpaper; wood vase with feathers; framed stone collection on wood easel; Majolica pitcher; glass cube on rock; wooden Chinese fisherman; child's lunchbox (dimensions variable)
Image courtesy the artist
Shelf with Globe, 1980
Wood, contact paper, wall paper, globe
16 x 18 x 20 in. (40.6 x 45.7 x 50.8cm)
Image courtesy the artist
*Untitled (baseball player, Snoopy, train engine)*, 1975
Wood shelf; plastic baseball player; plastic "Snoopy"; plastic train engine
7 x 24 x 2 in. (17.8 x 61 x 5.1 cm)
Image courtesy the artist
Helen Marten – *No borders in a wok that can’t be crossed*

Image Sheet

Helen Marten

*A face the same colour as your desk (1)*, 2012 (detail)
Welded/radial bent powder coated steel; stitched fabric; plastic bags; chocolate; cigarettes; cactuses; fruit; grinded rebar; plastic string; wood; pens; cardboard
90 x 60 x 70 cm; 35 1/2 x 23 2/3 x 27 1/2 in
Courtesy of the artist, Johann König, Berlin and T293 Rome/Naples
Photo: Annik Wetter
Helen Marten

*Peanuts*, 2012

Solid Ash; greasy orange Valchromat; sanded Formica; Cherry; Sepili; Walnut; resin/foam/latex breads and doughnuts; sesame seeds; sawdust; napkin; powder coated steel; pizza flyer from Betty Richter painting; soldered copper sheet; peanuts; steel cut from Charlie Brown profiles

rail legs each 120 x 55 cm

top dimensions: 280 x 50 x 4.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist, Johann König, Berlin and T293 Rome/Naples

Photo: Annik Wetter

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Helen Marten

*A face the same colour as your desk (6)*, 2012 (detail)

Welded/radial bent powder coated steel; stitched fabric; chocolate; cigarettes; cactuses; fruit; grinded rebar; plastic string; wood; pens; cardboard
Helen Marten

*One for a bin, two for a bench: Friend, Amigo, Sport*, 2012

(detail)

Rough sawn Pine; Maple; Ash; cigarette packets; cast bronze; clout nails; hand embroidered pillow; twig

250 x 130 x 55 cm; 98 1/2 x 51 1/4 x 21 2/3 in

Courtesy of the artist, Johann König, Berlin and T293

Rome/Naples

Photo: Annik Wetter
Haim Steinbach
TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY

In an interview published in Artnet’s April 2003 issue, Haim Steinbach discussed what he saw as the ideal system for pricing what he made: “I devised a formula by which there would be a price for the work—plus the price of the objects. Let’s say a shelf has three cornflakes boxes and six ceramic ghosts on it. If the ceramic ghosts are $10 a piece, that’s $60; the boxes, at $2 each, would make $6, bringing the total of the objects to $66. So if the price of a given work is $12,000, that’s $12,066.”

Jenny Saville
GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Jenny Saville’s “Continuum,” a presentation of eight drawings and five paintings, demonstrates the pull and power of the past—indeed, the inescapability of art history. The inclusion of the word pentimenti in several titles makes the point clearly: Pentimenti are compositional elements that an artist has painted over, yet still remain visible—they are the return of the repressed. From Saville’s The Mothers, 2011—a depiction of a seated mother holding two children—emerges Leonardo’s drawing The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and the Infant Saint John, ca. 1499–1500, owned by the National Gallery in London. The Michelangelo work that forms the basis for Study for Pentimenti IV (After Michelangelo’s Virgin and Child), 2011, is probably The Virgin Child with the Infant Saint John, ca. 1504–1506, in London’s Royal Academy of Arts. That work, like Saville’s paintings and drawings, is unfinished, its parts in various states of completion, some of its strokes “coarse” but nonetheless conveying what Frederick Hartt called “the breathing, pulsating surface”—a lively surface worthy of what he described as the “passionate grouping.”

