

Two Chairs, located in an “old-school” apartment in Yorkville, in Manhattan, positions two cultural producers in dialogue via their production.

mice: Haim Steinbach and Julia Weist

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~~Appropriation and ready-made~~ are terms that this small exhibition deliberately avoids. What is presented here is a layering of intentions that stress the confines of art production and art history prompting other ways of presenting and thinking about a work of art. In dialogue with each other, these two works by Steinbach and Weist inform thought surrounding audience and reception, interpretation and misinterpretation.

Haunting this project is Michel de Certeau’s 1974 work *The Practice of Everyday Life*; a contribution to the field of Cultural Studies in relation to the everyday that focuses attention from producer onto consumer, reader and audience. De Certeau recalls an experience visiting a particular regional museum in Vermont; he imagines past users and past communities through the museum’s intricate fabrication of a lived reality revealed in the arrangement of objects on display, in that moment crystallizing his thinking about proverbs and popular language; like objects, meaning in language is contingent not only on context and history but also on the “marks” left by use.:

“Was it fate? I remember the marvelous Shelburne Museumⁱ in Vermont where, in thirty-five houses of a reconstructed village, all the signs, tools, and products of nineteenth-century everyday life teem; everything, from cooking utensils and pharmaceutical goods to weaving instruments, toilet articles, and children’s toys can be found in profusion. The display includes innumerable familiar objects, polished, deformed, or made more beautiful by long use; everywhere there are as well the marks of the active hands and laboring or patient bodies for which these things composed the daily circuits, the fascinating presence of absences whose traces were everywhere. At least this village full of abandoned and salvaged objects drew one’s attention, through them, to the ordered murmurs of a hundred past or possible villages, and by means of these imbricated traces one began to dream of countless combinations of existences. Like tools, proverbs (and other discourses) are *marked by* uses; they offer to analysis the *imprints of acts* or of processes of enunciation; they signify the *operations* whose object they have been, operations which are relative to situations and which can be thought of as the conjunctural *modalizations* of statements or of practices; more generally, they thus indicate a social *historicity* in which systems of representations or processes of fabrication no longer appear as normative frameworks but also *as tools manipulated by users.*”ⁱⁱ Michel de Certeau

Part 1

De Certeau’s passage is engaging because it not only establishes language as object (Conceptual artists like Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner illustrated an equivalency between language and objects-within an art context-almost a decade prior to de Certeau’s observation) but also, as a tool defined by users and contexts.

Steinbach uses found phrases, as in the work *and to think it all started with a mouse* (2008) in two ways—as single works or as titles for an arrangement of objects on a shelf. He states: “the title itself is a found object like the other objects” thereby physically embodying this equivalence in his work as in Conceptual art. But like de Certeau, Steinbach has shifted this discourse to include objects and phrases from popular culture that people confront or even “use” daily—making no distinction between the artisanally crafted or mass-produced. Moreover Steinbach reverses the conceptual sequence of language to object as he renders objects *as* language:

“Objects are part of language, just as words are. The question is what you construct with them.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And also unlike the Conceptualists, Steinbach permits the *personal* in his work:

“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.”^{iv}

Steinbach’s work is a sort of acknowledgment—as well as an inversion of—de Certeau’s observation. While Steinbach has acknowledged the social and personal bonds embedded in the collection of objects and phrases within the fabric of his life and everyday life in general, they are nevertheless removed from whatever personal, social or historical context they occupied at the moment they enter his work as arranged material with the museum or gallery as context. New social relationships are then formed between objects, their surroundings, and ultimately the viewer. Steinbach’s purpose shares a kinship with de Certeau in their mutual embrace of the everyday. It is only through this process of decontextualisation that Steinbach’s arrangements remind the viewer of all those things and moments lost or ignored in the monotonous, constantly moving spectacle of imagery and objects that constitute our lived experience:

“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.”^v

De Certeau’s eureka moment was made possible through the careful reconstruction and arrangement of architectural structures and objects from past centuries at Shelburne. Steinbach’s work is weighted with the impossibility of a retrospective view on the present—time periods are mixed together and the present remains an elusive concept.

Part 2

Just as I am a fan of Michel de Certeau, and Thomas Hirschhorn proclaims he is a Gramsci fan,^{vi} I would argue that Julia Weist is a Haim Steinbach fan. Weist's work, *After Steinbach, About Steinbach, With Steinbach*, is art as fan production; artist as "fan."

