

FROM: BEYOND RECOGNITION: REPRESENTATION, POWER, AND CULTURE

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Allan McCollum, Plaster Surrogates, 1982-83. Installation at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York City, 1983.

Allan McCollum

Repetition & Difference

A recent installation of hundreds of McCollum’s “generic paintings” reflected the advent of a repetitive society—a society in which difference is artificially recreated through the proliferation of quasi-identical objects

BY CRAIG OWENS

Each art has its own imbricated techniques of repetition, the critical and revolutionary potential of which must reach the highest possible degree, to lead us from the dreary repetitions of habit to the profound repetitions of memory, and ultimately to the [symbolic] repetitions of death, through which we make sport of our own mortality.

—Gilles Deleuze, *Répétition et différence*

Since 1975, when he stopped painting the large, repetitive decorative abstractions, often on unstretched canvas, for which he first achieved

recognition in his native California, Allan McCollum has been manufacturing generic paintings: small, anonymous, more or less identical objects, always exhibited in series and composed entirely of frame, mat and, where the image is supposed to appear, a blank. The artist describes these works as decoys: “False pictures, pseudo-artifacts which beckon me into the desire to look at a picture, but which are complete in doing that, and that alone.” In them, painting is reduced *beyond* its essentials to utter conventionality, banality. It is ironic, then, that as recently as 1979 McCollum’s work could still

be cited as proof of the continuing viability of modernist abstraction—as if, as Jean Baudrillard has written, “Only the forgery can still satisfy our thirst for authenticity.”

Minimalist in their monochromism, their investigation of framing and their repetitiveness, the generic paintings employ only the *vocabulary* of Minimalism; for what McCollum has devised is, in fact, an effective, all-purpose strategy of esthetic infiltration reminiscent in this respect of Daniel Buren’s deployment of striped fabric with which to expose the contradictions of cultural production in a market economy: the inescapable fact that, in exchange, all works of art are reduced to equivalence. Clusters of the generic paintings have been exhibited in group shows, where they have served as mirrors reflecting the interchangeability—the indifference—of the other works on display. More recently, for his first solo exhibition in New York (mounted last March at Marian Goodman), McCollum doubled and then redoubled the stakes: 551 cast “plaster surrogates” swarmed across the gallery’s walls in a continuous, undulating band, while in a second room photographs taken directly from television depicted (found) McCollums “on location”—pictures in the world re-presented as generic paintings.

Each of the surrogates was derived from the same model (frame, mat and, where the image is supposed to appear, a blank). The only differences admitted were entirely marginal: insubstantial variations in size, proportion and the color of the frame (mostly within a narrow range of golds and browns). While the specific combination of these three variables seemed to constitute each surrogate as singular, the potentially endless repetition of essentially identical objects prevented us from mistaking difference for uniqueness. For although it was possible to view each work as a mirror reflecting all the others, at the same time it was impossible to forget that each was merely a reflection of all the others.

Neither the wit nor the sheer visual beauty of the installation can be discounted; but these, too, seemed to function as decoys, as lures—as if to compensate for the muteness of each individual



component. For while repetition inaugurated an indefinite play of substitutions, classifications, reversals and repetitions, this textual game seemed to suspend any reference outside the series itself, as well as any subjective relation between artist and viewer. Instead, the surrogates functioned as an opaque screen interposed between the two, rendering them mutually absent one to the other—an absence described, perhaps, by the blank at the center of each work.

Still, taken as a whole, McCollum's installation did have an unmistakable external referent: the marketplace. Viewing it was less like gallery-going and more like window shopping—or, rather, gallery-going *as* shopping. For what McCollum's work ultimately reflects is the recent infiltration into cultural production of what political economists identify as the "serial mode of production." Serialized production is both the definitive mode of late-capitalist consumer society and, since Warhol at least, the dominant model for art—and not only visual art, as Jacques Attali's diagnosis, in his book *Bruits*, of the situation of contemporary music confirms: No organized society can exist without structuring a place within itself for differences. No exchange economy develops without reducing such differences to the form of mass production or the serial . . . Music lives [this contradiction] in deafening fashion: an instrument of differentiation, it has become the very locus of repetition. It indifferentiates itself in commodities and masks itself in the star system. Music can therefore allow us to hear the essentials of the contradictions in developed societies: *an anxious search for lost differences within a logic from which difference itself has been excluded.*³

This contradiction between difference and repetition is intrinsic to the serial mode of production itself—a mode which proceeds from, but is not identical with, the mass production of commodities. For while mass production, and the social logic of homogenization which it entails work to eliminate difference (standardization), serial production reintroduces a limited gamut of differences into the mass-produced object. As Baudrillard observes in *Le système des objets* (1968), no object appears on the market today in a single type, but with a range of strictly

marginal differences—of color, accessory, detail—which create the illusion of choice. Consequently, what we consume is the object not in its materiality, but in its difference—the object as sign. 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.

