Robert Gober
Jeff Koons
Haim Steinbach

The Renaissance Society
at the University of Chicago

May 7 - June 21, 1986
Acknowledgments

There are many people who deserve thanks for their assistance in organizing this exhibition. Primarily, we have relied on Gary Garrels for his professional curatorial expertise, and I would like to thank him for his insight, enthusiasm and the enormous amount of work which he put into the preparation of the exhibition and this catalogue. Gary in turn benefitted from the assistance of Richard Hobloch, Jerry Sutz and Christopher Wool, who deserve special mention and thanks for their counsel.

Throughout, many galleries and staffs generously provided valuable assistance — for the work of Robert Gober: Paula Cooper and Carol Caldwell at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; for the work of Jeff Koons: Liz Koury at International with Monument, New York; Daniel Weinberg at Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles, Hudson at Feature Gallery, Chicago, and Rhona Hoffman at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago; for the work of Haim Steinbach: Clarissa Dalrymple and Nicole Klagesbrun at Cable Gallery, New York, Jay Gorney at Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York, Hudson at Feature Gallery, Chicago, and Donald Young at Donald Young Gallery, Chicago. I am most grateful for their support.

The lenders listed in the catalogue deserve special recognition for their support of the artists, and for their generosity in sharing their works with us.

We are grateful to Michael Glass and Michael Glass Design of Chicago for the excellence and generosity in their design work on the catalogue and invitation, and to Word City for their careful work with the typesetting.

Special thanks go to the staff of The Renaissance Society: to John Dunn, Assistant Director and Education Coordinator, to Ann Billingsley, Development Coordinator, to Patricia Scott, bookkeeper and secretary, and to Sarah Kianovsky, and Gillian Ahlgren, gallery assistants. Their personal interest and professional dedication have greatly strengthened this exhibition.

As always, my deep appreciation and gratitude for their continued support and trust go to the Board of Directors of The Renaissance Society, who contribute so generously of their time, energy, expertise and resources.

This project has been funded in part by a generous grant from The Illinois Arts Council, an agency of the State, and we have a debt of gratitude to them for making this exhibition possible.

The artists have in every way given time and thought to this project. It has been a pleasure and source of insight to work with them and share in their commitment. It is with pride that The Society and its membership present this first museum showing in the Midwest of these important artists; we are grateful to have this opportunity.

Susanne Ghez, Director

New Sculpture

This exhibition called "New Sculpture" represents a significant shift in contemporary sculpture in the last five years toward the making of sculpture based on the ordinary object. The three sculptors presented here — Robert Gober, Jeff Koons, and Haim Steinbach — are among a number of artists working in this way, particularly in the United States and in England. Many of their counterparts, especially British sculptors such as Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow, and Edward Allington, transform objects of detritus — the refuse of broken and abandoned products of contemporary consumer society. Gober, Koons, and Steinbach instead take and make objects of pristine appearance, unbroken wholes. They look back equally to Duchamp, Johns, and to the Minimalists — particularly Judd and the idiosyncratic work of Artschwager. Their work thus extends a rather distinctive American preoccupation with the new. Similarly, the predominant experience of this work is immediate. While the sculptures are not intractable to interpretation, they are objects not to be parsed as a narrative sum but instead to be grasped primarily for their own completeness. These are sculptures whose history is immanent rather than salvaged.

The exhibition also merits a sub-title: "The Presentation of Objects from Everyday Life," an allusion to Erving Goffman's influential The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959) which opens an understanding of these sculptures as consciously and explicitly provoking reflection on the problematic nature of the self in contemporary society. These sculptures are portraits and alter-egos for maker and viewer alike. They recognize and distinguish roles for the individual in crossing between public and private selves, between the ego as a product of personal and social history and society as the sum of those understandings.

