

Self-Referentiality and Mass-Production in the Work of Allan McCollum, 1969 - 1989

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SINCE 1977, when he shifted the focus of his earlier production, Allan McCollum has been involved in an investigation of the work of art with regard to its function within the social system. 'If one wants to understand art,' McCollum has stated, 'it seems to me, one should begin with the terms of the situation in which one actually encounters it'.¹ To this end, the artist has developed a diverse series of works that reflect upon the status of art in contemporary culture. Although their particular means and emphasis necessarily vary, the *Surrogates*, *Perpetual Photos*, *Perfect Vehicles*, and *Individual Works*, created by McCollum during the last twelve years, call attention to the place of art as an economic and psychological, not merely physical, presence within society.

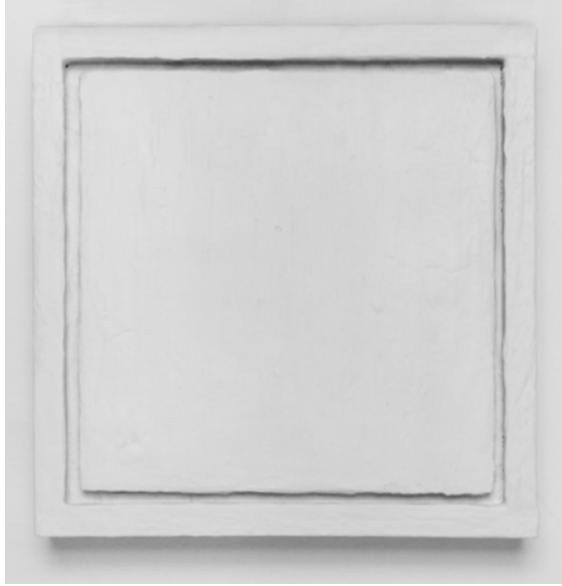
A small, square work, *Untitled*, 1977, measuring 21 x 21 cm and made of wood covered with an off-white acrylic, marks McCollum's departure from his previous approach to painting and his achievement of a new level of thematic interest. This transitional piece is to be distinguished from prior works by the artist because of the simple presentation of its own painted surface as a primary and singular fact. Notably moreover, the frame of the work exists as an extension of its painted surface since a groove of about a centimeter in depth creates a narrow indentation close to and parallel with its edge. As in the ensuing *Surrogate Paintings* in wood – first conceived in 1978 as individually colored monochromes and in 1979 as images of black-centered, matted, and framed objects – and the cast *Plaster Surrogates*, 1982, the surrounding picture

frame and its enclosed 'image' are combined on one and the same pictorial field.

Although no two pieces are ever identical, each *Surrogate* presents the same, self-reflexive image of a typical painting and thus provides what McCollum has aimed at from the inception of this series: 'a universal sign-for-a-painting'.² Since their literal



llAn McCollum: *Surrogate Paintings*, Acrylic on wood, 1979-82



Allan McCollum: *Untitled*, 1977, acrylic on wood, 21 x 21 cm.

content is their own depiction, the *Surrogates* declare themselves to be paintings in a generalized state. As such they may be looked at in relation to how a painting is treated – as opposed to what it might portray – within the current cultural context.

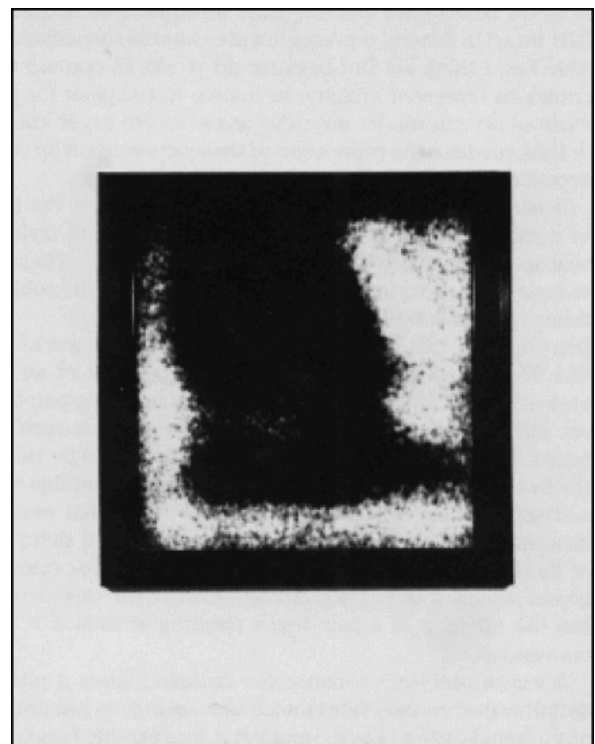
The *Surrogates* may be hung singly or together in small or large groups depending on the given situation, which is dictated in every case by the conventions of installation in the home, museum, or one-person exhibition. No single work in this series is identical with another in size or color or possible combinations thereof. Never large in scale and possessing a slightly rough surface, they maintain a reference to painterliness and the handmade along with their mechanically produced appearance. At the same time as they all are virtually alike, they satisfy



