

**T**oday, we should be thinking about the artist Haim Steinbach (b. 1944, Rehovot, Israel).

Most mornings, we wake up at home. We get out of bed, get a towel, and head to the shower. We choose clothes and shoes to wear and use the hairbrush that's always next to the mirror. We make sure the kids are up and sip coffee while packing their favorite lunchboxes. We tell Suzy to finish her juice and to put away the toys she left on the table. Sometimes, there's a brightly colored note on the fridge, with reminders about errands to run. We grab keys, wallet, phone, bag, and head out the door. We're usually running late.

For Haim Steinbach, everything begins with the home—its rules, grammar, habits, furniture, and people. His work involves the available objects that already live there. He selects them, arranges them, and puts them back into play.

Steinbach immigrated to New York from Israel in 1957, at the age of thirteen. By 1973, his grid-based paintings involved a mathematical system that determined the size and placement of bright bars of color. In 1976, he replaced canvas with particleboard and paint with linoleum. In 1980, he began making bricolage shelves, with one object usually placed on top. The triangulated wedge shelf first appeared in 1984.

If minimalism had been preaching the virtues of seriality, repetition, and non-hierarchy, Steinbach brought those terms into the everyday—into kitchens, playpens, and bedrooms. He traded in *less is more* for **MORE OR LESS.**

The shelf is a device. An instrument. To use it, Steinbach has invented a system that allocates space to objects, the way language allocates space to words. Each sculpture contains its own anthropology, geometry, and rhythm. It doesn't spell out metaphors as much as metonyms: it doesn't represent, but presents a series of specific objects. Ceramics rubs against plastic veneers, solid reds, and blacks. There is no script, nothing pretends, and everything is as it is. Pitcher. Pitcher. *Bold. Bold. Bold.*

Beep,  
honk,  
toot.

To select and arrange lies at the root of how all language works: phrases are formed by selected and sequenced words — a selection and arrangement that entirely determines the difference between sense and nonsense. Changing the order of things changes everything.

Like words, no object is ever alone. It co-exists with what it's placed near or next to. It co-exists with its own silent community of past contexts and past associations. It co-exists with the lives and affections of those who collect it.

René Girard once noted that our most personal desires, obsessions, and fetishes are always imitations of desires, obsessions, and fetishes that already exist. Advertisers figured this out long ago, and it's made them very rich. Steinbach's interest in objects is about the collective social rituals we are all enmeshed in, as well as the singular subjectivities they portray.

Duchamp was famously interested in disinterest—he claimed to not be attached to any of his readymades, but only to radicalize their ontologies by changing their contexts. Steinbach is attracted to attraction—he recontextualizes existing objects because of their appeal, their memories, the addictions they might satisfy, and what all that says about us. He says it best himself: *an object is an object, not a ‘readymade.’*

And just in case there is still any lingering confusion: Haim Steinbach's work has nothing to do with shopping malls.

No, these objects are not pieces of merchandise, nor are they cold simulations of a commodity-driven consumerist culture. And no, Steinbach is not complicit with the logic of late capitalism—or whatever *October* thinks. Instead, remember that *everyone* collects. For Steinbach, objects are connected to people, not to capital. Whether it's a lava lamp or a dog chew—we all surround ourselves with objects and put them in order. The order of these things matters quite a lot.

So are objects people? Maybe. Maybe not. One thing is clear: we aren't the only ones who live busy social lives. Objects get rejected and abused, but also repaired and rejuvenated—their moods and temperaments change. There are the bullies, the nerds, the dandies, the punks, the hippies, the snobs, the squares, the playboys. Steinbach's objects are no different from the rest of us: their moods depend on whose company they find themselves in.

In summary, let's say you own a tuba. You play some notes and make a song. All of those notes have existed before, played by other tuba-players, who combined them with other notes, in different songs—some of which might have evoked fears, while others led to tears. As you play them now, they could sound nervous or lazy or funny. They don't literally tell a story, but they add up to a tune that has a distinct spirit, taste, and sensibility. And if you don't own a tuba, go buy one.

The fifth season at The Artist's Institute,  
with Haim Steinbach, runs from August  
31st, 2012 to January 20th, 2013.