Once again, the world is flat.
folly-
folly for to-
for to-
what is the word-
folly from this-
all this-
folly from all this-
given-
folly given all this-
seeing-
folly seeing all this-
this-
what is the word-
this this-
this this this here-
all this this here-
All by works Haim Steinbach

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Cover: *once again the world is flat*, 1987
Back Cover: *hello again*, 2012
Haim Steinbach
once again the world is flat.

Curated by Tom Eccles & Johanna Burton
Center for Curatorial Studies
Hessel Museum of Art
June 22–December 20, 2013
once again the world is flat. is an expansive exhibition of works by Haim Steinbach, drawing from the artist’s grid-based paintings from the early 1970s to a series of reconfigured historical installations and major new works conceived in relation to a selection of works from the Marieluise Hessel Collection of artworks from the mid-1960s to the present day. Known primarily for his paradigmatic shelves displaying everyday objects, once again the world is flat. offers a significant opportunity to reconsider the work of this seminal artist, through the evolution of his work from the 1970s to his large-scale installations that have seldom been seen and are less well-known in the United States. Appropriately for the Center for Curatorial Studies, an institution dedicated to research on exhibition practices, 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, 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 hierarchal 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 has significantly reconfigured the architecture of the galleries with standard architectural building materials—metal studs, sheetrock, prefabricated shelving, and paint and wallpaper, all of which have provided new frameworks to display both works from the Hessel Collection and everyday objects selected by the artist.

Haim Steinbach was born in 1944 in Rehovot, Israel and has lived in New York since 1957. In 1968 he received his BFA from Pratt Institute and earned 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 paratactic 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,
vis-u-al-i-za-tion (vizh‘ō-al-i-zā’shan, vizh‘ō-al-i-ză’-shan), n. 1. a visualizing or being visualized. 2. anything visualized; mental picture.
or gifted objects alters the lens of cultural histories, mapping otherwise concealed bonds of attachment and desire between object, place, and viewer. 

*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, Bik Van der Pol, Rachel Harrison, Nayland Blake, Tom Burr, Allen Ruppersberg, Andrea Zittel, Josiah McElheny, and Liam Gillick. In many of these exhibitions, the museum has provided the opportunity for artists to reconfigure historical installations of their work—in Steinbach's case, his seminal installation at New York’s Artists Space in 1979, and for the audience to reconsider large-scale projects that many other institutions would find challenging to undertake. In preparing the exhibition at the Hessel Museum, Steinbach has judiciously selected a number of works from the collection that specifically relate to his own artistic strategies, at times with artists who he has either known (such as Joseph Kosuth) or whose work influenced his thinking (such as the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher).
In an email Steinbach wrote:

The Bechers were very important to my thinking early on. Their images of homes, water towers, etc. were like archives, collections of objects recorded. They are typological investigations, presented as such, selected, arranged and put into groupings. This is the same with collecting and collections, the Bechers collected their objects even as they were only recordings. I of course collect the real thing.

Collectors collect a type of thing, stamps, contemporary art, etc. and in this respect while reflexive of collecting, the Bechers were specialist collectors! I don’t specialize, like words each object collected belongs to another set of types, so my practice takes a step forward and enters linguistics, the language of objects. That’s where my work enters into discourse with Kosuth.

In his work *Art As Idea As Idea* we have a collection of words culled from the dictionary. Here Kosuth too is a collector like the Bechers, however he does not specialize in typologies of each word like for instance “house”, he conjures the image of each word but they are all of different types of stories and histories. The words are like objects, a mix of all kinds without hierarchical priorities! All words are equal until we see how they are used, until they are contextualized.

During the installation, Steinbach has also left room to return to the museum’s storage area where he could freely retrieve works for the large-scale installation in the central galleries. Here Steinbach’s methodology of placing significant artworks within a shelving structure recalls the museum’s function of both *Display* and storage. Here, there is the double-play of a “flat world”, one in which the objects from the collection when lying in storage are “just” objects taking space, awaiting their turn to be
picked and displayed. They are without hierarchy but also for the viewer their physical and semiotic qualities are heightened by the often-surprising juxtapositions and choices of careful placement that Steinbach makes.