Allan McCollum: *Photo from TV with Painting #2*, 1982 (source for *Perpetual Photo #2*, 1982-84).

in ironic manner the demand for uniqueness traditionally associated with works of art. In this way, the *Surrogates*, as their title suggests, are able to play the part of painting. Denuded of abstract or figurative referential content and ostensibly blank, they bring the many uses of art in society to the fore, whether as a decorative element, item of exchange, symbol of prestige, or possession of personal worth, suggesting the scope of its possible functions.

The *Perpetual Photos*, 1982-present, exhibited for the first time in 1984, reinforce the significance of the *Surrogates*. Rather than directly creating a painted image that is about being a painting as in the case of the *Surrogates*, in these works, McCollum produces photographs by enlarging the diminutive and illegible images of paintings that may be found in the backgrounds of television performances. The resulting images deny access to any knowledge of the original; instead they exist in their own right as blurred abstractions derived from the media where paintings have been clearly subordinated to the larger scenario. As the artist has explained, ‘When I enlarge these little meaningless smudges up to lifesize – the size of a picture we might hang in our own home – there’s nothing there, just the ghost of an artwork, the ghost of content’. These ghostlike images serve to haunt the spectator insofar as they ‘mimic one’s search for meaning in an artwork’. The absence of



Allan McCollum: *Perpetual Photo #2*, 1982-84, silver gelatin print, 20 x 22”.

specific content (which *is*, in itself, their content) turns the viewer's attention toward a consideration of the meaning of content in general and its constant regeneration.



Allan McCollum: *Perfect Vehicles*, Moorglo on concrete, 1988.

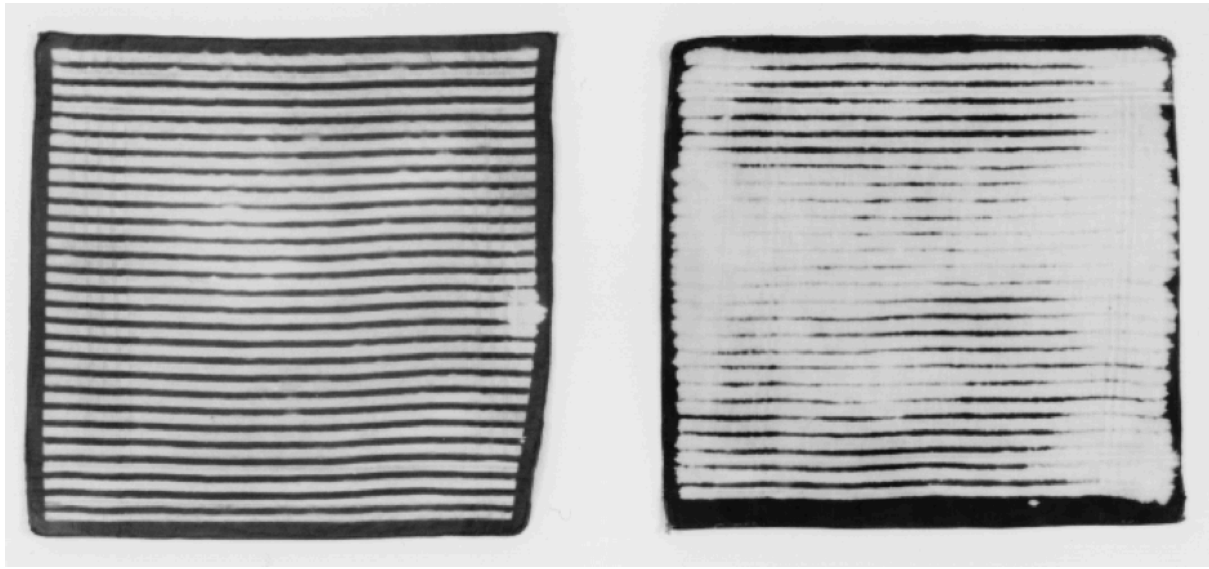
Like the *Surrogates* and *Perpetual Photos*, the *Perfect Vehicles*, 1985 (large-scale version, 1988), have been divested of particularized content in order to present themselves as objects belonging to the category of art. The *Vehicles*, differing one from another in color only, are cast in solid plaster. Modeled by McCollum after the most typical antique Chinese ginger jar, which has been extensively reproduced and copied for centuries, they represent a generalized abstraction of a vase form, although they lack its characteristic hollowness⁵. Formally suggesting both the male and the female⁶ and also alluding simultaneously to both womb and tomb, they cut across the stylistic boundaries of past and present objects of design. They embody multiple associations ranging from ancient vessels such as burial urns to contemporary household decanters that figure prominently in modern home decor. Arrayed in grouped isolation on pedestals or dominating an exhibition space like over-lifesized statuary, the *Vehicles* are emblematic of their own uselessness as vases made into art. In a tongue-in-cheek text pertaining to these works, the artist wishfully affirms and rhetorically queries: 'In extinguishing absolutely the possibility of any recourse to utility, I mean to accelerate the symbolic potential of the *Vehicles* toward total meaning, total value. I aim to fashion the most perfect art object possible....Is it 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?'

