JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY ART
www.jca-online.com

Haim Steinbach

Part 1

Joshua Decter: I'm interested in addressing, initially, the idea of desire for that which exists outside, a desire caught up with the cultural object-as-commodity. Perhaps you can reflect upon your desire for certain objects.

Haim Steinbach: When I began working with objects in the late 1970s, most objects I employed were used objects that I got from flea markets and yard sales. For instance, all the objects in an installation I did at Fashion Moda in the South Bronx in 1980 came from the neighborhood second-hand stores or were picked off the street. The idea of a desire for a "cultural object-as-commodity," something which "exists outside," intrigues me because I believe that what exists outside eventually comes inside. A "commodity object," once acquired, becomes internalized. What I think you are getting at here is an idea of an alienated desire.

Decter: "Alienation" in the Marxist sense?

Steinbach: I am thinking about alienation in terms of radical social and technological changes. Also, I am interested in the desire for something more down to earth, like survival. How do we survive these alienating forces? How do we channel our desire to accommodate alienating experiences and things? If you want to keep up with a changing reality, you are pressured to constantly reposition yourself. On some level there is a sort of reconstruction of the self that is continuously taking place.

Decter: But it's a reconstruction of the self that utilizes the materials of commodity production; in other words, ready-made object-products with entrenched meanings . . .

Steinbach: Objects, commodity products, or art works have functions for us that are not unlike words, language. We invented them for our own use and we communicate through them, thereby getting onto self-realization.

Decter: Why do you select certain everyday objects, and does this selection process correspond to a conceptual framework or method?

Steinbach: Back in the mid-seventies, while teaching an art course and discussing customs of presenting and viewing objects in our culture, it occurred to me that objects in and of themselves may be considered a material for art. The idea for art that I was thinking of was not in the sense of the Duchampian "ready-made" but rather in the commonly shared social ritual of collecting, arranging, and presenting objects. At first I began making narrow ledges out of one-by-two-inch pieces of wood and arranging small plastic toys on them. But after a short while I dropped this idea.
At the same time I was making panels, which I covered with linoleum surfaces. Having been a painter I guess I didn't feel confident as yet going totally in the direction of objects. While I was attracted to the visual designs of floor decorating material I was also interested in its cultural significations. The linoleum material I used simulated Spanish tile, Colonial floor boards, Italian inlaid marble design, etc.
A while later I began doing installations in my studio that consisted of presenting objects on prefab shelves. These were hung up against sections of floor to ceiling solid color or patterned bands of wall paper. In 1979 I had a show of such an installation at Artists Space in New York. At this point Artists Space was a hotbed of the "Pictures" artists, and I felt this was a good context in which to show this work. While there was some interest in this new direction of objects no one really made the connection between the employment of "pictures" to that of "objects."

Decter: And why do think this was the case?

Steinbach: Possibly because objects are things in the world. While they may have their fictions, they are not representations of things.
In 1982 I showed a group of hand-made shelves at Concord Gallery in New York. Each shelf, loosely constructed of found scrap furniture parts, plastics, decorating material, etc., carried a singular object. I considered the shelf to be an indication of a functional decorative object, like furniture, as well as sculpture. I thought of this body of work in terms of the distinction normally made between common everyday objects and art.
By 1985, after my show at Cable Gallery and Jay Gorney Modern Art, interest in the work began to catch on. By then I was again arranging groups of objects, only this time on wedge-shaped plywood shelves with plastic laminate surfaces. For this show I selected objects bought off the shelves of the department store, the supermarket, and the novelty store. In each group of objects, a certain relationship of a function, projection, or narrative was underscored. A pair of digital clocks with a "wave machine" underscored technological liquidity. A Disneyland phone in the shape of Kermit the Frog lounged in a conversational pose and, juxtaposed with two wooden mannequins, suggested a group discussion, and a twig basket with a couple of footballs was evocative of sporting and targeting. On a formal level, the colors of the plastic laminate covering the shelves were selected to play off the objects. In the month

following this show, I discovered my work identified under a dozen or so categories: Postminimal, Commodity Art, Postconcep-tual, Neo-Geo, Neo-Pop, Object Art, etc.

Decter: But the very language of your work seems to be an index for the very systemization of consumer desire (whether in terms of art or other commodities) that you have just described.

