

SHOE IN BLOCK

THE SUPERIMPOSITION OF THE ORDINARY

COMMENTARY

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“Shoe in Block” I & II are sculptural objects that render ordinary, highly functional objects useless by superimposing them into the same material space. An individual shoe is fused into the physical space of a custom-molded concrete masonry unit, creating a new unusable object that still retains the former signs of the shoe and the block. The remaining signs thus become conflicting, as the observer cannot immediately reconcile the presence of the two recognizable signs, transposed as they are into one unrecognizable object.

This process of signification is disjointed: it forces the viewer to a halt, because the object as a whole has no immediate relation to a particular signified, in effect, the object has a “stalled meaning.” Abstract sculpture tends to be comprised of subtle forms that give vague suggestions of potential signs, and the signification of the piece for the viewer takes place only over the course of discovering or experimenting with the possibilities of those signs in relation to each other. In the case of “Shoe in Block,” the component signs are familiar, explicit and obvious, and it is the juxtaposition of the signs that produce new questions and novel readings.

A fundamental principle of semiotics is that the sign itself is arbitrary, and is only understandable as part of a continuum of differing signs. The difference is critical to the existence of the sign. “Shoe in Block” enables the viewer to understand each component by realizing that their normal functions are now obviated; that their normalcy itself is attacked. Sneakers are, today, designed for two purposes: facilitation of movement and vehicles of branding. As embodied in the sculptures, the shoes are still wearable, but the wearer cannot walk or run in them, and their commodity value is lost to the owner if they cannot be worn and seen. Surrounded by and encased in concrete, the sneaker is understood by what it is not: a building material, an ad-hoc step or seat, a sign of compressive strength and material solidarity. Likewise, the Concrete Masonry Unit

(CMU), as it is known to builders or architects, is not a sign of fashion value, fleetness, or comfort.

The sculptures are combined inverses that retain only some of their constituent parts' original properties. Concrete blocks are heavy and deliberately designed to be unmovable in their final installation; sneakers gained their popularity and enormous market share via their association with basketball and other sports in which speed and agility is extremely valuable. Combined, the shoe can still be worn and even walked in, granted a strong and patient subject, at a significantly reduced speed. Similarly, the concrete block can still serve its ordinary compressive function, but not with normal geometric simplicity; these blocks cannot be lined up next to each other to form a gapless wall.

Both the sneaker and the concrete block are the result of elaborate and highly specialized factories that strive to create exactly identical products in mass numbers—yet the concrete block is subsumed in a field of sameness in their final function, joined with hundreds or thousands more and plastered and painted over, while the brightly-colored and eye-catching sneaker is expected to enhance the individuality of its wearer in its final function, and differentiate itself from the hundreds of other styles of sneakers at large. Both are mass-produced but have diametrically opposed identities and purposes in their intended installation.

Their materialities are also inverted: concrete blocks are made from a material that has been in use for thousands of years and is extremely cheap and easy to produce on large scales, yet is highly durable and long-lasting. Modern sneakers are produced only with the advent of a wide array of comparatively expensive synthetic textiles that must be assembled in precise and complex patterns by armies of machines and laborers (the employment of which has itself been the subject of much human-rights controversy).

But none of these properties are readily signified by the shoe or block alone as objects of contemplation. The placement of these signs together allows each to be seen, much as individual neurons in brain tissue are only visible with a contrasting agent that enables them to be identified and studied. The hardness and immobility of the block allows the observer to identify the softness and swiftness of the running shoe, and vice versa.

The superimposition of inverses is only the most explicit among a range of formal signification that sculpture, and art in general, is capable of. It is only through difference (and perhaps Derrida's *différance*) that signs mean, and it is only when ordinary signs and objects are contextually displaced, as in the case of much modern and contemporary art, that they are ready to be reinterpreted as narratives, dialogues, statements, or simply as a beautiful objet d'art. The act of interpretation falls on the viewer of the artwork, as does the first choice of whether to view it at all as an artwork.

Confounding this traditional recontextualization, we envision *Shoe in Block* to be installed in common public locales, such as the Lower East Side's Allen Street median strip. A potential viewer, whether pedestrian or passenger or loiterer, is caught unawares at the seeming impossibility of the superimposed objects. This context introduces a third "ordinary" component into the piece—removed from the gallery, the question of the artwork's nature looms larger, and the viewer is left without the careful cues that galleries offer: the title, the statement, the bare white walls. Devoid of these contrasting agents, the absurd materiality of the shoe-blocks must be considered in new ways. Does the errant passerby attempt to wrench the valuable shoe(s) from the concrete block, thereby possibly destroying the object so desired? Or are the sculptures immediately recognizable as such to an art-oriented Manhattanite, and enjoyed or dismissed with that in mind?

"*Shoe in Block*" I & II lend themselves to a wide variety of readings because of the richness of their component signs. The sneaker and the CMU come loaded with the viewer's entire history of associations, their memories and desires and objections, and the strange combination thereof allows these entire semantic networks to collide and be bridged with new narratives and ideas. The visceral pleasure of surprise, the stultifying wonder at their existence and question of their construction, and the longer process of association and contemplation contribute to the sculptures' appeal as superimposed ordinariness.