Weist's activity as an "artist/fan" adheres to the definition of fans proposed by cultural theorist Henry Jenkins: "fans as consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate."^{vii} Jenkins definition is dependent upon his reading of Michel de Certeau:

"For the fan, reading becomes a kind of play, responsive only to its own loosely structured rules and generating its own kinds of pleasure. Michel de Certeau has characterized this type of reading as "poaching," an impertinent "raid" on the literary "preserve" that takes away only those things that seem useful or pleasurable to the reader: "Far from being writers...readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves."^{viii} De Certeau perceives popular reading as a series of "advances and retreats, tactics and games played with the text" (p.175), as a kind of cultural bricolage through which readers fragment texts and reassemble the broken shards according to their own blueprint, salvaging bits and pieces of found material in making sense of their own social experience. Far from viewing consumption as imposing meanings upon the public, de Certeau suggests consumption involves reclaiming textual material, "making it one's own, appropriating or reappropriating it" (p.166).^{ix}

For Julia Weist *After Steinbach, About Steinbach, With Steinbach* began with a memory prompted by viewing Steinbach's work—and to think it all started with a mouse—on ARTstor:

"The artist catches her breath. When she first saw the piece she had a vivid memory of playing a game on her family's first generation Macintosh computer. Clicking the mouse dropped a person dangling from a moving helicopter. To this day she could still remember missing the hay bale and cart, plunging the small figure to his death."^x

This prompted Weist's research into the origins of Steinbach's *and to think it all started with a mouse* that resulted in a random reference to Disney, no references to Apple Inc. and no conclusive evidence that Steinbach privileged one reference over another—a result that surely would please Steinbach. She was convinced, however, that Steinbach was pointing to Disney and may have unintentionally pointed to Apple Inc. She was mistaken—Steinbach was of course fully aware of the double meaning embedded in his work. When this became clear, Weist took her research and work in a different direction. She decided to tamper with the reception of Steinbach's *and to think it all started with a mouse*—to weight the virtual world with references to Disney; thereby falsely staking out new territory by asserting her own authorship as originator of readings of Steinbach's piece related to Apple Inc.

"This ability to transform personal reaction into social interaction, spectatorial culture into participatory culture, is one of the central characteristics of fandom."^{xi}

Weist's project begins and ends with the internet and its ubiquitous screens. The residual objects—the sentence on the wall de-italicizing the Apple Computers font thus rendering it as it appeared iconically in many early ads and Weist's accompanying artist book function not so much as objects in and of themselves but more like traces of her investigation:

“Modern networks privilege widely distributed corroborative information. Those exponential and rhizomatic distribution models are potentially problematic when applied to the ‘meaning’ of cultural works. The value this project ultimately offers is the ability to discuss this critically alongside an active model of the system at work.”^{xii}

Once again the world is flat.^{xiii}

ⁱ The Shelburne Museum in Vermont was founded by Electra Havemeyer Webb, collector, ambulance driver during WW1 in NYC and daughter of sugar refining tycoon Henry Osborne Havemeyer—she may have been the first hoarder on a grand scale—her preoccupation was Americana—a collecting impulse largely derided by her family who collected European masterpieces of Impressionist art. The Shelburne Museum boasts a collection that includes many houses—dating from the 19th century or earlier—relocated by Electra to Shelburne.

ⁱⁱ M de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkley, 1984, p. 21.

ⁱⁱⁱ H Steinbach and A Huberman, “Not a Readymade” (a conversation), *Once again the world is flat.*, exhibition catalogue, CCS Bard Hessel Museum, Annandale-on-Hudson, 2013, P. 75.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, P. 78.

^v *Ibid.*, P. 73.

^{vi} T Hirschhorn, *Gramsci Monument: A Work in Public Space* by Thomas Hirschhorn, Produced by DIA Art Foundation, Located at Forest Houses, Bronx, NY Summer 2013, exhibition poster.

^{vii} H Jenkins, "'Strangers No More, We Sing': Filking and the Social Construction of the Science Fiction Fan Community." *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. Ed. Lisa A. Lewis. London; Routledge, New York, 1992. P. 208.

^{viii} M de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkley, 1984, p. 174.

^{ix} H Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, NYU Press, New York, 2006, P. 32-33.

^x J Weist, *After Steinbach/About Steinbach/With Steinbach*, Print, New York, 2014, P. 4.

^{xi} H Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, NYU Press, New York, 2006, P. 33.

^{xii} J Weist, *After Steinbach/About Steinbach/With Steinbach*, Print, New York, 2014, P. 19.

^{xiii} From title of exhibition: *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.