Here, the subject of Saville’s images is the mother and child. Saville claims to be interested in flesh, but I think she’s more interested in the psychology of the mother-child relationship—specifically, between the female mother and male child. In her images, their bond is precocious and uncertain. The expression on the mother’s face in Pentimenti IV, for example, is by no means loving—it even seems angry, or at least irritated and troubled. And if the blood-red face of a boy in the “Red State Head” series, 2004—, with its ambiguously sulen, turbulent expression, is any clue, his mother was not particularly good at raising him. Saville’s images raise the question of whether the mother is a “facilitating environment” for the child, to use the British object-relational psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s term for a “good-enough mother.” (In this regard, Parmigianino’s Madonna
Haim Steinbach
by Peter Schwenger
BOMB 121/Fall 2012, ART

creature, 2011, installation comprising (a) vinyl Creature of the Black Lagoon figure (b) metal, wood, wallboard beam (c) metal, wood, wallboard triangular incline (d) metal, wallboard, oblique wall (e) painted metal gate valve, dimensions according to original installation. Installation view at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, 2011. Photo by Jean Vong. Images courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.
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
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.


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 x 84 x 27 ½ 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?


**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.

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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 it's 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.

![Image](https://example.com/hs1.jpg)

**HS**

**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.
Salad is sexy. So says Helen Marten in a faux-erudite text – covering topics ranging from culinary experiments to the Florida landscape, in a vivid discussion of the symbolism of ‘things’ – written to accompany her exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery (the first version of the show was at Kunsthalle Zurich last year, and the concluding iteration will be presented by CCS Bard in June). The young London-based artist noted that the show was ‘triggered by thinking about this idea of what happens to image when substance goes on a diet’. Titled ‘Plank Salad’, various consumables –
from toiletries to Starbucks cups to seemingly perfect re-creations of donuts and a loaf of ciabatta – were combined with more surreal ‘silhouettes’ of furniture. Marten’s work is often discussed in terms of the digital realm, yet her amalgamations of image and object – where one becomes the other, objects as image, image as object – and their relationship to language often render ‘dimension’ irrelevant.

Marten’s work sits within a certain lineage that includes Isa Genzken’s architectural accumulations of pop-cultural ready-mades or Rachel Harrison’s combination of objects, images and handcrafted forms. Also relevant is Mark Leckey’s work on ‘Long Tail Theory’, which Marten’s writing recalls, in its collage of image and linguistic associations. Leckey’s 2009 performance-lecture Mark Leckey in the Long Tail conceived of the Internet as the site for a never-ending connection of minor associations via images while, more recently, he has discussed ‘techno-animism’, which he describes as the inanimate ‘coming to life’, as the objects around us begin to communicate.

Nicolas Bourriaud opened Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay (2002) – a book which likens post-production to certain strands of contemporary art practice – by suggesting that the passage from Marcel Duchamp’s ‘real’ to Jeff Koons’s ‘fake’ prefigures the ‘recycling’ and ‘remixing’ of existing objects and materials by artists in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Marten’s work can be thought of in this context to an extent, but it also forms part of a recent wave of work by younger artists – including Nicolas Deshayes, George Henry Longly, Jess Flood-Paddock, Pamela Rosenkranz and Anthea Hamilton, to name just a few – whose work combines the trajectory of readymade to sculptural assemblage with the flattened-out world of the digital age (and open-source material), as if the virtual world were re-made in three-dimensional ‘drag’.

A wall about a metre and a half from the entrance to the gallery created a long corridor in which multiple sculptures sat. Glistening donuts, embodying the essence of food-porn photography, were placed on a colourful keyboard-like bench, alongside a loaf of wholemeal bread and the titular Peanuts (all works 2012). It was impossible to ascertain whether or not they were real. Close by were a number of smaller sculptures, a little like wonky 1990s computer desks, with various things – pots of Biros and Nivea Cream – placed on or hanging off them.