Steinbach: The work reflects aspects of a collective cultural desire based on the exchange of objects between people. There is a structure as well as a system in my work; for instance, in numerical games of units that stress similarities and differences between objects. I am interested in attempting to appreciate the object as an object of desire and to explore the possibilities of objects. Being an artist, my strongest means to employ toward this end are visual devices that translate the art of looking. What I believe you recognize about my practice when you refer to the idea of indexing desire is that everyday objects produced by our society may be turned into objects of desire more than one time. I am trying to demonstrate than an object may be consumed more than one time and desired in more than one way.

Decter: I would think that this question of desire, which I brought up, also concerns a rather perverse need to reaffirm particular value systems that have been, as you suggest, cultivated within our cultural situation. And in terms of the reception of your work, there is evidence of a certain acceptance and acknowledgment, whether this is considered on positive, negative, or ambivalent terms, of that which is the product of our own desires.

Steinbach: It is evident that cultural rituals in themselves reaffirm one's value system and, interestingly, there's always something perverse in rituals, which does not exclude artistic rituals. I believe that my work taps into forces of ambivalence inherent in our culture, hence I suspect that it stimulates tensions of ambivalence in the viewer. When the reception is positive it is most likely based on a recognition of the "real" and actual in objects that may well include certain ambivalent forces in them.

Decter: And how do you make this distinction?

Steinbach: Ambivalence is a very difficult state to contend with. As a culture we most likely experience ambivalence nowadays more strongly than ever before; it is very powerful. Ambivalence is a conflict that seeks a balance. It's a conflict between having an aversion to something and, at the same time, being seduced by it. It is also a condition situated at the epicenter of belief. It registers a deep crisis of believing because if you really believe, then you are not ambivalent.

Decter: What is your belief system?

Steinbach: I wish I could tell you in one sentence. However, concerning ambivalence, I think that one can have a belief system in spite of it.

Decter: Are you suggesting that one can have a belief system that is based upon ambivalence itself?

Steinbach: A belief system that can withstand emotions of ambivalence, that tolerates it as a condition that inevitably derives from a cultural and philosophical system. One can have values that constitute belief while experiencing the forces of ambivalence. I think that democracy brings about ambivalence.

Decter: So, the so-called freedoms that are permitted in a democratic system may in fact produce states of apathy or confusion?

Steinbach: If you are living in a society like New York, a place considered to be confusing by many people, what is supposedly confusing about this context is the multiplicity of peoples. All the same, because of this, New York is an extraordinarily energetic place. It is a testing ground for democracy.

Decter: We also live in a context where there is radical heterogeneity — on ethnic, cultural, religious, and ideological levels. This obtains for the world of products, wherein there is an important relationship between the plurality of culture in general, and the plurality of objects that are produced by this culture to satisfy these various heterogeneous desires . . .

Steinbach: That's for sure. And yet people seem to build their own cathedral inside their house. They select the objects that they like to live with, and they make a shell for themselves. They cultivate their little domain. In terms of my own experience with objects, there was a time when I went through a purist period. I didn't want to have anything in my house — it was simpler just to have very few things around. I went through an evolution in my own work from a minimal, reductive language based on the conceptual activity of the late 1960s and early 1970s, toward a point at which a whole other range of discussions began to emerge.
I realized that I had developed an incredible bias toward objects, probably as a result of a resistance to an ideology of "commodity fetishism." One day I decided to open up, to fill my house with objects and let myself experience and familiarize myself with them again. I wanted to get to know them as things in the world that have a socially linguistic function. How these objects function in relation to scenarios within which rituals unfold became an issue for me. For

instance, now we are sitting around doing an interview, drinking coffee and eating cookies, and there is a particular set of objects around us that have a sort of social am-biance.

Decter: During the emerging of certain so-called conceptual art practices during the mid- and late sixties, it is interesting to note that a series of Kosuth's early work, which investigated language as a naming system through the presentation of a photographic image of a utilitarian object (e.g., a chair), the object itself, and a standard dictionary definition of that object, that these analytic investigations eventually led to the evacuation of the literal/physical object from the scene, in favor of the linguistic proposition.

Steinbach: Well, following this period, I began to reflect specifically about the exclusion of everyday objects in the activity of most conceptual art. Also, I was questioning the meaning of the theoretical idea of "object" as a paradigm in Minimal Art.