We are delighted that Haim Steinbach has embraced this opportunity with rigor and enthusiasm, allowing the collection to be seen and considered in new and unexpected ways. In this booklet, we have also added two important texts that illuminate Steinbach’s thinking. The first is excerpts from an essay by Giorgio Verzotti written for Steinbach’s survey exhibition at the Castello di Rivoli in 1995 that illuminates the artist’s early works. The second is a recent interview with curator Anthony Huberman in which the artist discusses his relationship to the readymade. The interview followed a six-month long investigation of Steinbach’s practice at the Artist’s Institute, a project of Hunter College in New York City and organized by Huberman and CCS Bard graduate Jenny Jaskey. Together with this project, once again the world is flat. provides a much-needed reassessment and overview of an artist’s work that is widely influential on both artistic and curatorial practice today.

*Tom Eccles and Johanna Burton*
All works from the Marieluise Hessel Collection

P43  Top: Bernd and Hilla Becher, *9 Plastered Houses, Ruhrdistrict, Germany*, 1989
    Bottom: Joseph Kosuth, *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*, 1967

P47  Haim Steinbach, *Untitled (cone bracelet)*, 2013
During the 1980s, Haim Steinbach was shoe-horned time and again into discussions of commodity fetishism, simulation, and neo-geo abstraction. But in nearly all the various appreciations and denunciations of his work, critics seemed to overlook a key element of what he actually does, which is to arrange groupings of things. These are not, as the artist has pointed out himself, representations of objects, but rather presentations of them. In so being, they may conjure conversations regarding the ready-made and its relationship to appropriation, say, or repetition via mass production, but such discussions are only tangential to the brute material fact of what’s actually there. This matter-of-factness figures prominently into the context at hand: this exhibition’s title, *once again the world is flat.*, is itself an object first found and repurposed by Steinbach in 1987 and here presented anew. Suggestive on a number of levels, the phrase might, in its most basic sense, remind us of how contingent our most intimate experiences are. Indeed, however unlikely it now seems, there was once a time—not so very long ago—

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1 This essay is partially based on a lecture given on Haim Steinbach for the Artist’s Institute, New York City, on the occasion of his sequence of installations project hosted there between August 2012 and February 2013. My thanks to Jenny Jaskey and Anthony Huberman for the invitation to reflect on Steinbach’s practice.
when people worried they would come to the edge of the world, and fall off. Steinbach’s utilization of the phrase here asks us to reconsider what we think we know, and to survey the terrain around us, as if we were seeing it for the first time. Again.

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In 1963, Roland Barthes wrote an analysis of George Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*, a book written some thirty-five years before. Bataille’s tale is a tour de force of sexual perversion and erotic adventure. But as Barthes makes clear from the beginning of his essay, the narrative is merely a vehicle that allows for much more interesting things to take place. Those things operate in the realm of metaphor and metonymy—the first defined by Barthes (following the Russian linguist, Roman Jakobson) as establishing figures of similarity, the second figures of contiguity. It’s a complicated essay, if not terribly long, both beautiful and strange.

For Barthes, the question is, “Can an object have a story?” The answer is yes, but he argues that most stories framed as object-driven are actually less stories of the objects themselves and more trajectories of ownership, what he calls

