NOT A READYMIDE

Just like all of us, Haim Steinbach has been choosing and arranging objects for his entire life. Just like the rest of us, he places the sugar jar next to the coffee machine. However, he also makes sculptures that interfere with the order of things. Here, he talks about why his objects are not “readymades” with Anthony Huberman, from The Artist’s Institute, which is dedicating its current season to Steinbach.
Now the question is why is it in the right place, why are we in the right place, we are comfortable, and we can ignore it. Of existence and communication within a socialized, cultural 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.

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?

Well, 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.

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 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.

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

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
From top-left –


it is III-1, 2008. Courtesy: Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York


Untitled (emergency sign, shot glasses, dog chews), 2009. Courtesy: Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York


Untitled (dance; candle holders; dog chews), 2011. Courtesy: Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo: Jean Vong


Opposite, bottom-left – Gate Valve, 2011. Courtesy: Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris

Opposite, bottom-right – Prototype for a Gate Valve, 2011. Courtesy: Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris
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.

BS: 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?

BS: 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 “readymades” had to be defined and validated within the historical hierarchy.

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

BS: 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 choose something.

BS: Objects are part of language, just as words are. What is it that you construct with them. Objects are more than words because they are more specific and completely embodied, with social 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?

BS: 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 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 readymade, 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.

BS: 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

AH: Tendiamo a pensare a un readymade come a un singolo oggetto, e perciò la tua idea di un oggetto che si trova in una comunità di oggetti cade leggermente al di fuori della tradizione duchampiana.

BS: Sono stato criticato proprio per questo. Sono stato accusato di aver tradito Duchamp.

AH: Di averlo tradito? È questo che pensi di farlo?

BS: A questo punto “readymade” è un’espressione ideologica. Quando Duchamp chiamò la sua opera un “readymade”, voleva dire che era qualcosa che era già stato fatto, una sorta di funzione prodotta in massa a livelli industriali che non aveva creato in prima persona. Esisteva già nel mondo, era un oggetto fra gli oggetti. Non c’era nulla di straordinario in questo. Se mai, ci ricordava che lo scabolottaggio era straordinario quanto la Gioconda. Stava infrangendo le gerarchie di giudizio estetico. Era un attacco all’establishment, a tutti i valori dell’arte. Stava aprendo la porta alla visione dicendo che la visione è selettiva, una gerarchia strutturale politico-sociale. Anche quando Duchamp morì nel 1968, l’ortinatoio veniva ancora considerato una specie di scherzo. Ma d’altra parte, quando Duchamp è stato innalzato all’onore degli altari è diventato un dio come Marx, Einstein e Freud, o un qualsiasi visionario radicale. La sua opera è stata studiata e lui è stato preso molto sul serio. Il “readymade” divenne definito e convalidato all’interno della gerarchia storica.

AH: E così ha perso la propria forza come attacco ai giudizi estetici.


BS: Gli oggetti fanno parte del linguaggio, proprio come le parole. La domanda è se ci costruiamo. Gli oggetti vanno oltre le parole perché sono più specifici e completamente incarnati, hanno strutture di rappresentazione, stile, forma e cultura. Un oggetto è realmente l’incarnazione di un mondo. Se ogni oggetto è un mondo in se stesso, allora si può costruire un messaggio o una storia significativi con un gruppo di oggetti.

AH: E l’idea di collocare gli oggetti in fila sugli scaffali deriva da questa linea di pensiero?

BS: Sì, a un livello molto basilare si, è quello che ho cominciato a fare a metà degli anni ‘70. Alla fine degli anni ‘70, feci installazioni in cui disponevo gli oggetti in modo normativo: non li attaccavo insieme. Non aggiungevano vernice. Li mettevo sugli scaffali come parole in una frase o note su una partitura musicale. Il linguaggio della collocazione, il linguaggio della disposizione. Una volta che si dovessero fare cose della stessa natura, ognuno degli oggetti in casa, in bagno, in cucina eccetera.

AH: Ciò introduce anche l’esecuzione, l’idea che questi oggetti sono “messi in gioco” come dicevi tu. Nello stesso modo in cui Roland Barthes, nello stesso periodo, parla di una frase come parola messa in gioco. È un concetto diverso da quello del readymade, che si riferisce a un oggetto che abita

MOUSE 36 ~ 100 YEARS OF READYMADE

194
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 “readymade” 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 simplicity, “readymades” actually present themselves 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.

BS: It’s giving the object its own voice. When you take a urinal, sign it “R. Mutt,” place it on a pedestal, 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, it is meant to be interacted with 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 is 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.

BS: 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?

BS: 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 a 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.

AH: Going back to having authority or agency over objects, you already brought up how Duchamp would title his works as one way he exercised agency or control over them. Could you talk a bit about the way you think about titling?

BS: 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. It’s made of plastic and it doesn’t look like a toilet brush because it was designed to look like 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 “readymade” 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 simplicity, “readymades” actually present themselves 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.

BS: It’s giving the object its own voice. When you take a urinal, sign it “R. Mutt,” place it on a pedestal, 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, it is meant to be interacted with 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 is 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.

BS: 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?

BS: 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 a 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.

AH: Going back to having authority or agency over objects, you already brought up how Duchamp would title his works as one way he exercised agency or control over them. Could you talk a bit about the way you think about titling?

BS: 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. It’s made of plastic and it 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 bookstores. 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.

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

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

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

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

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.

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.

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 arrangement. What if someone decided to switch their order? What if a collector who owned one of your works decided to change the placement?

My work is indeed vulnerable in that way. It always is vulnerable to that joke: “You can move it, it doesn’t matter, it’s a Steinbach.” 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 ash tray 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 ash tray to the guest.

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

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?

Like in the case of the kong, to turn power over to objects. But all that matters to you, right? It changes the song, so to speak.

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.

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

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

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

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

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.

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.

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 arrangement. What if someone decided to switch their order? What if a collector who owned one of your works decided to change the placement?

My work is indeed vulnerable in that way. It always is vulnerable to that joke: “You can move it, it doesn’t matter, it’s a Steinbach.” 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 ash tray 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 ash tray to the guest.

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

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?