Decter: Returning to the question of desire, it might be suggested that desire is constructed through the intersection of subjectivity and things, phenomena, in the outside world — a relationship that was somehow repressed within most conceptual and minimalist programs or modes of art making, wherein the "signs" of subjectivity were evacuated, canceled, in favor of a kind of mechanistic relationship to the material world, or an analytically philosophical "self-objectification."
What seems to characterize the question of desire in your work as it concerns a general condition of ambivalence suggests a kind of interdependence between "subjectivity" (as expressed through "personal" choice) and the utterly predetermined framework of ready-made objects within which such personal selections are made. What seems to precede ambivalence is a question of subjective investment in the ability to select, to choose from a realm of things, yet the range of "freedom" that exists is somehow predetermined, preordained according to a particular number of possibilities.

Steinbach: This relates to your notion of the "contemporary past"; that is, the minute something is made, it becomes part of the past and yet it becomes immediately contemporary with everything else, be it from the present or the past. The reality of any context is understood as a relationship of various elements, objects, visual stimuli that determine the character of a specific environment. This is the condition that characterizes the "contemporary present," the place where I work.
So then the question becomes: Where is my desire? Where is my subjectivity? It is in this place. But where is this place? It is my studio. But my studio is a place in which I live; it is not separated from my overall environment — it is part of this general context. The studio is everywhere. "Freedom" is always relative; it can never be taken for granted and, ultimately, it is always a steal from the "prison house of language," to use Jameson's term. This is so whether you paint a painting, sculpt a sculpture, or select objects from an already given context of availability.

Part 2

Joshua Decter: What is your relationship to the imagination, or what has been referred to as the "life of the imagination"?

Haim Steinbach: The imagination, the "life of the imagination" and desire, are elements of a shifting relationship with one's subjectivity. It is a relationship that continues to relocate itself from one situation to another. After exposure to certain philosophical readings, the minimal-conceptual paradigms became very attractive to me as models that could be applied. But take this idea from another angle. We've had some discussion about the viewer's relationship to the art object. Specifically, where is the desire located. Is it located within the object that has been invested with the particular subjectivity of its maker? Or somewhere in between the producer and the object? Or is this subjectivity communicated now by models other than those characterized by conventional notions of visual art? In this century, we have developed new technologies — such as aviation, television, telephone communication, computers, etc. — that may no longer communicate or connote a desire. Where is the desire located in these technologies? We are no longer talking about hand-made objects built laboriously in someone's little shop that communicate to us as part of our everyday reality. Rather, these technological things have been manufactured on a mass scale, and communicate to us on an electronic basis. Does this mean that we have any less desire? Or is this desire somehow less sincere?

Decter: Communication, of course, is based upon structures and systems of language. And your work articulates a specific visual language construct. Furthermore, this visual art language is also, on more generalized terms, a cultural language. It signifies certain larger cultural values, tendencies, phenomena, etc. Do you conceive of your works as units of communication which are injected into the general cultural situation? Can reception be controlled, beyond your desire to create a certain effect? Do you conceive of your work as a vehicle of communication?

Steinbach: All objects are "packaged" to deliver certain meanings. And desire packages everything. When we dress, we package ourselves, our bodies. Every thing and object has a skin through which it speaks. We live in a world, and there are objects in this world. We have feelings about these objects — we project into them, and communicate through them. There is a ritual relationship to these objects that occurs on a daily basis. In primitive societies, objects may be found on the ground, literally, strewn about the place as in a "natural" state. But in our advanced

industrial Western society, objects are found on consoles, on tables, on countertops. These counters and tables are vehicles of presentation; they are objects, they have functions, but they also have skins, histories . . . Something happens when you put an object on one of those support structures.

Decter: But many mass-produced objects are already designed to function in relation to a pre-determined support structure.

Steinbach: A box of detergent is made to go into a cabinet (which is a type of support structure), or is placed upon a washing machine (a type of minimalist support structure) when it performs its function.

Decter: Well, this is a common ritual of functionality.

Steinbach: Yes, but when this is brought into the living room as art, something else happens.

Decter: Is your method of art making designed to evoke the most commonplace situation or context?