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3 All quotations from Barthes are drawn from citation above.
“passing from hand to hand.” Disrupting nothing of narrative convention, these stories are the least interesting and most common in form. Rare, and remarkable, are instead those tales of objects that “also pass from image to image, so that its story is that of a migration, the cycle of the avatars it traverses far from its original being, according to the tendency of a certain imagination which distorts yet does not discard it.” Barthes is, here, talking about overdetermined avatars to be sure: Bataille’s eggs and eyes, testicles and breasts. Here, one begins with objects that share a trait: the aforementioned, for instance, are all globular. But they are radically unlike one another, too, and it is their same-different modality that allows them to be both “affinitative” and “dissimilar.” This places them within a certain kind of production, an “image system,” which Barthes claims is that of poetry, allowing for the “improbable” to sit alongside the common. In *The Story of the Eye*, objects are not only able to move between shared formal traits (i.e. the globular), but operations too. Thus, that is to say, the liquidity of that list of objects is as available for exchange as are the objects themselves (indeed, Barthes goes so far as to name this shared liquidity “the mode of the moist”). For Barthes, such metaphoric chains have no hierarchy and no paradigm—the movement between objects is the object of interest. This movement between objects might be defined as desire itself.
For Barthes, if narrative is the very matter that supports metaphor, metaphor cannot help but radically upset narrative, its very foundation. The two metaphoric strains that make themselves legible in The Story of the Eye are the Eye and Tears. But there is more. Through metonymy (which “exchanges” associations, where metaphor “varies” them), the two metaphoric chains themselves get crossed. One can, that is to say, poke out an egg, and break an eye. If we read Steinbach this way, as I think we might, he operates within the realm of the poetic in Barthes’s sense of the word. Objects are less about their owners, then, and more about the circulations they make. Put another way, objects reflect much of their owners’ beliefs, systems of faith, and measures of value. However, those same objects also produce said beliefs, systems of faith, and measures of value.

To this end, Steinbach’s method of highlighting the ways objects mean calls to mind, as well, the way Jacques Lacan breaks down the difficult concept of desire. Resorting to a kind of arithmetic, the psychoanalyst states, “Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second.” In other words, desire is a supplement, a thing left over, or, put differently, an effect irreducible to the very conditions that produced it.

If desire is what Steinbach’s work produces, it arrives with blunt, unexpected force. That might be because our drive to acquire and organize things is, in part, how we understand ourselves. Less a comment on capitalism than an investigation of the production of the self, Steinbach’s work acknowledges the fragility of subjecthood—that our funny, fragile egos are bound up in the unexpectedly rich terrain of the knickknacks and bric-a-brac, to say nothing of priceless momentos, we collect and covet. In a multipart work reminiscent of his installations from the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, a small print hanging on found wallpaper reads: “I went looking for peaches and came back with a pair.” The equation, though fatally flawed, produces a remainder.

_Once again the world is flat._ offers a survey of work by Steinbach from the last four decades. Yet, it upends expectations for a retrospective by presenting a significant body of work produced since the beginning of his career, and then framing that corpus as an object in and of itself. Radically reconfiguring the seventeen galleries of the Hessel Museum through a series of newly installed “wall frames,” Steinbach forces new lines of sight, blind spots, and hanging surfaces into the galleries his work occupies. The “wall frames” themselves offer levels of surface and closure: some are no more than aluminum studs approximating a wall; others take areas of sheetrock; some of these are hung with wallpaper
and, on some occasions, present works of art by Steinbach himself or borrowed from the Hessel Collection. At various heights, and assuming myriad angles, they are borders, barriers, frames, structures, supports, passages, even *passages* (as in 19th century painting, where planes blend into—and confuse—one another).