The large space on the other side of the wall contained a number of wooden sculptures that mimicked dressing screens, alongside pastel images of a delightfully feminine Mozart – a kind of caricature, built from blocks of paint printed onto what looked like leather (actually ostrich fabric), while bottles of Ricard and Pernod hung on strings from the bottom. (Embarrassingly, I found myself Googling ‘Mozart’ and ‘drunk’ as I wrote this: the Urban Dictionary claims that ‘Mozart’ is slang for ‘drunk’, due to the fact he composed whilst intoxicated.) Marten herself
describes this over-stylization as a form of ‘drunk’ cartoon dealing with a failed view of genius. Opposite these sculptures were multiple wall-mounted black iron chairs, that curled and coiled as if abstracted, silhouettes of the real thing (Traditional Teachers of English Grammar) – simultaneously snarling and flirting – from which hung suggestive clumps of car keys. On the floor lay a rectangle of planks made out of different shades of veneer – Falling Very Down (Low pH Chemist) – their edges bevelled to slope to the floor, with various tray-type items lying on top, seeming to ridicule Minimalist floor sculptures of the 1960s. The world Marten creates is enjoyably bizarre; the familiar is assembled and reformed, in a process of Alice in Wonderland-style haptic dissolution.

Kathy Noble
BR/PS: You titled your show at the Kunsthalle Zürich Almost the exact shape of Florida and your show at the Chisenhale Gallery, London, Plank Salad. The exhibition at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, is called No borders in a wok that can’t be crossed. Obviously language plays an important role in your work.

HM: I’m talking in a lot of metaphors, but what I’m aiming at is the triggering of an avalanche of overlaps. Or getting to the peripheries of a place—to somewhere on the edges—where things can’t quite be named with certainty. The borderlands of things are erotic seams in which information is held, but continually dissolved, retraced, or overlapped. When you conceal error under fresh layers, it’s a strange move toward violence. These titles are a kind of musculature to activate or raggedly group the works together. They’re umbrella propositions that are encircling to an extent, but they do all the rounding up in a lasso type of way.

Language is a system that we know very well how to exploit and wrap around things. Words are communicating, but at the same time they’re tumbling about themselves in a very knotty chaos of pictures and images. Language can bruise, activate, or dissolve known outlines of things. So in all of this we’re treading increasingly close to motifs of anxiety or territory: through curiosity, paths are desperately sought to make known, validate, or reinvent the pace of images. There has been a schematic shift of ideas, where the images of those ideas themselves lollipop behind words; there is a delay of reference—like trying to match images of bacon to the idea of tasting meat.

Of course there is an enormous amount of space for translation or deviation, so to come up with definitive answers, after only one shot at the target, is inevitably a struggle. And I’m probably more interested in all the residual wonky grammatical errors anyway.

BR/PS: You have this incredible ability and ease with which you move through materials, both through a physical grasp of the substance and something that is also highly pictorial. Could you talk about the specific roles of the materials that you use?

HM: The things that we experience every day are all built from substances possessed with social temperatures. Touch, temperature, and speed are parts of the same type of visual equation, so to manipulate one or the other more heavy-handedly pulls any resulting image into confusion. We are generally obsessed with the “skins” of objects, without having any idea of what it might mean to fuck with the edges of touch, with what kind of frictions, amplifiers, or conversational circuitry make them what they are. Something obsessively handled can be hot, but also dead. Cold materials can be callous, but economical too. I’m bored of seeing surface coveted, and then abandoned as a full stop punch line, because of course that doesn’t communicate content. All these things—surface, product, package, image, and text—are continually skirting in circles around one another. Perfunctory details are like chemical markers because they can become notations of a daily ritual. Teabags, cigarette packets, sello-tape, rubbish bags, mouthwash, and vegetable peelings all fall into this category. And we understand them precisely because we can hold them. I like the idea of trash
that something with little cultural snobbery. Lend more authority, but without big, gaudy, popular perhaps—is lent more authority, but without

HM: I’m interested in optical status and approximation. I love it that we put flowers in vases and look at them as though we’re courting nature by binding them to the role of an ornament. Or the idea that a croissant can be good-natured or earnest or miserable just by virtue of sitting on a plate and performing as activated starch. As tribal humans, we have always been substance abusers: bread might be a tissue, a comedian, or some toast. But things don’t become frightening until we name them enough to totalize them, and so abstract them from any locatable origins. There is kinetic excitement in casting a box of cereal in an operatic role, making it sing as a picture, and then stripping all language or harmony bare. The layering and side-to-side frictions are important. And all these things are always building into an alchemy of different bits and pieces, so to some extent, a “re-syntaxation” is happening all the time. Things we know and can name, and then those we cannot, are being forced into layers of lamination with one another. And of course I still love the domestic. A master hybridizer of the tulip, for example, is deliberately seeking new species, but the cross can only be made between existing stock, existing genes—there is no mysterious matter.