Steinbach: I am not interested in using art to evoke the psycho-drama of the laundry room, for instance. I do not think that my work evokes the psychological space, or the historical memory, of a particular everyday situation; rather, my re-configured objects may evoke other possible cultural and psychological associations. So, in some sense, the work is not about denoting a specific memory, but rather suggests other aesthetic, cultural and social evocations and associations concerning the conditions of specific objects in the world. For instance, the design of specific commodities, and the language-games connected to such designs, generate a variety of meanings and significations. For example, the word "bold" that appears on the BOLD laundry detergent box signifies a range of things, not merely the utilitarian activity of laundering.

Decter: And so, you are suggesting a move beyond denotation in something else . . .

Steinbach: Yes, whatever is evoked, is not fixed to a particular experience or a specific place. Evocation travels like images do in dreams, from one place to another. In other words, one might find a familiar image or object within the domain of dreaming, but it may appear in strange surroundings — that is, de-contextualized. Likewise, desire travels from one person to the next, from one context to the next, always dislocated from its origin, even if we seek to relocate that origin of desire.

Decter: In terms of the organization of a subjective archaeology of cultural artifacts, where does the notion of imitation enter in — if at all?

Steinbach: I think imitation, as a concept, does have a role in the construction of desire. I really believe that we imitate by nature, but we develop modes of imitation based upon subjectivity — i.e., different experiences, different relationships to language codes, etc. I am very aware of this question of the relationship of imitation to desire, having reflected upon whether desires people have are in fact imitations of other people's desires.

Decter: Are you repeating — or imitating — the consumer logic of commodity culture? Or is it necessary to insist upon some binary division between criticism of or complicity with the "system"?

Steinbach: Well, when my work emerged on the scene, for instance in the show at Cable Gallery, this is what people focused upon, because this was the language I had selected for this specific exhibition. Yet, my somewhat earlier pieces were not mass produced, but these works were not brought into the discussion. Returning to your point about criticality, everyone assumes a critical relationship to things, whether they are on the Right or Left. And when you confront people with the everyday, they panic. They say, "This is just a mimicry of our world, the one that we hate so much, the one that we see at every turn." It seems as if there is a massive outcry, on both the Right and the Left, to go back to primordial times — back to a time when there were objects invested with some sort of Utopian reality. My work is not about some sort of Marxist Utopia, nor is it about some kind of puritanical or psychological utopia. In my work, unlike Mr. Koons, I am taking real objects out of our world — I don't make them, I don't have someone fabricate them, I don't put a little signature on them, I don't paint them, I don't place them upside down, I don't lick them, and I don't put my feces on these objects. They're just objects — you can lift them off the shelf, throw them on the floor, re-arrange them, or even put other objects on the shelf.

Decter: But you really can't . . .

Steinbach: You can! I say to someone: this is how I have placed these objects, and here are the instructions. But that person responds by saying: hey, it's in my house, and I can move them. My pieces are already predicated upon the fact that they are moveable, changeable. They can be played with. If an owner doesn't want to look at one of my pieces anymore, that person can remove the objects from the shelf, and place each component in a box for storage. In this way, the collector is already participating in this type of ritual. When my works exist in someone's house, they are not protected and encased — they collect dust, they have to be cleaned, etc. There is an inevitable daily physical interaction with these objects.

Decter: But when we reflect upon other cultural contexts, for instance the situation in Russia wherein radically inflated food prices make eating a rare event, we notice that commodities begin to assume an almost sacred status for people continuously deprived of consumer satisfactions — they stare at food and commodity products as if they were holy relics behind glass.

Steinbach: A related phenomenon occurs when my work is placed within a privileged cultural context. If it goes into a museum, you will not be permitted to touch it. But if it exists in someone's home, then that condition of separation or detachment is removed. When something becomes rarified, as in your description of what is occurring in a place like Russia now, then that rarefied thing becomes an incredibly powerful object of desire. It could be the simplest thing. I grew up in Israel, and once my grandmother returned from a trip to the United States with a box of Chicklets gum, and I did not want to open it — it had such a beautiful box. The best designed gum box I had ever seen; there was a domestic gum available in Israel but the wrapping wasn't as nice. The Chicklets box was an incredible object because I knew that they were not available on the Israeli market. But when I moved to the United States, such things became an ordinary part of life, and it no longer assumed the same status as an object of desire that it once had for me — but a desire of a certain kind, rarified and capitalized upon.