The *Vehicles* address the notion of the transcendent, timeless work of art. In parallel manner with the *Surrogates* and *Photos*, they stand as neutral signs that colorfully, sleekly, and wittily point to their own emptiness as vases. Paradoxically, their emptiness as vases imbues them with a weighty import as functionless objects that nonetheless function to carry signification. In short, they refer to themselves as symbolic objects that, specially allocated and classified within the social order as art, automatically signal the expectation of content and engender the desire for response.

Through their reference to the small scale, symbolic collectible or bibelot, McCollum's most recent series, the *Individual Works*, extend his aesthetic inquiry further. A continuing piece, open to future realizations, it exists to date in two parts, one of which is a turquoise blue and the other a salmon pink. These room-sized displays are each comprised of over 10,000 small, similarly-scaled, graspable objects. In recent exhibitions the *Individual Works* have been placed contiguously on a single pedestal table measuring approximately 50 square meters. Each separate object represents a different combination of top and bottom halves of shapes cast from about 150 different household items or their parts. No two objects are alike, although their sheer



Allan McCollum: *Individual Works*, enamel on hydrocal, 1987/88, sizes vary from 2 1/2" to 6" in length, 2" in diameter.



Allan McCollum: *Untitled Paintings*, 1969, dye and bleach on handkerchiefs, 39 x 39 cm each.

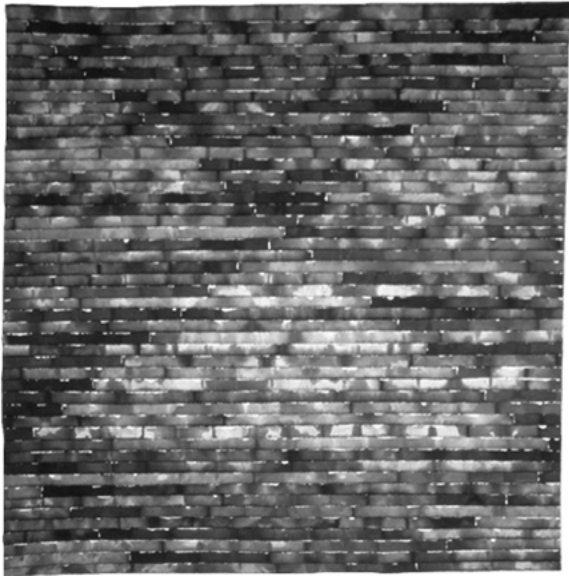
multiplicity and seeming similarity gives an overall effect of mass-produced identity. In this way, these works incisively cut through the established divisions between high and low art, or art and non-art forms of production. As McCollum has pointed out with respect to the *Individual Works* project: ‘... it addresses what is lost in the opposition of art production and industrial production, the cultural trope of the Unique versus the Expendable, the Irreplaceable versus the Common: the psychological underpinnings of the Class system as mediated through our making of things. This work is about an unnecessary and arbitrarily configured dichotomy we all seem to need to believe in...’.