The exhibition includes examples from pivotal moments in the artist’s career, including some of the earliest of his extant works investigating post-minimal tenets and plumbing the distinction between high and low with regard to materials and vernaculars. Included in this show are just two of the plastic laminated wood shelves for which he is best known. One of those is owned by the Marieluise Hessel Foundation, and thus appears as both a work pulled from the Center's collection, and as an instance of work by Steinbach. The dual attribution is notable here, and all the more so because *once again the world is flat*. asks that viewers re-evaluate a career too often reduced to a single aspect of its wide-ranging content. That so few of the best known of Steinbach’s shelves appear here does not mean that others of the genre are nowhere to be found. Indeed, the first of the artist’s shelves—a simple construction of two boards nailed to the wall and bearing three forms—from 1975, is included, as are other variant iterations from the early 1980s. *Shelf with Globe*, for instance, and *Shelf with Snoopy*, 1980 and 1981, respectively, evidence Steinbach’s signature tango
between minimal display and baroquely common object. Included, too, are the artist’s installations from as early as 1979 (one first shown at the historic Artists Space in New York), in which elements of the domestic, private sphere enter the sacred space of contemporary art, producing the strangest of unions. In every case, however, Steinbach refuses the generic, highlighting, instead, the deeply personal nature of every constellation of items he brings together. A work from 1997 makes the intimate character of his work clear. *this stuff belongs to me* comprises a simple shelf; on it are two ceramic dishes, shaped like strawberries, and a wicker basket, its front embroidered with the eponymous words. I learned, during a studio visit with the artist, that the objects belonged to his now-deceased mother-in-law, who adored all things strawberry, and whose sole designated “private” spot in life was said basket. But, even when not armed with this back-story, one grasps that the shelf displays a personality.

In a 1999 text titled “Two Owls”—a reference to *Display #23—Adirondack tableau* (1988), the first piece a viewer to Steinbach’s show at the Center for Curatorial Studies will encounter—Steinbach writes about the strange intersection I am attempting to describe here: “I select and arrange objects which have already been produced, which are mostly from multiples, because just about every object in the world is either from an unlimited or a limited edition. What is an edition?
Does a chicken farm produce editions of chickens; do the chickens produce editions of eggs? When you buy a carton of 12 eggs in a store are you buying a limited edition of eggs? Are they special eggs from free-range chicken? What would limit the edition is either an artistic dictate or supply and demand.”

It is this either/or that interests me: what limits an edition is “either an artistic dictate or supply and demand.” Here, Steinbach marks an ambivalent bind between commerce and artistic production. The “dictate” on a “useless” object is as strong as—if very different in valence—a shortage of food. The two registers, of course, couldn’t be more different, which is why the equation is of so much use. He goes on to explain something crucial about how the very notion of value accrues, and here, the symmetry between the artistic dictate and supply and demand is usefully problematized: “When there is no more demand for a certain style of shoes, production stops and soon they disappear. However, 50 years later if you still have that pair of shoes they may be considered exemplary or quintessential and end up in a historical museum. One may even argue that all objects are somewhat unique because they are produced with respect to the limitation of their demand. The less there is a demand for an object the less of it there exists to be had. It follows that the most unique object is the object that no one desires.

The undesired object is limited in quantity and becomes rare. In time, due to its rarity, it might acquire immense value.”

Steinbach’s interest, then, in collecting as a mode of production would seem to court the individualistic, affective drive toward objects, while also acknowledging the serial nature of every such “special” object. This crux, between the serially produced and the singular is where Steinbach’s work sits. True, it’s not set firmly within legacies of the readymade, but neither is it outside the realm where various kinds of value might be usefully compared—even rendered oppositional to one another. Indeed, while it’s important—urgent even—to argue Steinbach’s practice away from the overarching (and weirdly lasting) arguments that have placed him all too squarely within the logic of consumer culture, it’s equally imperative to see the strange textures revealed within the fabric of that logic.

Steinbach’s famous shelf—like the other modes of installation utilized by the artist—works to establish a platform, a frame, and a mode of legibility akin to underlining. But because Steinbach should be thought just as much in terms of Judd as Duchamp, the shelf also can be argued to establish something distinct from “pointing” at an object (which we understand to be Duchamp’s gesture), to insist that the armature for every object be considered as relevant as the object itself, if never reduced to it. Indeed, the artwork