I think lamination is the best way to think about it. All these parts I’m roughly defining could potentially exist as separate layers, and in forcing them together you’re stylizing the way you make a picture. With the Mozart screen prints (Geologic amounts of sober time, 2012) for example, no part of the scene is allowed to expand, everything is tucked to the edges of the frame, or obscured behind a looming face. Shirt collars, hair lines, and eyebrows are inflated to indecent scale, and with this obstinate flatness comes a retinal defiance of volume. Hair doesn’t bristle, eyes don’t blink, and fabric doesn’t fold. There is a constant twitching and twisting in and out of pictographic clarity and sensory chaos. Hand-drawn or digital, the line that seeks to enclose or define can also waver, and lines that are straight, blank, or clear can become drunk, wonky, and walk off the screen at any moment. There is something that signifies comic authority, but meaning is buffered in a continuous shuffle between assertive speech and drunken babble.

HM: I love the idea of cut and paste: it approximates the image of ancient hands shredding through paper, drawing lines, measuring up, and removing information. As an analogue suggestion of activity, the idea is one of thumbs, of fingers, and so of touch. It speaks of care—deliberately saving to preserve—but also of necessity, of the impulse to chop out either to edify or to abandon. But within computer space what is actually happening is a negation of the hand, of all things potentially touched or filthy. These verbs are predominantly linked to the terminologies of human–computer interaction, so they are also negotiated by the idea of a user interface. What we can dream with cut and paste is that there might be, hidden somewhere in the blackness of unlocatable virtual space, some form of disembodied editor plowing through an index of commands. That there might exist an atomized—yet pixilated—thumb and forefinger wielding scissors and glue is a gloriously magic proposition.

The ideas of collage and inlay are things I’ve been battling with. In collage, there’s this wonderful idea that images are more bruised. They’re asked to be more

BR/PS: Can you say something about the relationship between collage and the idea of cut and paste? You talk also about the “inlay” and the idea of “rendering,” the latter of course being a relatively 21st-century term. Not to mention ideas of compression.

BR/PS: The words “new behavior,” “surface,” “temperature” are often used to refer to the ways you might think about materials. But there’s also a new syntax and a distinctly new reality to it. What is your idea of the “re-syntaxation” of everyday objects?

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The ideas of collage and inlay are things I’ve been battling with. In collage, there’s this wonderful idea that images are more bruised. They’re asked to be more

vocal about the verbs of squash- ing and sitting, so the fundamental action of placing one thing on top of another is a problem of weight. Collage is dealing with physicality in a way that is blatant—what we see are things on top of things on top of other things. Like thick makeup, a ceramic glaze or stickers on fruit, we can read the layers, or at least understand there is a between-ness, and so we can name parts.

Collage maneuvers through the same impulses for vandalism as tagging or graffiti. The action of the composition has posture: it is brave, stylish, an appendix gesture of and within fashion. It is to some degree a styling of layers. In sampling and recombining imagery, collage is a forcing of pictorial rhymes to behave with new stutters: it is impediment, a refocus, or a negotiation. Collage, in whatever realm, is superposition, so there is of course flatness, but it is a flatness that bristles with an implied sense of growth … of the thickness of multiple speedy laminations.

The inlay speaks less vocally about direction: there is little upwards or backwards, it is a sideward splay, a place of lateral grazing and recombining imagery, collage is a forcing of pictorial rhymes to behave with new stutters: it is impediment, a refocus, or a negotiation. Collage, in whatever realm, is superposition, so there is of course flatness, but it is a flatness that bristles with an implied sense of growth … of the thickness of multiple speedy laminations.
BR/PS: When you talk about re-synuating language, you also speak of poetic strategies. There is a moment of the surreal. Maybe we need another word for that. And of course there is compression, where information is not deleted, but hidden.