Decter: Based upon this brief autobiographical narrative, it seems that the question of your cultural position at different points in your life has been a crucial factor in terms of how you relate to the specific vernacular of a society . . .

Steinbach: Yes, my cultural experiences have been radically different, and my adjustments have been very slow.

Decter: But your work seems to indicate that you are still fascinated with — or caught in a state of wonder about — these cultural artifacts; a deep fascination prevails.

Steinbach: I'm fascinated and seduced by everything. Including ugly, kitschy things that people tend to reject. And this dynamic cannot simply be reduced to the logic of commodity culture, but rather has to do with a subjective relationship to the "otherness" of things — and the tension of desire that occurs when you seek that "other." That's where the excitement and tension is, and that's what I want to crack open and understand. That has been my project from the start — it's about rituals of investment. And this is an experience which is not limited to elitist cultures, elitist institutions or high art — it is a universal experience of how objects and artifacts are organized in the world.

Decter: There seems to be a consistent binary logic established in each of your works, so that the shelf unit might be considered to function as a dividing line between the overt display of artifacts on the one hand, and that which is absent, repressed, or invisible on the other. Perhaps there is a distinction created between the material evidence of desire (the displayed objects) and a domain of sublimation . . .

Steinbach: I like this idea. And if this is one way to talk about the work, in terms of a dialogue between repression and overt de-sublimation, I think this may begin to explain the type of reactions I have been getting about my work. To this day, I receive incredibly nasty, dismissive reviews — and I also receive insightful ones. This has been going on for six years, since my work was first noticed. I often think about the unevenness of response to my work, and I guess that if the work suggests a paradoxical condition between repression and de-sublimation, this apparent contradiction may offend some people.

Decter: Perhaps what really troubles certain people is that your work seems to signal a radical immersion into — or embrace of — the so-called "real" world of objects and things. It virtually relinquishes an "artfulness" of the art tradition, and becomes an index of your fascination. In a sense, your work might strike some as being about a condition of purely "expressed" desire — make material.

Steinbach: Well, then, the big question emerges: where is the authority of the artist? Where is the statement? Somehow, I think that what my work is saying, and how it is operating, does not fit into a traditional art world framework, wherein the artist recognizes his activity and production as being completely different from other activities in the world — and this claim of difference or separation produces a kind of psychological high. Perhaps my work punctures that high that is traditionally associated with the freedom artistic production. At the same time, I believe that there is a poetics in my work. It may be a new poetics that has to do with activities that both you and I engage in when we return home, and make decisions to arrange the flowers in a certain way. At that moment, one experiences a sense of satisfaction — but this is a common, universal experience. And that's different than art — or at least that's what certain people claim.

Decter: But, is that what you're also claiming?

Steinbach: I'm saying that it's that same.

Decter: Are you really claiming that the common experience described above and the experience of art are the same? Because if that's what you're claiming, than it might be extrapolated that there is no substantial difference between one of your pieces and a section of a supermarket aisle, for example.

Steinbach: Of course it's not the same, but there has been criticism of my work from certain individuals who claim that my practice is, in fact, not distinguishable from interior design. They might suggest that my work indicates a very good sense of interior design but that it is not essentially different from interior design — it's not complex, like art is supposed to be. And the same individuals might bring up a reference to the "social implications" of my work, but would really never be able to thoroughly examine those implications. There are many, though. For instance, the way in which we perceive our everyday environment — and the objects populating this environment. You may be reading a book one day, and suddenly notice, out of the corner of your eye, a specific arrangement of objects in a part of the room that may have been there for months or years, but for some unknown reason it has only now caught your attention. And this reaction, I would suggest, is quite complex in terms of its implications. There is also something rather arbitrary about our relationship to the cultural environment.

Decter: But there are only a certain number of options or choices that are available to us in any given context, and therefore an horizon of experience which can occur . . .

Steinbach: There are controls and limitations, as with anyone — and I clearly define these in my practice. For instance, when I make a shelf with two colors, this is an absolute condition that arises from making specific choices out of a wide range of possible relationships. And these selections are made in relation to the pre-determined set of possible color schemes which exist for a particular product that exists in the marketplace. So there is always a controlled relationship between my design of the shelf unit, and the pre-determined condition of the product's object-design; and the packaging of the commodity is always changing in terms of design, and this is a condition which exists beyond my direct control as a consumer.