BY BRINGING THE MAKING OF art into the immediate sphere of industrial mass-production, the work seeks to overcome the restrictive barriers that tend to cordon art off from greater accessibility. Unlike other works dealing with relationships between art and industrially-made, non-art or commercial objects of everyday use, McCollum’s piece deals with basic assumptions regarding uniqueness as a built-in requirement for art, be the work a urinal by Marcel Duchamp or a replicated Campbell soup can by Andy Warhol. In the process of allying the unique and precious object with the ubiquitous and ordinary one, he foregrounds the unspoken capacity of art to act as an object of desire, historically placed in the hands of a few.

All of the works in each of the four series by McCollum examine their own role within the broader social framework as objects whose economic and

psychological value in the culture usually is concealed or, at least, not overtly stated. In seeking to devise forms for allowing the work of art to comment upon itself, McCollum has drawn upon, as well as made reference to, the significant aesthetic concerns of a number of his immediate predecessors and, in the process, redefined their aims. Paintings exhibited prior to 1975 when he was living in Los Angeles anticipate McCollum’s future work in as much as they suggest the nature of his artistic enterprise at the outset of his career in the late 1960’s.

During the period from 1968-1977, McCollum developed increasingly systematic and mechanical sets of procedures for the production of ‘self-referential’ art works. Unstretched, stained paintings of 1969 – done on a small scale using handkerchiefs and in a large format using canvas – ironically referred to Color Field painting, extensively exhibited in America at this time. Evenly-spaced, horizontal, white stripes on a grey field contained within an encompassing border characterize these early paintings. For their realization, McCollum first tinted their fabric with household dye and, having then applied strips of masking tape to protect areas of the dyed surface, he subsequently removed periodic sections of the grey coloring by lightly spraying the surface of the material with laundry bleach. The artist describes these works as ‘formalist-paintings-as-Fluxus-objects,’ stating that it was his intention in these years ‘to produce a kind of contemporary painting in a mechanical manner using only materials that could be found in the supermarket’²⁰. As in the case of artists such as Helen Frankenthaler, Morris



Allan McCollum: *Constructed Painting*, 1970-71, canvas, dye and caulking, 231 x 245 cm.

Louis, Kenneth Noland, or Jules Olitski – who are known for staining their canvases with paint – he followed a procedure of soaking the weave of the canvas with liquid grey so that the painted image and its supporting material surface would integrally blend together. However, having also withdrawn the imbued grey colour from areas not covered by the bands of tape, McCollum effectively reversed the conventional figure/ground dichotomy through the allusion to photographic forms of mechanical reproduction by way of presenting the work in the *negative* as areas of light and dark. Paintings brought into being by the inseparable combination of the contradictory processes of dyeing and bleaching thereby succeeded in parodying their own, quite literally, self-absorbed nature while they also made reference to the repetitive methods of factory production.

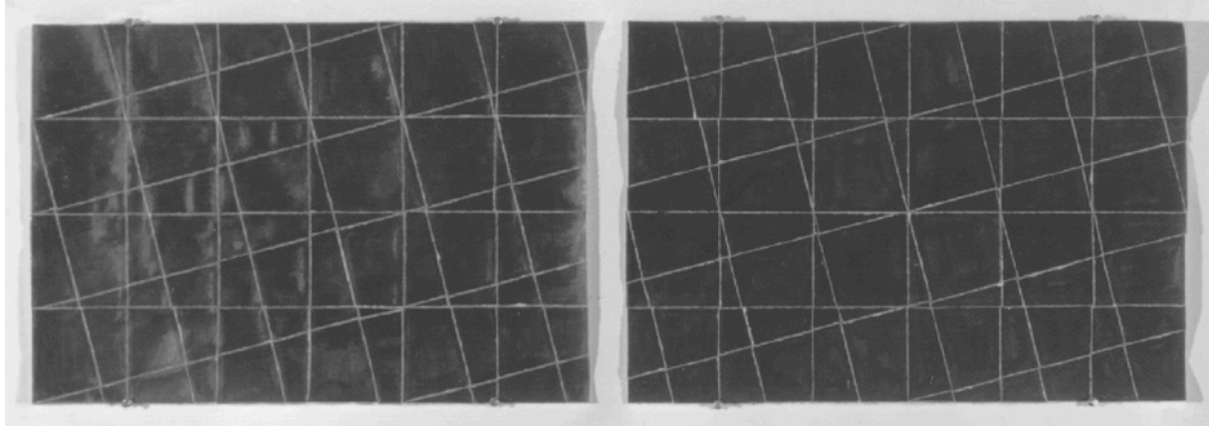


Richard Serra: *Casting*, 1969, 10 x 765 x 455 cm.
Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

