



*Plaster Surrogates, 1982/84. Installation: Metro Pictures Gallery*

***WHAT YOU DON'T SEE IS WHAT YOU GET:  
ALLAN McCOLLUM'S SURROGATES, PERPETUAL PHOTOS  
AND PERFECT VEHICLES***

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*The un-naive thinker knows how far he remains from the object of his thinking, and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely. This brings him to the point of clowning. He must not deny his clownish traits, least of all since they alone can give him hope for what is denied him.*

— Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

The Emperor's Clothes aspect of art flouts common sense in spite of (more likely *because of*) the relief it affords from the usual goosestepping toward Quality. People deny, out of hand, the desire to see others naked, let alone the desire to see if the ruler really "measures up." There is another story of a Chinese emperor who staged a competition between the two foremost artists of his court. A prize would go to the one who created the most wonderful mural. They were given opposite sides of a long hall, partitioned down the middle. The first worked slavishly for months. The second hardly lifted a finger. The time came to decide a winner. The partition was removed; the first work was unveiled. Truly, the emperor had never seen a more beautiful sight, but the second unveiling revealed a mirror. Perhaps only two opposing mirrors one from each artist— would have been more fitting: an infinite regress. In both stories, such "charlatanism" is not what it seems; its economy of means is exemplary.

Allan McCollum's work derives straight from conceptual art where such gestures were the order of the day. The most striking precedent for McCollum's work, particularly the *Surrogates*, is Michael Asher's 1973 "de installation" at the Heiner Friedrich Gallery in Cologne. Here Asher exposed the business side of the gallery to public scrutiny by removing the wall separating the office from the (sacrosanct) exhibition space. This singled out the ordinarily unnoticed effort spent in concealing otherwise "shameful" doings of commerce. Like Asher, McCollum uses reductive, allegorical devices to foreground the frame/context, but where Asher reaches towards a literalized social fabric, McCollum remains metaphoric and introspective.

Yet here introspection is hardly synonymous with Modernist reductivism. The *Surrogates*, for example, mime a Minimalist appearance while subverting it at the same time. If the convulsions of appropriation art have taught us anything, it is historical dialectics: each cultural artefact can be rewritten indefinitely and, therefore, is always open to contest. One picture proves to be worth far more than a thousand words. What McCollum's output does is to suggest a different basis for reductivism, a basis other than the specific materials which literally comprise the art object. It suggests a different end to an accustomed deconstruction, a new teleology. The upshot of this endeavour would deny any ultimate meaning to an artwork. Although anyone's recoding would always be provisional, in this case the rewriting of reductivism particularly undermines an essential claim to the authority of the original.

McCollum's oeuvre breaks down into three broad categories: *Surrogates*, *Perpetual Photos* and *Perfect Vehicles*. (His two collaborations - one with Laurie Simmons, the other with Louise Lawler - as well as "Paintings on Location incidental to the action" fall between these divisions.) Each of these categories concerns itself with how authority works through representation. In psychoanalytic terms, this means addressing the notion of the phallus. It entails not so much a psychologistic search for phallic symbols "in the work," as it does the problem of representation *vis-à-vis* the formation of the speaking subject.

"False pictures, pseudo-artefacts which beckon me into the desire to look at a picture, but are complete in doing that, and that alone"—that is how the artist described the *Surrogates*. This statement clearly maps out an austere poetics for the work. The longing which he feels is a deeply impersonal quality, something which anyone who bears the stamp of language would necessarily experience. Desire constantly travels from one representation to the next, driven by a lack that is both fuelled and partly satisfied by fantasy. All desire is ultimately desire for the phallus. Lacan talks of the speaking subject coming into being *in* and *through* the phallus. Although the phallus remains an always fraudulent construct, the subject must assume a definitive relation to it. Taking up this position is repressive; if phallus amounts to a primal deception, finding a role through it becomes forced and disingenuous. Expressionism attempts to voice the implicit agony of this demand, but fails in its very availability since representation itself is the crux of the problem.

The *Surrogates*, to begin with, are normative "picture-objects," more akin to sculpture than painting since "picture," "mat," and "frame," are all one, moulded in solid plaster. The frames are painted a nondescript black, brown or grey. The mats are always white. The picture portion is invariably black. Each one is ostensibly the same as the next, yet unique in "trivially" specific details. McCollum has described them as "slightly nightmarish." Like dreams, they operate through displacement. "Surrogate" suggests not only the paid partners of sex therapy programmes, but also "prosthetic" or "dildo" and the inevitable absence they hope to cancel. The

term intimates that something's amiss. Paul McMahon has likened them to house-pets—which are usually “fixed,” “spayed” or “neutered” for hygienic purposes. That the *Surrogates* are fashioned from plaster also evokes memories of the groupies who dubbed themselves “the Plaster Casters” and their erstwhile collection of trophies.