There is a continuum set down here with Gober and Steinbach anchoring the ends and Koons balanced in the middle. Gober's sculptures suggest a presence of self defined primarily as the summation of personal experience and perception. They are fabricated by hand — plaster worked over an armature of wire, lath, wood, and steel — and distanced from their industrial forebears by both form and surface. Gober's sculptures are often unabashedly anthropomorphetic; their titles often allude to emotional states and conditions of being — The Silly Sink, The Scary Sink, The Sink Inside of Me. Early sinks were portraits, loci of memories — porcelain sinks used by both of his grandmothers, an identical work sink installed by his father in a basement shop, and the broom sink from Gober's first studio, a storefront laundry in New York's East Village. The first sink was made when a close friend of Gober's was dying of AIDS, and in retrospect he recognized it in a procedure of cleansing. In Gober's sculpture, unconscious parts of the personality are allowed form.

"I try to push it to the point where I don't know what I'm doing, because that's what I trust the most. I trust my own experience with a piece."
Hopefully, the better the piece the more multiplicity of responses it will engender. But people are on the whole afraid to be bewildered in front of a work of art. But it's a prerequisite that good art demands, that you wonder 'what the hell is this?' and you're bewildered by it. People are afraid to enter that state, and so they come up really fast with reasons, equations for things."

The sinks are silent, their spigots removed, a pair of holes remaining. They are objects distanced from utilitarian purpose; they remain immuculate, alone, receptive to our impressions but enigmatic. They are affinities to the enduring pair of cast bronze, painted ale cans, Untitled (1960) by Jasper Johns — but here with greater allowance for the personal, the expressive, with more openness to subjective projection than in the stailwart icons of Johns. Still an intellectual rigor and logic of method supports these works, a consistency of development between pieces that also can be traced in Johns, Stella, and Judd.

Duchamp's Fountain (1917), a urinal tipped onto its side, also echoes as a precedent for these sculptures. But Gober again veers from its literalness, most immediately by constructing these works by hand. The focus of inquiry is existential rather than epistemological. The ordinary industrial artifact is used not to challenge the discourse of art but to suggest the irreconcilable problems of human identity — emotions and existence impervious to improvement. Changes of material culture cannot alter the humble status of humanity tied to birth, loneliness, love and death.

Steinbach's sculptures would seem to be the more direct descendents of the first 'ready-made,' Duchamp's Bottle Rack (1913). Unaltered objects, plucked directly from mass produced commercial stock, are presented in the context of art, supplied by Steinbach as sleek minimal wedges, referencing the sculpture of Judd and Artschwager. And like Duchamp, Steinbach denies a selection of objects on aesthetic grounds, eschewing a connoisseurship of consumer goods. "I'm not involved with that kind of thing. Another underlying current is fundamental to my choices, a kind of contradiction in terms of the function of these objects, the possible latent metaphorical associations that are being played on."

Steinbach suggests a multiplicity of readings of objects in isolation from usual contexts and in the relations between objects and between objects and the viewer. In lead part, two Dracula heads, six digital clocks, and a garden hose in a circular plastic dispenser are displayed across three interconnecting shelves. The red digits of the clock "faces" are echoed in the red markings suggesting blood around the mouths of the Dracula heads; both are memento mori, signs of death. The coiled orange garden hose in turn "reads" equally as a source of sustenance (the water bearer), as the system of nourishment (the bowel), the system of destruction (the entrails), and the system of reproduction (the alert and protruding phallic nozzle). Time — the clocks in the middle section of the piece — mediates between the severed death heads at one end and the multifarious gardening implement at the other. This sculpture with its post-modern form and bright, decorative color scheme is a contemporary still life, an appreciation of the goods of bourgeois culture but laden with allegorical intent, a re-engagement with the tradition of 17th-century Dutch painting.

In security and serenity, Steinbach pairs molded plastic toilet brushes with kinetic glitter lamps, two sets of each presented on separate but structurally identical shelves. The silver, gray, black, and white composition, the symmetrical balance of objects, and the sleek shapes of each, quietly undermines the contrast of "kitsch" to "classicism."