HM: Maybe the idea of environmental clipping is important here. To take something from one visual context, and plow, glue, weld, mesh, or crumble it into another is the most elemental and glorious type of manipulation. The idea of poetry is that it might be somehow unhinged from the parameters of everyday speech. Or equally, that something colloquial is provided with new rhythms. Something is surreal because it can’t quite be indexed. So that inevitably loops into thoughts about compression, because there is a displacement of levels of visibility, of hierarchy, and of course legibility.

The origins of compression are both industrially mercantile (think about crushing a can) and digitally integral (the PDF). I think the idea of compression of something that is against its own will; it’s bristling. It happens by virtue of necessity. And I’m highly suspicious of where all the grubby information goes when it’s folded into pixels and algorithms. The ability to read the temperature somehow gets smeared out of the frame. I like the slipperiness of it, how the transferal works, or how you can miraculously triple or halve the content of a piece of information. And with the illusion of instancy, so the sweat and dirt is eradicatet, or at least momentarily obfuscated. There is something amazingly violent about it, which I’m also interested in with all my work—the boundaries where humor, self-deprecation, sexiness, absurdity, and violence all somehow fold into one another. And of course it all riffs on a language that is very nearly universal: advertising/packaging/special effects. But these things are somehow freebies. Defying volume speaks more about of the possibility of shape, and in that, the possibility of weight, materiality, and relationships of foot to ground.

BR/PS: The inlay is, of course, made of different kinds of materials that encounter one another, but on a surface that is inherently flat. Whenever you talk about your work you mention flatness, but of course we see three-dimensional things: we see materiality, we have encounters—irritating maybe—with real materials. And again, when talking to your generation, it is impossible to avoid the fact that the Internet has changed our perception of surface and reality.

HM: There is potential for real obscenity in the amount of information that maybe forced into one object. Of course the digital is relevant, it has simplified a way of indexing information, of discovery. And that in turn is connected to some kind of dislocation from being systematic; there are chance encounters in reference, in looking up one thing and by mistake finding something else. But what I’m really trying to ask questions about is my relationship to stuff at this moment, right now—how do I move around it, what can I touch, what can I smell, what can I taste in this substance. And from that, what type of miraculous navigations can be plotted.

BR/PS: You often speak of “style.” Our experience of the synchronicity of images, or the possibility of images meeting on the Internet, is inherently styleless or anti-style even. Could you tell us a little more about where your images come from and how you work with them? What is the process of turning into a material reality? And obviously the handmade plays a role, either as a narrative, that distacts us from the digital behavior, or as a narrative that brings us to a new syntax of an encounter with the so-called real.

HM: It’s interesting to think about what happens when information is deliberately made devious: what it means to apply a logic, and then take it all back very quickly and shatter something that made a complete sun—you get difficult, but recognizable leftovers. So in a certain detached way this is to do with sequencing, and how impatient our retinal sensations are to be seduced by the instantaneous.

Returning to style, it’s difficult to escape from the fact that, on one hand, these things are behaving in a very theatrical way because they’re full of posture and so many baroque, over-rhetorical gestures, but at the same time there’s also an incredible poverty to the image.

When I think of style, I could connect it to outings of error, to the flaunting of mistake. Like the chairs, the olives, the pasta: all these things slip very easily in and out of nameable categories, but they’re forced into weird polarized places—either too much, too many, or wildly reductive. So rhythm is always kind of staggering along in an en route gesture. I think it’s all also to do with hierarchies, and over-designing an optimum position from which to look. And if you rearrange or undo the seams of something, invariably you alter its outline. So I always like to think that things have both internalized delay strategies for showing themselves, but also very surface moments of activation. In the same way that a scar leaves a raised and paled gap on the surface of the skin, there is a momentary fluctuation in the fullness of surface information, but the material is not displaced, just somehow staggered. There might be a glitch. If something is dishonest, what does it mean for an image to be dishonest? For a cup to be a cup, but also not be activated as a cup. This is a pretty gratuitous place to be!

Objects and the things we make can become strangely totalized entities, things that are so over-touched and so forced into an unlocatable space that there’s almost no room for breath. In the same way that CGI animation works, you are very much stylizing dishonesty. And I mean dishonesty in the sense of something that is treacherous, something that through oversaturation can actually strip itself of all locatable content.