6  Steinbach, “Two Owls,” ibid.
is made up of, say, the shelf and the things on it, but those aspects together still don’t amount fully to the work as we comprehend it. This is why the emphasis on intimate objects, or, better, our intimate relations with objects, is only half the story. Consider Judd in this respect. Judd has never been accused of the same crimes as Steinbach because his sculptures might sometimes look like shelves, but they rarely fully act like them. The reality is that once a faction of Judd’s objects actually did start behaving like shelves—unabashedly inhabiting the realm of utility—his practice was seen by some as in peril for having entered the realm of crass commercialism. In that case, Judd actually was making furniture, rather than devices acting like shelves. Indeed, in a New York Times piece detailing the opening of the Calvin Klein flagship store in Manhattan in 1995, the Chinati Foundation Director is quoted as saying that “she had made sure that none of Judd’s paintings or sculpture appeared in the ads. ‘We didn’t want to mix it,’ she said. His art should not be decoration for a furniture campaign.” Of interest here is that Steinbach’s work might challenge such a distinction all together.

The core—the heart, even—of once again the world is flat. is literally the central gallery of the show. Collected here are...so many collections. Utilizing a type of scaffold shelving unit he has

previously employed, Steinbach pulls works not only from the Hessel Collection, but also from his own—a single photograph that has hung in his family's bathroom for decades makes its first appearance in a gallery. Bought in an Upper East Side thrift store long since closed, a black and white photograph of a young boy, throwing up armfuls of autumn leaves, it’s an image that is about abundance—and pleasure. Here too is a long, prefab shelving unit, filled with wares from Henry, an antique store located in Hudson, New York and owned by his longtime interlocutor, Nancy Shaver. (It should be said that many more works in the show are peopled with items supplied by Shaver; her desire to collect has long intersected with Steinbach’s desire to make that desire visible.) Finally, included in Steinbach’s show: a collection worth a book’s detailing. *Display #30- An Offering: Collectibles of Jan Hoet*. In 1992, the Belgian curator was placed in charge of *Documenta 9*; he asked Steinbach to contribute to the major international exhibition, leaving open for dialogue what might be shown. Visiting Hoet (who was then the Director of S.M.A.K.—Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst—in Ghent) in his offices, Steinbach found that the curator had a collection of his own. His cramped basement office was lined with shelves, and these with objects ranging from flea market curio to a drawing by Joseph Beuys. Steinbach’s request, which was granted, was to show Hoet's collection as his
work for Documenta. The curator, without hesitation, agreed. The items amassed in Hoet’s office were shown on a circular shelving unit designed by Steinbach that approximated the shelf space of the curator’s office. The work was later placed briefly in a commercial context (One Five Gallery in Antwerp), and eventually acquired by Hoet for his own institution; ironically, then, this work, comprised of the curator’s personal objects, became part of his museum’s collection. It has been in storage there, until it was requested for loan, to be shown here, as part of once again the world is flat.

Between the work’s acquisition and now, much of Hoet’s collection has been displaced. The shelves are barer now than before, the effect, one can guess, of a museum becoming unfamiliar with the fundamentals of its own pieces (one might say of its own history), and which assesses values based on parts rather than wholes. The bits of Hoet’s collection gone missing during its time in deep storage are those least immediately “valuable,” those that could be mistaken as detritus, hard to recognize outside of Steinbach's context, which insisted they were just as valuable as everything else on view.

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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 1974, 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 penciled parallel lines following the exterior edges of the panel and then, using these lines as guides, rubbed small, precise geometric shapes onto 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.

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The linoleum panels, like the particle-board panels, embody the portrait of a social background that becomes the theme of Steinbach’s work. 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.

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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 in 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 feather, 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.

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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 that 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.¹

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 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.

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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. 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 the shape of Kermit the Frog. And even when the objects are specified once again, as in the Untitled titles, 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 machè 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 the “erotic man”, “friar”, and “sister” in fact indicate an authentic American folk art sculpture and two wooden medieval style statuettes.

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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 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.

Not A Readymade

*Anthony Huberman and Haim Steinbach*

The following conversation between curator Anthony Huberman and Haim Steinbach was first printed in *Mousse Magazine* (# 36, Dec-2012 – Jan 2013) and took place as part of an extended project at Hunter College’s Artist’s Institute in New York where each season is dedicated to thinking about a single artist, and looking at the broader context of contemporary art through the lens of that artist’s work.

