

Magic in the web of it

Alex J. Taylor

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, it is an inanimate object - a white handkerchief embroidered with red strawberries – that seems to propel the play's narrative. More than a prop or even just a symbol, this humble square of cloth is imbued with all of the agency of a human character. Appropriately enough for its etymology, Desdemona's handkerchief is handled by almost every character in the drama, its passage from one character to another creating a complex web of social relations as it is lost and found, stolen and gifted. 'There's magic in the web of it,' explains the Othello of the object, as though the relationships of Shakespeare's saga are woven into its very warp and weft.¹

The folded handkerchiefs concealed in Haim Steinbach's 1993 wall-mounted constructions might not weave quite so dramatic a tale, but they do retain something of the object's metonymic power for human presence. In these works, first exhibited at the Sonnabend Gallery, shallow plywood boxes faced in white hung on the wall. Each box features a small concealed drawer, visible as a u-shaped cut on the lower edge of the unit. And inside each drawer, a folded white handkerchief features an embroidered name, such as Bess and Hector (the artist's cats) and Adi (the nickname of physicist Adolf Abrahamson, a friend of the artist's parents). Steinbach's characteristic materials are all here, but the demonstrative juxtapositions of his shelves from the mid-to-late 1980s make way, in the early 1990s, for a group of works with a more introspective, even transcendental air.

The quietude of these works only heightens, I think, the sense of social encounter that Steinbach elicits through his object displays. Where his wedge-shaped shelves stage a kind of conversation through the combination and juxtaposition of objects and ask the beholder to engage in this dialogue, the invitation to open these drawers provides a more explicitly haptic enticement, ordinarily so taboo in the gallery setting. The folded handkerchiefs acquire an unmistakable preciousness, displayed as they are like the sacred artifacts of some obscure ritual. Opening a drawer might be an entirely everyday sensation, but in Steinbach's hands the gesture is infused with all the mythic power of the white square, and the sacralizing effects of the white cube.

Although he only recognized it later, Steinbach's use of the handkerchief also holds some personal significance. In October 1938, his father Itzhack was deported from Berlin to the Zbaszyn refugee camp just over the Polish border. One of the few possessions he kept from this time was a polka dot handkerchief embroidered with his nickname. 'Over the years the handkerchief had little life of its own,' the artist recalls. 'But on a rare occasion my father would bring it out of its hiding place.'² The object was burdened with his father's memories of exile, but it also holds visible traces of his web of relationships in the camp. Once unfolded, the cloth bears a dozen or so handwritten messages, in several different hands, that appear to describe an escape plot. The details are unclear, but these messages confirm this object to not just have

witnessed the traumas wrought by Nazi Germany, but played its own part, however modest, in the forms of collectivity and resistance it inspired.

The handkerchief that Steinbach eventually inherited from his late father is a powerful, moving thing. But the plainer handkerchiefs in his works from the early 1990s also contain something of its sense of human presence, even historical memory, in their material form. The capacity for objects to speak of histories beyond the limits of their objecthood is essential to Steinbach's practice. As critic Germano Celant observed in a 1987 essay, his works render objects as nothing less than 'repositories of social epics... registers of the layers of time, of the lives of the people through whose hands they pass, people themselves passing from infancy to maturity to old age.'³ The names on Steinbach's handkerchiefs might gesture towards personal relations, but they do so in order to engage more expansive networks of human connectedness.

Consider the stacks of towels from European hotels for his *Untitled (table with towels, bone, pacifier)* 1993, made for an exhibition titled 'Das Fremde/Der Gast' (The Foreigner/The Guest) in Linz, Austria. For this work, Steinbach had the exhibition organizers request embroidered towels from local hotels, in so doing, turning their embroidered names from identifications of ownership to expressions of generosity. The presence of these names also strangely signal the towel's communal use by so many nameless guests, even while still somehow transforming generic, used objects into something that a guest might even take as a memento. Displayed on Steinbach's tomb-like crate of pine and MDF, these towels seem to stand in for the unnamed bodies with which we endlessly come into contact – even more self-consciously so in this present moment of social distancing. Again, Steinbach uses small drawers to implicate our own bodily gestures in such contacts, and even if the work's hidden bone is, in fact, a bone-shaped pet chew, functionally equivalent to the infant's pacifier with which it is paired, the result is still a kind of vernacular vanitas that traces our journey from the cradle to the grave.

These are the kind of complex, compound and often contradictory chains of social relation that Steinbach's objects set into motion. These towels and handkerchiefs might bear embroidered names, but they can hardly be regarded as anything so simple as branded commodities – especially as they circulate beyond the conventional limits of the market economy, through gift or theft, or indeed once they are subject to the peculiar logics of the art world. Steinbach's works often grapple with competing systems of value, but here such dynamics seem subsumed by the sheer material economy of his objects, and the quiet simplicity of their display. The result strikes the kind of intimate, elegiac note that we also find in contemporary works by artists such as Félix Gonzàles-Torres and Robert Gober.⁴ Although seldom recognized at the time, Steinbach's works from the height of the AIDS crisis equally charged the blank forms of minimalism with a deep sense of mourning, effects that are only heightened upon the occasion of their re-presentation in the aftermath of 2020.