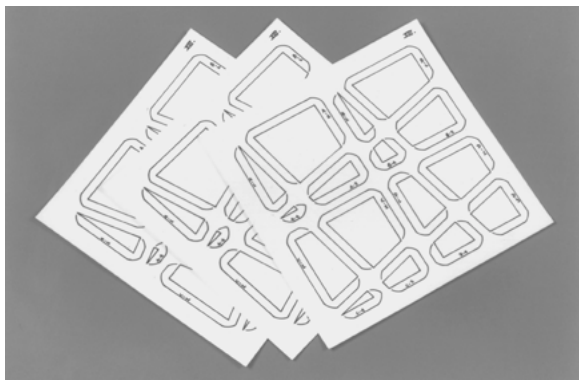
From the late 1960's to the mid-1970's McCollum developed another series of paintings, visually resembling brickwork, whose content revealed the work's form to be the product of its method of formation. For these series, he constructed each work according to regularized procedures of glueing together strips or squares of canvas – all cut to the same size and color – stained in advance – in rows according to various predetermined systems for their linear placement. Industrial caulking secured the individual strips or squares of canvas – which had no pre-existing backing – to each other and became a visible element of the painting. Therefore, as the artist has expressed it, 'there was no way to distinguish the work's composition from the features of its fabrication.'

These early paintings by McCollum, divulging the very substance and process of their own making within their thematic parameters, are indebted to the innovations brought about in sculpture in the second half of the 1960's. 'The elimination of pictorialism and metaphor in favor of the literalism of making' by artists like Eva Hesse or Richard Serra directly influenced McCollum at the time. Serra's *Casting*, 1969, for example, which laid bare the activity of handling material while expressing its true physicality, specifically impressed him. For the realization of *Casting*, Serra threw molten lead into the angle created by the intersection of wall and floor of the gallery space. Once the metal had hardened he pulled it away from its position at the base of the wall and, having repeated this action about a dozen times, placed each molded strip of lead in parallel succession on the floor of the exhibition area. A work such as this, with its sequential manipulation of a raw, industrial, non-art material, offers a clear reference point for McCollum's decision to expose the caulking that both held his paintings together and participated in their pictorial configuration.

Pencil, ink, watercolor, and acrylic works begun by McCollum in 1974, labeled *Untitled Paper Constructions*, further succeeded through processes of mechanization in reducing painting to the terms of its own formal construction. Thus, they overtly challenged the convention of self-referentiality for its own sake by demonstrating that self-referentiality could, in fact, be *mass-produced*. In a wry response to the dogma of the time, which focused on relationships between a painting's internal image and its edge, McCollum discovered the means to correlate image and edge so that they might be totally interdependent rather than mutually exclusive. These works likewise defined their own rectilinearity



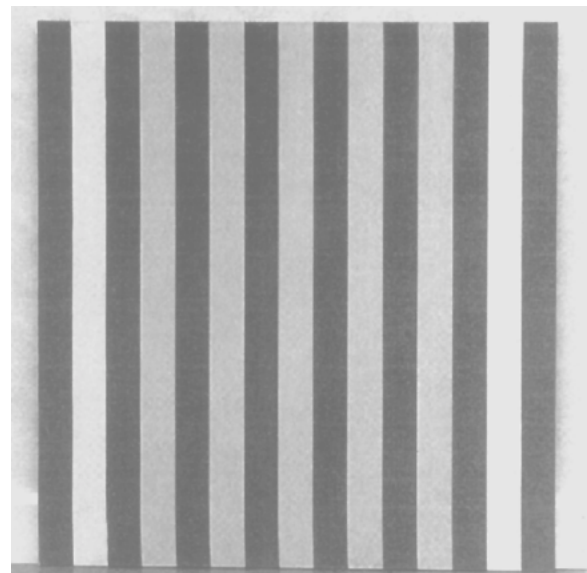
Allan McCollum: *Untitled Paper Constructions*, 1974-75, left: colored pencil on 96 paper shapes glued together, right: India ink on 96 paper shapes glued together, 41 x 61 cm each