"I'm acknowledging the validity of common objects. This is very much related to the snobbishness of the pervasive use of the word "kitsch" which identifies a certain object as dismissible, that is, not worthy of being experienced; or if experienced, only by a low class of people who have much less refined feelings and sense of things than we do. The word doesn't just qualify the object; it also qualifies the consumer audience that buys that object. But it's one of those words that doesn't have an objective meaning. It's used culturally, a class kind of experience. It closes off meaning. It says you can't experience these things because they are categorically defined."

Steinbach's presentation of unaltered consumer goods is most telling in its ambivalent, problematic commentary on individual identity and relationships in late capitalist culture. These objects are taken from a marketplace of total alienation, in which personal involvement and trust have been replaced by media marketing, packaging, and luxuriant production presentation. One of the most prominent and effective marketing techniques has become the array of identical objects, mesmerizing by their complete availability and freedom from individual constraint. Their promise is thoroughly open-ended, seduction through unlimited fantasy.

"The paradox is that the experience is alienating, but it's a sensation, a spectacle, and it's exciting. It's like the movies; it puts you in a trance. When you look at the objects in my work, what's being conveyed is an appreciation, a satisfaction with the object. But the experience is voyeuristic. It's not that there is a lack of desire to reach the objects in a closer and more intimate way — in fact, the activity is getting to know these objects — but there is a lack of history to the experience and nothing can substitute for that. There is a freedom in alienation that is being capitalized on. When you have that space where freedom is allowed, there is excitement that is free of the morals, the ethics of an older society."

"The 20th-century phenomenon of the spectacle is that we have arrived at the means to make the fantasy of having everything, making the illusion of the satisfaction of this desire. But that's
why the absence or gap is bigger. The basic aspect of human nature has not changed. The basic fact of our dissatisfaction is that we are going to die, that we are not going to get all we want, that there are limits. That's universal and never going to change. But the spectacle is the ability to bring the fantasy of the realization of the satisfaction to a much closer sense of an illusion of the real. The objects are at hand. Ali Baba's cave is not unlike Macy's, but then it was more recognized as fantasy.*

Koons's sculptures are as much embodiments of individual states of being as they are reflections of the social order. They relish themselves as objects of display but seek the penetration of analysis. Their surfaces, their skins, are shields that allow an exhibitionism but also convey their vulnerability.

The early works, which Koons refers to as the "encased" pieces, included two series. "The New Hoover Convertibles" were made of upright Hoover vacuum cleaners enclosed in acrylic plexiglass cases over a bank of fluorescent lights, and the "New Shelton Wet/Dry Double and Triple Deckers" in which commercial vacuums were stacked in plexiglass cases over fluorescent lights. Initially they appear primarily as critical variations on the marketing of goods, but the contextual shift of encasing the objects, of removing them from an immediate, accessible consideration, and the particularity of the vacuum as an object transform the works into metaphorical conundrums. In this case, the reading again references Duchamp but rather than the "readymades," Koons's work parallels the layering of The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (the Large Glass) (1915-1923).

*I chose the vacuum cleaners because this is a machine that, if it is used, is used to collect dirt, which is just the opposite of the absolutely pristine situation in which I placed them. It is a breathing machine, and I chose it for its sexuality because I feel the vacuum cleaner has both male and female sexuality — the wet/dry, the either/or. They are sucking machines but yet they have large holes in certain areas, but then they have different attachments which are phallic. But to me they read as a neutral sexuality, and that's very important. Sometimes certain objects will tend to be more masculine or feminine but the totality of my body of work will always read neutral.*

"The vacuums display a state of the new, after the moment of birth, untouched, pristine, clean, which you can't alter if you can't touch. They display their integrity. Although the objects are mass produced, their state is an individual state, not a social state of the new. As soon as you're born the development of integrity is one of self-destruction of the physical self. The object is born with integrity which it loses only by participating, while we develop integrity only by participating.*