If music allows us to hear these contradictions, visual art allows us to see them. Few works of art exist today as single, isolated examples; rather, the majority appear in series, and their significance resides primarily in the position they occupy within the series to which they belong.⁴ To cite only the most obvious example: it makes no sense to exhibit one Cindy Sherman photograph by itself (although her work is often presented this way). To do so is to render it meaningless, for the significance of Sherman's work resides in the artist's permutations of identity from one photo to the next. Thus, Sherman has borrowed from the media not only a stock of feminine stereotypes, but also its serialized format.

In fact, serial production does not recognize the fine art/mass culture distinction (and is partially responsible for its dissolution). So that when McCollum exhibits his own series of black-and-white photographs of interiors, themselves taken from TV series, he moves us out of the gallery and into mass culture, demonstrating the pervasiveness of serial production. In McCollum's photographs of



"Paintings on location—incidental to the action," black-and-white photograph, 11 by 14 inches.

everyday life as represented in the mass media, framed pictures in the background become illegible—these are, thereby transformed into “McCollums”—frame, mat and, where the image is supposed to appear, a blank. Collectively captioned “Paintings on location—incidental to the action,” these photographs reinsert McCollum’s work back into the culture at large, where its greatest subversive potential resides.

If McCollum represents the advent of a repetitive culture—both within the art gallery and without—a culture in which difference is “artificially recreated by means of the repetition of quasi-identical objects” (Attali), still, we cannot immediately assimilate him to that tradition of melancholic artists, from Duchamp to Sherrie Levine, who insist upon the diminished possibilities for creativity in an image-saturated world (or so it has been claimed).⁴ For the automatic, mechanical repetition that characterizes consumption is only one—the most superficial—type of repetition. Art invokes other, more profound types—those of memory and ultimately (following Freud’s formulation of a compulsion to repeat) of death. The significance of McCollum’s work resides in its superimposition of all three types, a

superimposition which restores to repetition its critical—even revolutionary—power. For, as Deleuze writes at the conclusion of *Répétition et différence*:

Repetition—even in its most mechanical, quotidian, habitual, stereotypical forms—has a place within art . . . For the only esthetic problem is how to insert art into everyday life. The more our daily life appears standardized, stereotyped, submitted to the accelerated reproduction of consumer goods, the more art must become part of life and rescue from it that small difference which operates between levels of repetition, making habitual consumption reverberate with destruction and death; linking cruelty to inanity; discovering, beneath consumption, the chattering of the schizophrenic; and reproducing esthetically, beneath the most ignoble destructions of war (which are still processes of consumption), the illusions and mystifications which are the real essence of this civilization—so that, in the end, Difference can express itself . . . even if it’s only in the form of a contradiction here or there, thereby liberating the forces needed to destroy *this* world.

1. Joseph Masheck, “Iconicity,” *Artforum*, January 1979, pp. 30-41.

2. Jacques Attali, “Introduction to *Bruits*,” *Social Text*, 7 (Spring/Summer 1983), p. 7, italics added.

3. A more detailed account of the serial mode of production in art would have to distinguish between contemporary artists’ use of the series and the role that it played in both Impressionism (Monet’s “Rouen Cathedrals,” for example) and modernism (Mondrian’s serial production, for example). These questions are too complex to be tackled here; however, I would argue that while, in Impressionism, the series works to claim the absolute uniqueness of each single moment of perception, and while, in modernism, it represents an evolutionary or developmental process, in contemporary art it is used to deny both uniqueness and development. Obviously, serial production in art must be linked to the stages of development of capitalism.

4. In a recent text, I dispute this interpretation of the Duchamp-Levine tradition. See “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post modern Culture*, Hal Foster, ed., Port Townsend (Wash.), Bay Press, 1983.