The realist picture signals an immediate connection to some palpable “thing.” It fosters a naive illusion of well-being. By looking at this kind of picture, we believe we somehow come to possess what it depicts. Avant garde painting, until as recently as David Salle, has concerned itself with scrambling this connection so that the reward is no longer this ever more mysterious thing, but rather the ever more discursive connection. McCollum, rather than scrambling or reducing, appears to have removed the picture, if only allegorically. The picture can, of course, be equated to the phallus. The phallus marks the end of recursive connotation, an anchoring point for meaning, a final denotation - or commitment. Such an ending is always arbitrary. (Authoritarianism is an addiction to this finality.) With the *Surrogates*, McCollum evokes castration fears without actually removing anything. By offering a faked version of a picture's usual trappings minus the picture itself, he's fabricated an almost Pavlovian expectation without following through. These stimuli force a given story upon us: Once upon a time, there was a picture, but someone took it away. So, appearances to the contrary, the picture was never there to begin with. The parallel to Freud's account of the (male) infant's first glimpse of female genitalia is unavoidable. In the patriarchy the desire for imagery can be ascribed to the phallus; scopophilia is the male privilege. The phallus desperately seeks its own representation at every turn, an affirmation which is an exponent of its primal fraudulence. Conversely, women are treated as castrated (negated) males. In this pseudo-parable of the *Surrogates*, what began as *castrati* end up, then, as women—which are more threatening or less, take your pick. Their “otherwise” is hypostatized as an adamant refusal to fix meaning: a masquerade: a devouring vortex of endless connotation: the *vagina dentata*. In installation, the redundancy of the blank picture repeated *ad nauseam* is horrific, but comical. The humour comes from the realization that this faked dilemma is very real. Castration anxiety turns out to have more to do with the organization of the gendered subject than with any literal threat of castration. McCollum has cast a deprecating gaze on the phallogocentric bias of representation. While theories of Freud and Lacan may be subsumed by the sexism of dominant ideology, they nonetheless struggle against it by articulating the workings of that repression. Indeed, they are “double edged swords.”

The *Perpetual Photos* elaborate upon the themes of the *Surrogates*, and though here we are indeed given pictures, they are pictures with a vengeance. These are culled from scenes in televised movies which feature paintings as part of the scenario. McCollum zooms in on the paintings and blows them back up to life-size, where, reconstituted, they break down beyond recognition into abstract dot patterns—effectively frustrating the pleasure of image identification. As such, they are pictures of pictures many times over. Each *Perpetual Photo* features the still it was derived from affixed to the back. During last season's opening of this work at the Diane Brown Gallery, this afforded the added spectacle of viewers removing pictures from the walls to view them from behind. Viewing pleasure becomes relegated to a place beyond—actually behind—the frame, which imparts a peculiar *trompe l'oeil* effect. Also available, during that opening, was a two-volume register of the film stills. But these refer us to what? Just a more focused image. Only a handful of film makers have shown a pointed awareness of the querulous way a painting intrudes upon the *mise-en scene*. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* some rural police pass by an abstract painting in the foyer. One pauses before it and scratches his head. On the way back out, he does a doubletake. Robbe-Grillet, of course, has long been obsessed by this



Source for *Perpetual Photo*, right



*Perpetual Photo*, 1982/84

theme. In Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*, for which Robbe Grillet wrote the screenplay, characters stand transfixed before paintings. Some of the scenes seem to be pictures come to life. Goddard's *Passion* was entirely devoted to that idea. So McCollum's inquiry turns out to have more to do with the elusiveness of the image than it does with media overload. Without performing additional tricks (flipping the piece over, or consulting the register) we have no way of knowing exactly what we're looking at. Turn on the TV. A fine painting graces an aristocratic setting. Change the channel. Another picture has evidently been acquired by the *nouveau riche*. Turn the dial once more. A reproduction struggles to cheer up working class quarters. Each case registers a specific pathos; the picture is always more of a prop than an artwork. Its function is to confer sumptuary distinction on a designated site. Here, fictional scenes work better than reality because they're patently more ideological. The word "prop" implies something flaccid that needs to be buttressed. In effect, the picture—the preserve of (artistic) freedom—is overdetermined. McCollum avers, as before, that his much-sought-after object never truly existed in the first place—at least not apart from a history of desires, expectations and repression.