Perhaps we can understand all of Steinbach's still lives to have a memento mori quality, deploying material possessions to remind us of what we too will eventually leave behind. In the meantime, they still remain charged with all of the imaginative potential that makes objects exert such force in our inner lives. Even Marx could not help but indulge his own fantasy that raw wood seemed to come to life once it was turned into a table, an object he imagined 'stands on its head, and evolved out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas.'⁵ Some such phantasm seems to be at

work in Steinbach's *Display #28 (rustic wall with music box and candle snuffer)* 1991, not the least because one of its objects appears to be speaking. Although designated as a 'music box' in the work's list of materials, this is no mechanical heirloom but rather the battery-operated novelty known as the Blabbermouth, first launched in American stores as a radio in 1986, and then released as a cassette player the following year.⁶ Like the surreal love child of a Chattering Teeth toy and a minimalist sculpture, this oracular object's red plastic lips emerge from a blank face of white plastic (much as Steinbach's blank cabinets appear to have pushed through the gallery wall itself), and move 'in time to the words or music.'⁷

When first shown at Jay Gorney Modern Art in October 1991, Steinbach had the Blabbermouth mime a mixtape of popular Christmas tunes including *Oh Little Town of Bethlehem*, *Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and *White Christmas*.⁸ Steinbach's soundtrack thus usurped even the most aggressively early arrival of holiday music to Soho's retail landscape – only to present a discarded novelty gift several seasons out of date. In another of the work's shuttered niches, a small conical 'candle snuffer' is dislocated from the chamberstick to which it was once hooked, the widely reproduced eighteenth-century design that allowed light to be carried from room to room, like that used by Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. The cedar hog-pen siding of the wall also cultivates a ye olde effect, though more like a stage set than an actual barn or stable. The work's shutters have no windows to protect, a sensory refusal that is reiterated by their contents: a cryptic device to extinguish an absent candle paired with a mechanical mouth equally bereft of breath.

Both the objects in *Display #28 (rustic wall with music box and candle snuffer)* were taken from a Tuscan farmhouse rented for a summer holiday. As a photograph by the artist records, he found the Blabbermouth on the ledge of an arched window, its disembodied mouth almost appearing to speak for the stone farmhouse itself (the technology is, we should note, infinitely multilingual in its mimicry). Its placement further anthropomorphized the house's array of shuttered windows and doors, and the borders between inside and outside, public and private that Steinbach used the wall form to explore. Steinbach has explained that he connected his work's blind windows to the blacked-out panes of glass in Marcel Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* (1920), although the work's rustic tableau framing a bodily fragment might equally suggest his *Étant donnés* (1946-66). The construction roughly retains the architectural proportions recorded in his photograph, but translates its aesthetic into the American vernacular of clapboard siding, old fashioned but also unavoidably bright and new. 'Fresh once upon a time,' is the phrase Steinbach used, with a nod to Duchamp's punning precursor, to capture this paradox on the invitation card for the exhibition.⁹

And it is true: everything was new, once upon time. Steinbach's perception of the interdependence of nostalgia and newness destabilizes their slippery borders, and interrogates the forms of fabrication involved in memory and history. Steinbach had told curator Elisabeth Sussman in a 1988 interview that he was interested to 'understand the process by which humanity fabricates fictions of the past or present.'¹⁰ In the same interview, the artist follows up this statement by citing two dictionary definitions of the word 'artifact.' The first is straightforward, and shares the artist's obvious interest in the material world: 'Any object made by human work.' But the second definition is stranger, darker. An artifact is also, Steinbach explains, 'any structure of changed appearance produced artificially or by death.'¹¹ The latter

usage relates to radiology, but cited without reference to this specialist field, it also serves to cast an ambiguous shadow over the meaning of the objects that define his practice. Art, like all possessions, might belong to the everyday realm of lived experience, but in these works, Steinbach engages those forces that extend beyond the boundaries of the material world, and indeed beyond the limits of our own lives.

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¹ *Othello*, Act 3, Scene 4, Line 81

² Haim Steinbach, 'Handkerchief,' Unpublished object description, 2020

³ Germano Celant, 'Haim Steinbach's Wild, Wild, West,' *Artforum*, December 1987, 75.

⁴ Gober was a student of Steinbach's at Middlebury College in the mid-1970s, and their works appeared together in the important 1986 exhibition 'The New Sculpture: Robert Gober, Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach' at the Renaissance Society, University of Chicago.

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol 1., trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 163.

⁶ In November 1987, one newspaper gift guide illustrated the Blabbermouth alongside a Lava Lamp among that year's 'offbeat Christmas gifts.' See Kevin Chafee, 'There's off-the-wall gifts out there,' *The Desert Sun*, 30 November 1987, 1.

⁷ This was the description on the product's original packaging, smoothing over the technology's inability to differentiate between verbal and non-verbal sounds.

⁸ Along with the eminently Steinbachian track *My Favorite Things*, drawing out the wall's alpine *mise en scene*, these first two Christmas songs are named in Joshua Decter, 'New York in Review,' *Arts Magazine*, v. 66, no. 5, 1992, 80. Steinbach recalls that *White Christmas* was also played. Email to the author, 9 December 2020.

⁹ This text was itself a work, derived from another 'found' object with an Italian connection. The phrase comes from a magazine advertisement for Good Seasons Italian Dressing Mix. Detached from this context, the result is what Barthes might call a 'message without a code,' to quote from his own famous account of the semiotics of 'Italianicity' in advertising. See Roland Barthes, 'The Rhetoric of the Image', *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 32.

¹⁰ Haim Steinbach quoted in *The Binational: American Art of the Late 1980s*, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 1988, 192.