Koons's next body of work included three types of objects — framed ads for Nike sports shoes, basketballs suspended in water in glass tanks, and cast bronze inflatable objects — a basketball and soccer ball — or objects that allow man to enter and survive the water — a life raft, a snorkel, and aqualung. The Nike ads were used without alteration, showing famous black sports figures, mutely endorsing shoes. Koons calls them the "Great Deceivers," as they suggest the attainment of success and wealth, but with no capacity for exercising power to affect the social system. They are the front men, the eye catching and deceiving surface. The "equilibrium tanks" suggest immanent states of being, both psychological and philosophical. The 50/50 tanks, in which the balls are sustained half-in and half-out of water, again suggest a logic of choice — either/or — while the total equilibrium tanks imply a state of complete suspension, where gravity has been excised from the equation or neutralized; the situation is primal, womb-like. Koons refers to the cast bronze works as "Tools for Equilibrium." They are the antipodes to the "Great Deceivers." Their utilitarian purpose has been rendered impotent; their promise of sustaining life has been ossified; they now become instruments of death which would sink and drown their bearer. They are the objects of desire, the precious artifacts of art, the carriers of civilization.

"My work sometimes gets transformed into a memorial where the hand must come into play, but I always try to maintain the integrity of the object. When you do transformations, these are imperfect processes you work with. There is no perfect process. If I feel I can preserve the integrity or most of it, then I say go ahead. If not, then I just have to work in another medium or find a different object. Where I do not have to have anything altered, I will not alter it, its personality, what I'm picking up the content from.*

"My work really has to do with the experience of life, with social experience, communication with the external world. The morality of being an artist is important, especially now. I find art is a very humanitarian act. Because of that I'm very concerned with accessibility.*

A consciousness of history, of the present being grounded in the past and its own ineluctable assumption into that grounding, pervades the work of these artists. The role of the individual in acting on that history and of skirtsing a fatalism, either social or existential, through intervention is suggested as an unavoidable consequence, even necessity, of self-awareness. But this is not a bold or rhetorical, a flamboyant or permissive stance. The assertiveness of these works is tender in its recognition of human frailty, encompassing both comedy and tragedy.

Gary Garrels

*All quotations are taken from informal conversations between the artists and the author, March 17-28, 1986.
Robert Gober

*Untitled Pair of Sinks, 1985*

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**Born**
1954, Wallingford, Connecticut

**Education**
Tyler School of Art, Rome, 1973-74
Middlebury College, B.A., 1976

**One Person Exhibitions**
1986
Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

1985
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

**Selected Group Exhibitions**
1986
"Drawing," Knight Gallery, Spirit Square Arts Center, Charlotte, North Carolina

1985
"Scapes," University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, and The Art Gallery, University of Hawaii, Honolulu
"Changing Sculpture Exhibition," Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

1984
P.S. 122, New York
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Jus de Pomme, New York

1983
"New York Work," Studio 10, Chur, Switzerland
Barbara Toll Fine Arts, New York

1982
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

1979
112 Greene Street, New York

**Selected Bibliography**

**Catalogue**
*Untitled Pair of Sinks, 1985*
plaster, wire lath, wood, steel, semi-gloss enamel
two parts: 30 x 34 x 27"; 27 x 34 x 27"
overall: 84" long
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Melvyn J. Estrin, Bethesda, Maryland

*The Ascending Sink, 1985*
plaster, wire lath, wood, steel, semi-gloss enamel
two parts: each 30 x 33 x 27"
overall: 92" high
Collection of Thea Westreich, Washington, D.C.