**HAIM STEINBACH** What is a “readymade”?

**ANTHONY HUBERMAN** I suppose the historical definition of the readymade is an object that an artist did not make, that an artist picks, finds, or chooses, and inserts into a context that frames it as art, without doing anything to it. And then that notion has become much more complicated and layered over the years.

**HS** Must the artist present it as art?

**AH** Well, no. I think it is mostly the act of placement into an art context that plays the role of framing something as art. I don’t think the artist names it anything. It’s the context that does the naming, not the artist.

**HS** Duchamp, with his “readymades,” was engaging with, prodding, the museum system. The way he is usually discussed is misleading. He said he was “indifferent,” but his indifference
had to do with distancing—with his ability to step outside the usual structures of aesthetics and say that anything could be aesthetic. If anything can be aesthetic, then you can go to the department store and buy a bottle rack or a urinal, sign it “R. Mutt,” and present it to a museum as a work of art by Mutt.

AH So with that in mind, I’d like to try and apply those ideas to your own work. I think one way people understand your work is as a Duchampian gesture, or that the objects on your shelves operate like readymades. I want to try and talk about that, and perhaps challenge it a bit. For example, tying into this idea of indifference, I wanted to ask you about the relationship your objects have to the idea of the home. As opposed to the Duchampian conceptual gesture of going into a shop and buying something, the objects in your work have spent time in someone’s home, in someone’s life. Is this something you think distances your work from the lineage of the readymade?

HS Well, Duchamp’s objects also spent time in his life and home.

AH Right, but he didn’t buy the bicycle because he wanted to use it as that. He put it in his studio to figure out what the hell to do with this shape, this form.

HS I don’t know, did he not ride a bicycle? Duchamp stated that he made Bicycle Wheel to entertain himself. He said that whenever he
was bored, he would just turn the wheel. That he would do this for his amusement contradicts the idea of his total indifference, and again points to how much it has to do with pleasure and amusement. By bringing the bicycle and/or a bicycle wheel inside the house to play with, he domesticated it, which then brings in a social dynamic. I would say that my practice is directly connected to the social. It embraces the idea that art is always with us, a function of the everyday. Singing a song while ironing a shirt, or speaking theatrically, which we all do now and then—all of these activities are an extension of our social lives, our civilized existence. With my work, the bottom line is that any time you set an object next to another object you’re involved in a communicative, social activity.

AH Because your works have more than one object? Or are you referring to the act of displaying them?

HS There’s always more than one object at hand. Being here means you and here. Anything is always nearby or next to something else. It is always part of the collectivity, part of the fluidity of existence and communication within a socialized, cultural society.

My practice is to try to point to things that we ignore out of habit. One of the realities of the everyday is that we ignore everything that is part of the everyday. As long as something is in the right place, we are comfortable, and we
can ignore it. Now the question is why is it in the right place, why are we comfortable with it, and why do we ignore it? If the order of things gets disturbed, it gets our attention. I like to say that I aim to interfere with the order of things. My goal is to find other ways of ordering things.

AH We tend to think of a readymade as a single object, and therefore your idea of an object being in a community of objects falls slightly outside of the Duchampian tradition.

HS I’ve been criticized for exactly that. I’ve been accused of betraying Duchamp.

AH Betraying him? Is that what you think you are doing?

HS At this point the “readymade” is an ideological term. When Duchamp called his work a “readymade,” he meant that it was something that was already made, something of function that was industrially mass produced that he didn’t make himself. It already existed in the world, an object among objects. There was nothing more remarkable about it than that. If anything, he reminded us that the bottle rack was as remarkable as the *Mona Lisa*. He was breaking hierarchies of aesthetic judgment. It was an assault on the establishment, all the values of Art. He was opening the gates of vision by saying that vision is selective, a politically structured hierarchy.