BR/PS: Could you say something about the relationship between the physical and moving image works?

HM: We live in an age of serious retinal impatience, so simulacra sneak through our eyeballs and are never registered as the real thing. Online textures quote the infinitely real—even the wetness of sex is there—so there is obscurity in the sheer accuracy of information. Things have been contaminated by images (by pictures of themselves), but it is not a muddying like dirt or crumbs, more a disabling of perfection. We could quite plausibly murder our substance and still assume that we were handling real, flesh-heavy objects. So inevitably, tactile pleasure is an attitude of touch that has been sanitized by demands for the instantaneously and digitally real.

But substance is not really substance when we observe it through the screen. Of course photographic imagery shows us real life, but if we kissed this screen or smeared fingertips against it we would be reminded that our flesh is the external flesh of a hot-blooded voyeur. And we can wipe these marks away. As much as we desire or enjoy the negation, we are not yet able to enter ourselves into a state of pure data. We could lie across a keyboard, but never climb inside the intangible and infinite space it reveals to us.

Even though it seems weird to describe the more realistic as the more deceptive, what is
BR/PS: How does this terminology change in a world where the fabric of the reality has changed? And how do you then refer back to materiality in that? It would be interesting to look at that difference, and the different fabric of known appearances, and how they have changed because the fabric of reality has changed.

HM: The videos are terrifying to make, because the composition of them is potentially infinite, and the position of the viewing is absolutely fixed. So how to clothe or dress a single frame becomes a very laborled strategy. I find it different to making objects, because there can be no responsibility to physical gravity, no real sense of material density (in the video work) other than what is faked across the screen. So it’s about desire, too.

The beginning sensation making these objects is underpinned by an enormous pleasure in touch or of placing things to misbehave with one another. So it somehow comes back to this idea of stylizing, and stylizing between accident and intention in the same way liquid might fall into a glass. I’m talking really about building up this tactile pleasure to a point where encounter with a physical object either becomes totally ludicrous or violent, or even something erotic.

I guess the point where the videos and objects might merge is this idea that what an artist can take pleasure in is having the power to occupy a funny space where optical translation is tripped up by verbal translation. At some point maybe the eyes see faster than the brain or the brain translates before the eyes really become focused. I have the luxury to activate or deflate things with slippage, to rearrange the way things are named. So of course a cat is a cat but if you want to call it a lettuce then it can be a lettuce because the space of art-making allows an alphabet that is as pictorial as it is linguistic. And vice versa. So when I’m talking about style I also mean the type of emotion that you can assert for a material by virtue of forcing a friction with something else.

BR/PS: Maybe we should talk about another term more in depth, which is “illusionism.”

HM: I think illusionism links again back to this idea of speed. And what illusionism implies is a puff of smoke kind of idea: of obfuscation or of hiding behind something. Within that, perhaps there is a moment of joy or a beginning of understanding: so inevitably illusionism might also be coupled with pretence or with a hiatus of readable information. Maybe what illusionism more directly asks is that you suspend your idea of reality and allow a new influx of meaning to scramble or rearrange what is known. I’m sure that it’s back to thinking about hierarchies again.

In a certain way, the videos render out all joy because they completely negate any idea of being able to handle anything in the real. Imagine only ever being able to look at photographs of food, but never actually eat anything. I guess the idea of eating also touches on this idea of zones of surface, of consumption, but it’s also algorithmic: the idea of eating can be as logical as “you’re full, you shit; you’re hungry, you eat,” so we’re in a certain simplified syntactical conversation with the actions of refilling (or refueling) process with substance.

There’s a very precarious balance between fullness and vacancy. Packaging of course makes all the difference and to be delivered with product—a nice box, an ordered system, a time-scale, a luxury—delays us having to process everything, or tricks us into the belief that we are actually engaging with substance, form, or emotion.

I’m also often thinking about density and the paradox of emptiness in obscenity. I want to get to a place of violence, where the work needs to be on the nervier side of collapse, so the metaphor of dieting and food is a very convoluted way to imagine the consequences of posture in a space where reductive strategies could be played in relation to whiteness and the ideas of elegance it entails.