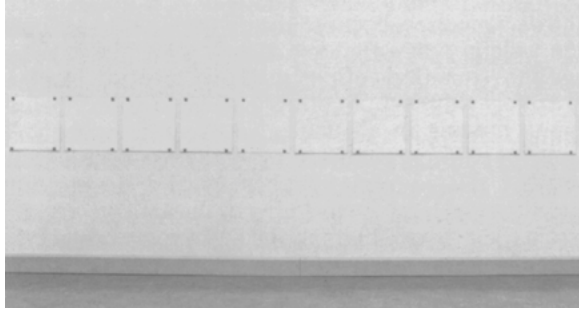
Allan McCollum: *Printed Shapes used to generate Untitled Paper Constructions*, 1974, off-set on Drawing Bristol, 18.5 x 18.5 cm.

instead of being circumscribed *a priori* within a delineated boundary. Utilizing certain existing and basic geometric shapes – obtained when one grid of squares is rotated 22% degrees and superimposed on itself – to form a succession of rectangles, he composed a system for generating a series of handmade works whose criss-cross patterns varied in size and color. The shapes themselves were commercially printed in quantity on drawing paper. McCollum then painted them himself, tore them out along their lines, and glued them together in a puzzle-like fashion. In this way, the shapes could be constantly re-used to systematically and mechanically engender ongoing permutations of form. Paintings thus arrived at through the sequential repetition of rectangular units consisting of interlocking shapes, were, in a sense, ‘patterned’ after themselves in a potentially indefinite manner. By offering a diversity of essentially equivalent patterns, they demonstrated their fundamental similarity in the face of multiplicity and commented critically on the idea of singularity for its own sake.

McCollum’s systematic approach to these works may be seen in the light of the influential methods of Sol LeWitt while his reduction of their formal elements to predetermined, standardized components bear witness to his high regard for the work of Daniel Buren. The use of repetitive arithmetic or mechanical systems – freeing LeWitt and Buren, respectively, from dependence on arbitrary compositional arrangements and expressive signs of making ends each of their works with their individuality in conjunction with determining aspects of their support. Having extended the interpretation of the work’s support to encompass the walls of the existing exhibition space, LeWitt introduced the idea of producing ‘a total drawing environment’ by ‘treating the whole room as a complete entity – as one idea’¹¹. By employing a predetermined system of lines, such



Daniel Buren: *Peinture*, 1965-68, acrylic on canvas, 142 x 131.5 cm. Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.



Robert Ryman: *Untitled (Brussels)*, 1974, acrylic on plastic-foil, 14 x (53 x 53 cm). Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

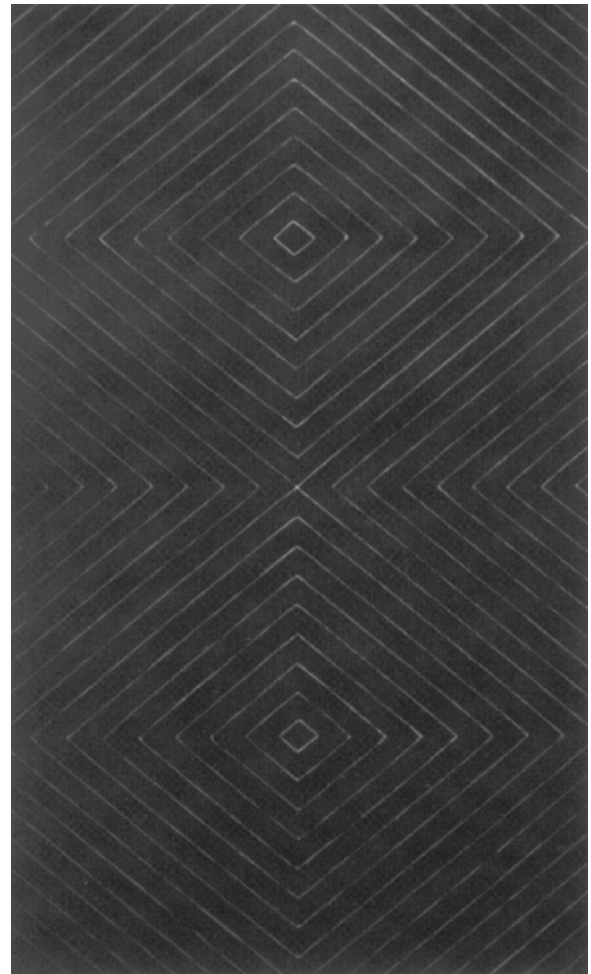
as the basic series *All Combinations of Arcs from Corners and Sides; Straight Lines, Not Straight Lines, and Broken Lines*, evolved in 1973 and used for many different installations, he has been able to effect the complete interpenetration of linear elements with any given surface. Buren, for his part, has expanded the definition of a work's support to account for all of the factors – both physical and social – of its institutional framework. As early as 1965 he arrived at the decision to reduce the pictorial element of his work to the repetition of alternating white and colored vertical bands 8.7 cm in width. This unvarying striped pattern, which may be printed on any material and adhered to any surface, functions as a neutral sign for painting and, as such, constantly has served to integrate the content of each of Buren's works with the specific context in which it is presented. Highly receptive to the procedures introduced by these artists in the latter part of the 1960's, McCollum has directed their influence toward other purposes. Whereas both LeWitt and Buren address the given surroundings of the work in the endeavor to reassess the traditional confines of the delimited, material object, McCollum has chosen instead to attend to the object of art as a consolidated, physically detached entity. McCollum's early paintings, exhibiting the same self-reflective inclinations as his later production, serve as a link between his work of the 1980's and the major issues in painting set forth at the end of the 1950's and beginning of the 1960's by artists such as Robert Ryman, Frank Stella, and Roy Lichtenstein. The work of these three artists, to cite several influential figures, is regarded by McCollum as crucial to his thinking. With the intent of emptying the canvas of previous types of subject matter whether of figurative images, abstract compositional arrangements, interior states of being, or references to the author's intervening 'hand' – each of these artists, like others of their generation in the United States and in Europe, has replenished painting with quintessential, non-illusionistic forms of self-referential content.

