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Steve Reber, *New Work*

There is a certain melancholia inherent in Steve Reber's work. Igloo coolers that can no longer hold water, frying pans that cannot be exposed to heat, record players and boom boxes that will not work, a bricklayer's plumb line that lies impotently coiled on the ground. These are confused objects. They are items that are obviously not employed in their traditional use, separated dramatically from their use-value by their exhibition or their reification as art objects. There is some humor to be sure in these "surrogates," as the artist calls them, but also a sadness. Through his artwork Reber evokes the feeling one may get when they return to their hometown after many years; things may look the same, yet it all is profoundly different, you are profoundly different. Reber reminds the viewer of the things lost or left behind, both personally and art historically.

The rush to move past Modernism into the nebulous Postmodern era, many are now wondering if art has not left certain questions unanswered and certain paths unexplored by moving too quickly. To begin his essay for Gerald Byrne's exhibition at the Renaissance Society,<sup>1</sup> Hamza Walker noted this quick succession of art movements that marked what is widely considered to be the height and end of Modernism, "In the decade spanning 1958 to 1968, developments in American visual art moved at a fast clip. In the wake of a triumphal Abstract Expressionism came Pop Art, Minimalism and Conceptual Art." The zero-sum game of the reduction of art resulted in a cohesive body of work but also did effectively follow its own narrative to its logical end. While it certainly was not the "end of art" as the cliché phrase goes, it was the end of a certain trajectory.

The elegiac quality to Steve Reber's works and their distinctly contemporary appearance recognizes the irretrievability of the modern era and losses attendant with the end of modernism, while moving forward as art. In striving for objective universal forms modernism paradoxically became cold and impersonal. Reber's *In the House* pays homage to the *Cubi* series of modernist master sculptor David Smith while allowing a space for the uninitiated viewer to enter in. We can all recognize the ubiquitous ceiling tiles that grid drop-ceilings in offices and basements all over the country. Swatches of fabric placed on the sculpture complement the ceiling tiles and add to the tactile quality of the artwork, reversing the indifferent, smooth and anti-tactile quality of David Smith's medium of choice for the *Cubi* series, stainless steel. Yet even in the familiarity of Reber's materials there remains something mysterious, something apart. If modernism attempted to bring out art through reduction, Reber goes one further by complicating his

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<sup>1</sup> Hamza Walker's essay "How Long is Now?" for Gerald Byrne's "A Thing is a Hole in a Thing it is Not" at the Renaissance Society, 2011.

choices of media, adding layers of personal associations and challenges for material harmony.

The work of Steve Reber reminds us of the successes and failures of modernism. While the melancholia of his surrogates reminds the viewer of the end of a grand narrative in art history, they also suggest that a more personal art, one that is closer to our daily lives. While art has repeatedly promised utopia or better living and continuously failed to deliver on a large scale, Reber's surrogates suggest their own limits. Their form belies their function, there are certain things that they just cannot do. It is at this point that Reber's art prompts the viewer to realize his or her own agency. As a reflection of human activity art cannot solve our problems for us, nor can design or architecture. It is up to each individual.