

## “Found Statements”

Haim Steinbach’s work with language proposes that *reading* is an act of *seeing*, and even if this is not always, strictly speaking the case, the graphic codes which proliferate on our current media culture accustom us to word and image arriving in the same package. Steinbach is interested in the vernacular “saying”, the sort of speech that strikes us as both direct and shared, both common and readily understood. The promise of vernacular-in slogans, catch phrases, ad copy, figures of speech-makes communication seem effortless. Words become memorable, easy to repeat. If language here hits its target, it is because the vernacular “saying” is an expression of readerly consensus or fluency on matters of social relations as well as about particular cultural meanings. Steinbach queries this consensus, because for him, what we think we know about what we see, speaks to our understanding and misunderstanding of our place in the world, and about our levels of contentment and discontent within these relations and meanings.

Steinbach is a veteran collector of “objectified” short statements. When he comes across a colloquialism, a title, or a slogan that strikes him as intriguing or relevant to his work, he clips the text, conserving both the words and typeface, which is their visual presentation. By turning vernacular phrases into wall painting, drawing or print, Steinbach subverts the original context of the language he’s found and moves the words toward new identifications and associations. Just as Steinbach’s shelving of objects reminds viewers that display is an ideological enterprise, his wall paintings of vernacular text serve also to play with established codes of interpreting what is seen. Language in Steinbach’s work is both stable (the typeface remains the same, the words are verbatim) and flexible (the type size of the words changes according to the context of the display, and the words now refer to something else in addition to what they “used to mean”).

In his language works, when Steinbach conserves a phrase in his collection, it is an act of memory, of preserving a relation of language and community, thus his insistence on duplicating the typeface, the original look of the words. The work is a mediation of readily available, short hand forms of speech of today’s mass media world. By the beginning the 21<sup>st</sup> century the vernacular of the “saying” has expanded into new territories of communication. “Sayings” as an image of the printed word are employed as agents of desire, baits, callings, devices for getting attention and temptation plays. What Steinbach does with this found relation by rearranging it visually and conceptually (as image and referent) invites viewers to re-identify with the language before them. The challenge to the viewer is what to make of it.