Even by the time Duchamp died in 1968, the urinal was still considered kind of a joke. But then, once Duchamp was canonized,
he became a God like Marx, Einstein, and Freud, or any radical visionary. His work was studied, and he was taken very seriously. The “readymade” had to be defined and validated within the historical hierarchy.

AH And so it lost its punch as an attack on aesthetic judgments.

HS It was assimilated, and yet in the museum it still causes friction. Unless it’s put in the design department. My work returns to questions of hierarchies, but in a completely different way. Whereas Duchamp selected objects from the hardware store, I am accused of embracing all the objects in the world.

AH Let’s talk about that. “Choice” is the operative word in thinking about both your work and the readymade. One does not make something, but rather chooses something.

HS Objects are part of language, just as words are. The question is what do you construct with them. Objects are more than words because they are more specific and completely embodied, with structures of representation, style, form, and culture. An object is really the embodiment of a world. If each object is a world in itself, then can you construct a meaningful message or story with a group of objects.

AH And the idea of placing objects in a row on shelves came out of that line of thought?

HS Yes, on a very basic level, this is what I set out to do in the mid-1970s. By the end of the
1970s I was doing display installations in which I was arranging objects in a normative way. I was not gluing them together. I was not adding paint. I placed them on shelves, like words in a sentence or notes in a musical score. The language of placement, the language of arrangement. Once you question what you do with objects, you are of course looking once again at the social structures of putting objects to use in the home, in the bathroom and the kitchen, and so on.

AH It also brings in performance, the idea that these objects are being “put into play,” as you have said. In the same way that Roland Barthes, at this same time, was talking about a sentence as words being put into play. This is distinct from the notion of the ready-made, which is about an object inhabiting a context, rather than an object or objects being asked to enact, or perform a series of actions next to each other.

HS Duchamp put the bottle rack or coat hanger into play. He took a coat hanger and put it on the floor, and called it *Trap*. There’s a poetic language game happening, a pun, and it’s meaningful because he is asserting his idea over the object by turning it into something other than its intended function. He was the author of that object in a new way. The argument for the “ready-made” as a distinctive, meaningful artistic gesture has to do with the notion that it’s not about the object per se, but the concept. What is often being said about my work is that if anything
can go with anything, and all objects are equal, then the work lacks an idea, however my ideas are not the same as Duchamp’s. While I order the objects in repetition and singularity, I basically present them and their meanings remain open ended. And that’s unsettling to many, but there’s friction, sound, and resonance in play below the surface.

AH You’re asking an object to have authority on its neighbor, and vice versa.

HS It’s giving the object its own voice. When you take a urinal, sign it “R. Mutt,” and call it Fountain, you are putting the aura of your authority, and the aura of art, on it. This is also true for the bottle rack, which no longer is as such, as it is now a “readymade.” Whereas when I present something, it is placed in common manner, implying to be interacted with by the receiver.

AH You seem to be talking about the difference between representation and presentation. One way to think about the readymade in the Duchampian tradition is that it’s a representational act, it means more than what’s in front of you. In your case, the objects are not representing the authoritative, artistic genius of an artist, but they are objects presenting themselves to us.

HS The term “readymade” to me is now a hierarchical term, giving everyone who participates in the discussion the idea that they are
a part of something very special. It has entered the realm of elitism. I’m saying, my work is not a “readymade.” I am not involved in “readymades,” my work is not about the “readymade.” I am playing and exploring with objects.

AH So, if there was an object lying around the studio that you had actually made yourself, it would not be in any way more significant, and you might choose it in the same way that you would choose an industrial object?