*The Silly Sink, 1985*
plaster, wire lath, wood, steel, semi-gloss enamel
63 x 33 x 29"
Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr., New York

*The Sink Inside of Me, 1985*
plaster, wire lath, wood, steel, semi-gloss enamel
52 x 84 x 30"
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Melvyn J. Estrin, Bethesda, Maryland
Jeff Koons

1955, York, Pennsylvania

Education
Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, 1972-75, 1976, B.F.A.
School of The Art Institute of Chicago, 1975-76

One Person Exhibitions
1986
International with Monument Gallery, New York
Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

1985
International with Monument Gallery, New York
Feature Gallery, Chicago

1980
The New Museum, New York, "The New" (window installation)

Selected Group Exhibitions
1986
"Time after Time" (curated by Collins & Milazzo)
Diane Brown Gallery, New York

1985
"Objects in Collision," The Kitchen, New York
"Paravision," (curated by Collins & Milazzo)
Postmasters Gallery, New York
"Logosulli," (curated by Collins & Milazzo)
Daniel Newburg Gallery, New York
"New Ground," Luhring, Augustine & Hodes Gallery, New York
"Cult and Decorum," (curated by Collins & Milazzo)
Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York
"Post Production," Feature Gallery, Chicago
International With Monument Gallery, New York
303 Gallery, New York
Galerie Crousel-Hussenot, Paris

1984
"A Decade of New Art," Artists Space, New York
"Objectivity," Hallwalls, Buffalo

1983
"The Los Angeles New York Exchange," LACE, Los Angeles (exhibition catalogue with essay by Roberta Smith)
"Hundreds of Drawings," Artists Space, New York

1982
"A Fatal Attraction: Art and the Media," The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (exhibition catalogue with essay by Thomas Lawson)
"A Likely Story," Artists Space, New York
"Energie New York," Espace Lyonnais D'Art Contemporain, Lyon, France

1981
"Lighting," P.S. 1, Institute for Art & Urban Resources, Long Island City, New York
Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore
Annina Nosei Gallery, New York
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

1980
"Art for the Eighties," Galeria Durban, Caracas, Venezuela (exhibition catalogue with essay by Scott Cook)

Selected Bibliography
(exhibition catalogues cited above)

Catalogue
New Hoover Convertible, 1980
Hoover convertible vacuum cleaner, Plexiglass, fluorescent lights
57½ x 22½ x 22½"
Collection of Dr. Jack E. Chachkes, New York, courtesy of Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles, and International with Monument Gallery, New York

New Shelton Wet/Dry Double Decker, 1981
Shelton Wet/Dry vacuum cleaners, Plexiglass, fluorescent lights
82 x 28 x 28"
Collection of Elaine and Werner Dannheisser, New York

1 Ball Total Equilibrium, 1985
glass, steel, distilled water, sodium chloride reagent, basketball
64½ x 30½ x 13½"
Collection of Michael H. Schwartz, New York

2 Ball 50/50, 1985
glass, steel, distilled water, magnesium sulfate, basketballs
63 x 36½ x 13½"
Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Aqualung, 1985
brass
27 x 17½ x 17½"
Collection of Barbara and Eugene Schwartz, New York

Snorkel, 1985
brass
1 ¼ x 17 x 4"
Collection of Susan and Lewis Manilow, Chicago
Jeff Koons
2 Ball 90/90, 1985

Jeff Koons
New Hoover Convertible, 1980
Haim Steinbach

Born
1944, Israel; 1962, U.S. citizenship

Education
Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, 1962-68, B.F.A.
School of Art and Architecture, Yale University,
New Haven, Connecticut, 1971-73, M.F.A.

One Person Exhibitions
1986
Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C.

