

EXCERPTED FROM:

The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art

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Andrea Fraser, *May I Help You?*, Performance by Andrea Fraser at American Fine Arts, Co., New York, produced in cooperation with Allan McCollum, 1991. Courtesy the artist.

CONTEXT AS SUBJECT [EXCERPT]

The intense engagement with context has created many intersections between artists, at times as actual collaborations, far more often involving the creation of works that incorporate a precise response to other works, both earlier and contemporary. Such works indicate both a thorough analysis of the circumstances of context and an equally careful consideration of the nature of authorship—paradoxically made that much more evident by the mechanisms of reference and quotation. The recontextualization can be as subtle as Sherrie Levine's photographs after other works of art, which contain within a seemingly isolated and portable object traces of multiple contexts of both display and reproduction, or far more explicit in the many and varied ways artists have physically recontextualized nonart and art objects alike. The process of considering works of art that respond to and incorporate other works, which may themselves be created through acts of recontextualization such as copying or appropriation, implies a layering of authorship, or a chain of quotation and reference, that can create a disconcerting sense of vertigo.

A particularly sly example of this layering process appeared in *May I Help You?* — Andrea Fraser’s 1991 performance by proxy at the American Fine Arts gallery. In her own thoroughly scripted appearances Fraser has presented herself in the guise of the docent, weaving together statements about art and culture lifted from a multitude of sources or, more recently, using a similar process of appropriation to perform the role of the artist. For the work at American Fine Arts, members of the gallery staff, performing a script crafted by Fraser, descended upon gallery visitors in a space hung with Allan McCollum’s *Plaster Surrogates*. And just as the format used for the surrogates plays off found conventions, the text of the script consists of found statements, particularly published statements by dealers and collectors and the interviews with individuals representing different classes in French society that appear throughout Pierre Bourdieu’s now-classic sociological study, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.¹ Fraser’s authorship in this work was thus reduced to the process of establishing a context for the individual quotations and their performance as a script.

The script performed by the gallery staff began with acclaim for the beauty of the work on display; as the performer moved around the room, she or he described or responded to the individual examples with varying degrees of enthusiasm, pomposity, incomprehension, and pathos. The objects by McCollum that were the ostensible subject of this puzzling soliloquy could already be described as highly enigmatic. The cast sculptures, approximately one hundred in all, hanging in a row around the gallery, were molded and painted to masquerade as framed images. From a distance their format would be instantly identifiable to anyone familiar with the conventions developed for displaying works on paper. But closer inspection reveals them to be a kind of painted relief, with the central rectangle where the image would normally reside rendered as monochrome black. In this attention to the appearance of art, the series is closely related to McCollum’s *Perpetual Photographs*, and indeed some of the stills taken of television sets that served as the basis for that series of photographic abstractions also contained “surrogates on location,” recognizable as framed and matted works with illegibly dark centers. The *Plaster Surrogates* also share with McCollum’s other works a process of controlled variation that produces similar yet differentiated objects. For the *Plaster Surrogates*, the combinations made possible by approximately twenty different sizes for the object itself, 140 frame colors, and a dozen shades for the

¹ The individual sources used for the script were specified in a manuscript copy of the text provided by Andrea Fraser.

mats yielded thousands of unique if closely related works.² McCollum also minimized his physical touch with the help of studio assistants. He described his motivation for the *Plaster Surrogates* and the related *Surrogate Paintings*, where the entire object was painted in the same monochrome hue, as a desire “to represent the way a painting ‘sits’ in a system of objects . . . the goal was to make them function as props so that the gallery itself would become like a picture of a gallery by re-creating an art gallery as a stage set.”³

McCollum began the *Surrogate Paintings* in 1978 and the *Plaster Surrogates* in 1982, and both were widely exhibited in the context of solo and group shows during the 1980s. So by 1991 viewers familiar with contemporary art were likely to recognize this play on gallery conventions as an example of work by McCollum. What they may or may not have been expecting, depending on how much prior knowledge they brought to their visit, was Fraser’s activation of that stage set with her own play off art world conventions and rhetoric. The fact that McCollum’s play with display conventions was so readily recognizable was an effect of his activation of a highly specialized set of practices for the presentation of art. In large part those practices are a product of the methods of collecting and display typical of the art museum, as they developed in the aftermath of the separation of museums into collections of different types. This division, largely solidified in the nineteenth century, established the art museum as a specific kind of collection, in many ways distinguished by the attitude toward the object from such other collection types as historical societies and natural history museums. The art museum has also changed the relationship of art to its environment. Many early works were in a sense appropriated by their entry into the museum, with their original function at times drastically altered by their assimilation into a system of categorization based upon period, style, and, where possible, authorship. For contemporary artists, the museum and the related environment of the gallery are now the assumed space for art—with this condition evident in responses that range from extreme attention to particular aspects of such contexts to the explicit rejection articulated in work made expressly for other settings.

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² See the description of the *Plaster Surrogates* in William S. Bartman, ed., *Allan McCollum* (New York: Art Resources Transfer, 1995), 39.

³ Thomas Lawson, “Allan McCollum Interviewed by Thomas Lawson,” in Bartman, ed., *Allan McCollum*, 2.