HS It is a question of what does it mean that you make an object or don’t make an object. Who makes the object, who deserves the credit for making the object? And what is making anyway? Isn’t thinking, imagining, and conceiving a way of making? When a musician composes a score, who makes the music, the composer or the orchestra? I have an intimate relationship with all the objects I work with, just as any creative person has an intimate relationship with their material, whether they are a musician, a poet, or a writer. Most of the objects that end up in my work have been with me at least half a year if not longer. I’ve had objects that have been sitting around for decades that ended up in a piece many years later. Sometimes they have personal histories, and sometimes they don’t, it’s not necessarily something that somebody gave me; I could have gotten it for myself, but they’ve become part of my personal history, because they have been part of my space, part of my domestic reality.
Going back to having authority or agency over objects, you already brought up how Duchamp would title his works as one way he exerted agency or control over them. Could you talk a bit about the way you think about titling?

Theoretically, titling is a very important aspect of my thinking. I would say that Duchamp’s convention of titling was very different. It’s an important distinction that you’re bringing up. There are several ways in which I title. One basic way is that the work is *Untitled* with the “U” capitalized. Then in parentheses I list the names of the objects, for instance *Untitled (elephant, toilet brush, kong)*. The elephant is not really an elephant; it is a small, ceramic elephant. The toilet brush is made of plastic and doesn’t look like a toilet brush because it was designed to look like a Brancusi sculpture. For many years MoMA used to sell it in their bookstore. And the Kong is actually a rubber dog chew, but it’s also the name given by the individual who designed it. So, I’m pointing out that the names by which we identify objects are bound in language. A ceramic elephant is not an elephant, and the word elephant is not an elephant. When my son, River, was a year and a half old, he called the elephant he saw on TV, “Omni.”

But some of the titles are much more abstract or poetic.

Another way I title works is to give them a found word, or a found statement.
I keep a list of ones I run across, so I’ll remember them later.

AH So if there are three objects on a shelf, this “found phrase” of the title becomes a fourth object?

HS Exactly. The title itself is a found object like the other objects. The question is then how to take those parts and arrange them.

AH Like making a song? With repetition, and rhythm. Here enters the idea of composition.

AH Well, “composition” is OK but I prefer the word “arrangement.”

AH There is something more “democratic” about an act of arrangement over one of composition. Perhaps this goes back once again to our discussion of the notion of authority? It’s interesting that although the readymade is often considered to be connected to indifference, that it’s actually imbued with huge amounts of authority, whereas the way you relate to objects tries to attack that notion of authority.

HS Yes, because it takes it out of the realm of absolute specificity and total power of the originator, and throws it more to the world of the relativity of objects and contexts. I think the ideology of the “readymade” at this point transcends any notion of arrangement. It has become a symbol, almost a religious symbol.

AH You talk about turning power over to objects, but at the same time, you do place them in very specific order or a very specific arrange-
ment. What if someone decided to switch their order? What if a collector who owned one of your works decided to change the placement?

HS My work is indeed vulnerable in that way. It always is vulnerable to that joke “You can move it, it doesn’t matter.” Of course it matters to me, but of course it also doesn’t matter. Once somebody owns my work, they might decide to play with it. They may also have to dust it, or they may choose to dust one object but leave the others alone for the next year, and see what that looks like. Somebody might take the ashtray off the shelf and put a cigarette in it, and the owner may become incensed or may simply put it back on the shelf and offer another ashtray to the guest.

AH But all that matters to you, right? It changes the song, so to speak.

HS Right, and it extends the discourse from something that Duchamp started. It is coming out of that history. With all due respect, Duchamp did something very radical that affected many of us. He opened doors to discussion, and vast areas to develop, in terms of how we relate to objects and what we prioritize, and give special attention to, and see. It really opened the doors of seeing. In art, ultimately, who has the control on what we see and how we see?

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**P6, 10, 33**  Installation views at MATRIX / UC Berkeley Art Museum

**P30–31**  Installation at Lia Rumma Gallery. Photograph by Agostino Osio

**P43**  **TOP:** Bernd and Hilla Becher, courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York. Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College

**BOTTOM:** Joseph Kosuth, courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery. © 2013 Joseph Kosuth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

**P47**  Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College
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