Ryman expressly defined the nature of such innovations when he wrote:

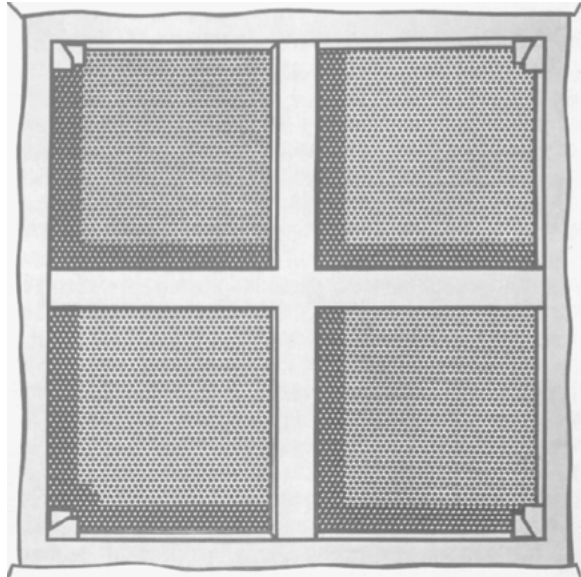
'We have been trained to see painting as "pictures," with storytelling connotations, abstract or literal, in a space usually limited and enclosed by a frame which isolates the image. It has been shown that there are possibilities other than this manner of "seeing" painting'¹².

Ten years before he had characterized his own practice with the statement that 'there is never a question of what to paint, but only how to paint. The how of painting has always been the image, the end product'. For Ryman, whose paintings suggest the unlimited possibilities for the application of paint, painting is an ongoing reflection on painting. In his work, the means of painting that serve to articulate a surface are also the end of painting, that is, they are the thematic material.

STELLA AND LICHTENSTEIN have likewise defined painting as an independent reality. Stella's



Frank Stella: *Tuxedo Park Junction*, 1960, enamel and lacquer on canvas, 310 x 185 cm. Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.



Roy Lichtenstein: *Stretcher Frame with Bars*, 1968, oil and magna on canvas, 91.5 x 91.5 cm. Courtesy Leo Castelli, New York.

Black Paintings of 1958-60, for example, with their imagery that is limited to concentric bands, deny precedence to any one compositional element and do not distinguish between the foreground and background of the pictorial image. Rather, they point to the factual aspect of the otherwise fictional picture plane and to its capacity of being an object in its own right.

Lichtenstein, by other means, has similarly identified the picture plane as a reality unto itself. In lieu of giving evidence of his personal touch, he has wanted his 'painting to look as if it had been programmed'. This series of *Stretcher Frames with Cross Bars*, 1968, exemplifies how Lichtenstein's already flat imagery acts to comment on its own equivalent status with the given, two-dimensional, pictorial surface. Presented within an overall field of dots denoting the process of mechanical reproduction, the images of canvas backs refer not only to the underpinnings of their structural support seen from behind, but simultaneously display the inescapable actuality of their frontality as paintings. In their supreme and humorous self-referentiality, these canvases are depicted as if they were photographic reproductions and thus are images about the fact of being images.