Finally, the latest project also references the *Surrogates* so as to complement them. McCollum evidently first conceived of the *Perfect Vehicles* some time ago, but waited a few years to execute them. These resemble Chinese ginger jars, except that they've been cast from solid hydrostone, so that they can no longer hold anything. They are painted in a variety of colours, patterns and finishes to be displayed and sold in groupings of no less than five. Where the *Surrogates* attack the tacit axiom that females are castrated males, the *Perfect Vehicles* reverse or "rectify" the male



*Perfect Vehicles*, 1986. Paint on solid-cast Hydrocal.

to-female sequence. A female orifice is paved over or “completed” in order to render it phallic. More than any previous body of work, the *Perfect Vehicles* sardonically target the collector class. The artist does this by drawing from another area of the art world: the “art and antiques” segment. Here, an inkling persists that this kind of collecting is more self-serving than “our kind.” Part of the appeal of the antique is its exquisite obsolescence, and therefore anti-utilitarian bent. Even Proust succumbed to the charm of chairs which would collapse beneath the weight of the sitter. McCollum takes this idea to its ultimate extreme; the most aesthetic object is that which is most useless. He even tries posing as the aesthete in his statement for the show at Cash/Newhouse last Spring: “Is not my role as an artist to reproduce—and repeat at will—that psychic effervescence associated with the unrepeatable and perfectly unique timeless moment in which the rest of the world simply fades away?” This idea is doubled by the work’s sexual subtext. A vase suggests an exteriorized vulva. Closing it off converts it into a phallus, the “perfect vehicle” for representation. The power of the phallus lies in its very fraudulence. Were it to be anchored upon a specific site, it would forfeit its potential compass of every possible representation. Like God, only an imaginary point can be everywhere at once. Yet, its persistence, as a construct, becomes ever more mannered and can only be awkward contortions on the part of the subject and by the inertia of nostalgia. The Modernist art object disavows utility from the start. Therein lies its authority. It purports to shun all relations to the world, but its disinterested detachment is a lie. So it is that the *Perfect Vehicles* accelerate the “planned obsolescence” of the fine arts down to the zero time of Modernism.

In an interview with Laurie Simmons published in the *East Village Eye* [2] last year, McCollum remarked that the urge to reduce to a determinant “something” was typically male. His own work at first might appear, in fact, to do this, but it actually does the reverse. Or rather, his complete *oeuvre* resembles the way a lens works, a large body of information is focused down to a point which in turn expands to a far-reaching set of concerns. Lacan’s model for consciousness is similarly non-reductive- the interpenetration of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Here, nothing can be reduced to a single cause, but the relation between different orders is always motivated. In “Repetition and Difference” Craig Owens argues that McCollum’s work involves a critique of the market in the age of mass production. I have tried to discuss the work according to the psychoanalytic bases of representation, but what pushes this complex towards its specific historical formation? At stake is the cathected object. At this juncture, psychoanalytic and economic determinations appear to connect. Owens states, “Thus, difference itself becomes an object of consumption, and the agenda of serial production becomes apparent: to carefully engineer and control the production of difference in our society.” [1] Although Owens specifies marginal nuances in a single product type, this observation applies just as well to the systemic fabrication of sexual difference. Owens goes on to cite Cindy Sherman’s work as the most obvious example of the serial tendency in art-making. Not surprisingly, her work also points up the distinction between real and artificial femininity as meaningless. The commodity, of course, is the cathected object *par excellence*. According to Lukacs, it represents the central contradiction between means and relations of production under capitalism. Greater, more thoroughly mobilized production-productionism—demands that the libido be deflected from sexual gratification onto the commodity. Authority can then be preserved by regulating consumption. McCollum’s work is unique in that it issues a comprehensive challenge to that authority and provokes a profound yearning for some thing else, which might again turn out to be the phallus—or an entirely distinct inversion of that order. The present system is revealed as a nightmare, and yet...

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[1.] Craig Owens. “Allan McCollum: Repetition and Difference,” *Art in America*, Sept. 1983. p. 132.

[2.] Beth Biegler. “Surrogates and Stereotypes: Allan McCollum and Laurie Simmons, Under the Rubric of Post-Modernism,” *East Village Eye*, December/January. 1986.