1985
Cable Gallery, New York

1982
Concord Gallery, New York

1981
Berkshire Community College, Pittsfield, Mass.
achusetts, "Design for a Yogurt Bar" (installation)

1980
Fashion Moda, Bronx, New York, "Changing Dis-
plays" (installation)

1979
Artists Space, New York, "Display #7" (installation)

1975
Carlo Lamagna Gallery, New York

1974
Johnson Gallery, Middlebury College, Middle-
bury, Vermont

Selected Group Exhibitions
1986
"Time after Time" (curated by Collins & Miliazzo),
Diane Brown Gallery, New York
"NewNew York," Cleveland Center for Contem-
porary Art, Cleveland, Ohio
"Jonathan Lasker, Haim Steinbach, Wallace and
Donohue," Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York
Postmasters Gallery, New York
1985
"Infotainment" (organized by Livet Reichard,
Co., Inc., New York), Rhona Hoffman Gallery,
Chicago; Texas Gallery, Houston; Vanguard
Gallery, Philadelphia; Aspen Art Museum,
Aspen, Colorado (exhibition catalogue with
essay by Thomas Lawson)
"Cult and Decorum" (curated by Collins &
Miliazzo), Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York
"Objects in Collision," The Kitchen, New York
"Post Production," Feature Gallery, Chicago
Nature Morte, New York
1984
"Objectivity," Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York
"Artists Call" (Group Material "Timeline"), P.S.
1, Institute for Art & Urban Resources, Long
Island City, New York
"Domesticity," Suelen Haber Gallery, New York
1983
"Objects, Structure, Artifice: American Sculpture
1970-1983," SVC Fine Arts Gallery, University of
South Florida, Tampa, and Center Gallery,
Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania
(exhibition catalogue with essay by Michael
Klein)

"Social Conquest" (installation; collaboration
with Julie Wachtel), Graduate Center Mall, City
University, New York
1982
Bell Gallery, List Art Center, Brown University,
Providence, Rhode Island, "Red Cross" (install-
ation) (exhibition catalogue with essay by
Ronald J. Onorato) Washington Project for the
Arts, Washington, D.C. (collaboration with
Johanna Boyd; dance performance, slides,
music)

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(exhibition catalogues cited above)
Indiana, Gary. "Charm of Tradition" (review of
exhibition at Cable Gallery), The Village Voice,
October 10, 1985.
Klein, Michael. "Haim Steinbach" (review of
exhibition at Cable Gallery), Arts Magazine,
Lurie, David. "Haim Steinbach" (review of exhib-
iton at Cable Gallery), Arts Magazine, vol. 60,
no. 4, December 1985, pp. 118-119 (ii).
Miller, John. "Producer as Consumer: Haim
Steinbach at Cable Gallery," East Village Eye,
November 1985.
Smith, Roberta. "Some Things Old, Some
Things New" (review of exhibition at Concord
Gallery), The Village Voice, April 27, 1982.
Smith, Roberta. "Haim Steinbach at Cable," Art
in America, vol. 74, no. 2, p. 128 (ll).
Zimmer, William. "Installation Feed" (review of
exhibition at Artists Space), The Soho Weekly

Catalogue
security and serenity, 1985
wood, formica, molded plastic toilet brushes,
kINETIC Glitter lamps
Two parts: each 30 x 31 x 13"
Overall: 86" long
Collection of Eddo A. Bult, New York

supremely black, 1985
Wood, formica, ceramic pitchers, cardboard
detergent boxes
29 x 65 x 13"
Collection of Eddo A. Bult, New York

say you, say me, 1986
wood, formica, Parabears, Kuzbek liquor bottle
dolls
34 x 55 x 16½"
Collection of Gregory C. Clark, New York

set off, 1986
Wood, formica, ceramic vases, kinetic wave
machines
25 x 77 x 13½"
Collection of Bette Ziegler, New York

lead part, 1986
Wood, formica, rubber masks, digital clocks,
rubber garden hose in plastic dispenser
31 x 103½ x 14¾"
The Saatchi Collection, London
Haim Steinbach

security and serenity, 1985

Haim Steinbach

lead part, 1986
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**ISBN 0-941548-11-2**

The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago

Designed by Michael Glass Design, Inc.
Typeset by Word City
Printed by Thomas Graphics

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