The paintings of Ryman, Stella, and Lichtenstein prefigure the work of McCollum in their extreme and ultimate self-referentiality. However, by pursuing the implications fostered by these works to their logical conclusion, McCollum has succeeded in turning their inwardly directed message outward. Through his recognition of the fact that their paintings expressly

pointed to themselves, he came to the realization that they therefore could be interpreted as *signs* for painting. Taking his cue from this understanding, McCollum has created works that are to be seen explicitly as signs and to be read from within the broader cultural discourse as well as within the discourse of art *per se*. In his words, it had seemed that 'Every conceivable description of a painting that one might offer to define its "essence" or its "terms" could always be found to also define some other, similar object which was not a painting – except for one: a painting always has the identity of a painting; a painting is what it is because it is a convention. It exists precisely because the culture makes a place for it. As a definition, of course, this is a lot like saying, "a painting is something often found over a couch," and yet it was exactly this sort of common - sense definition which I felt was missing in all that other formalist debate. The "terms" of painting are the terms of the world-at-large! An artwork is related to every other object and event in the cultural system, and the meaning of the artwork resides in the role the artwork plays in the culture, before anything else'¹⁵.

WHILE SHARING SELF-REFERENTIALITY, taken another step farther, in common with Ryman, Stella, and Lichtenstein, McCollum's recent work parallels the thinking and practice of artists like Buren, and also like Michael Asher, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, or Lawrence Weiner, on account of its contextually and socially orientated thematic content. Just as these artists have, since the late 1960's, been involved with redefining the traditional forms of painting and sculpture in relation to the economic and social systems of support that provide them with their 'backing,' McCollum as well seeks to affix his work within the encompassing social environment. By serving as self-referential signs, his objects are able to speak of the belief systems bestowed on them by the culture in which they take part.

The oeuvre of McCollum, in large degree, finds its methodological roots in the radical developments in painting and sculpture ascribed to the decade of the 1960's. At the same time, its philosophical roots are primarily to be found in the cross-disciplinary areas of theatre and performance. Events and actions, initially produced under the influential aegis of John Cage and labeled as Happenings or grouped under the heading of Fluxus, flourished world-wide during the 1960's and 1970's. Often motivated by the desire for social change, these works aimed at restructuring ingrained concepts of art by challenging the preconceived methods for and categories of its realization. If Cage, by the 1950's was seeking to dissolve the distinctions between the sounds of art

and life in his music, a succeeding generation of artists in many instances attempted to break down the divisions between art and politics by using the work of art as a tool. The activities of the Provo group in Amsterdam⁶ in the mid-1960's, as a telling example, were known at the time for their socially equitable schemes, specifically in the realm of public transport. A project entitled *White Bicycles* was a proposal for the distribution of some 20,000 free, public bicycles and illustrates one attempted amelioration of the social system through artistic intervention.

The words of George Maciunas, founder of Fluxus, would seem to anticipate the underlying spirit at the basis of McCollum's work in its equalitarian aspect. 'The value of art-amusement,' Maciunas maintained in 1965, 'must be lowered by making it unlimited, massproduced. obtainable by all and eventually

produced by all⁷. Also utopian in its motivation, the work of McCollum aspires toward an elimination of the historically and culturally imposed requisites for uniqueness, which artificially furnish the art object with its worth. If McCollum's paintings of the previous decade represent the search for methods of serialization through reflection upon their own making, his work of the recent decade manifests the ways in which mass-production and aesthetic production can merge in a work of art without lowering its inherent value. Serving as both art and sign-for-art, works by McCollum fore ground their own nature as objects of pure desire without definitive referential limits.

I would like to thank Sally Ruth Rau for her editorial assistance

Notes

¹ Allan McCollum, quoted in Gray Watson, 'Allan McCollum, interviewed by Gray Watson,' *Artscribe*, December/January 1985/86, p. 67.

² McCollum, quoted in D. A. Robbins, 'An Interview with Allan McCollum,' *Arts Magazine* October 1985, p. 40.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ The idea of basing the *Vehicles* on the ginger jar form evolved from a sequence of studies of vase shapes begun by McCollum in 1980.

⁶ See John Miller, 'What You Don't See is What You Get: Allan McCollum's Surrogates, Perpetual Photos and Perfect Vehicles,' *Artscribe*, January/February, 1987, pp. 32-36.

⁷ McCollum, 'Perfect Vehicles,' in *DAMAGED GOODS: Desire and the Economy of the Art Object*, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986, p. 11.

⁸ McCollum, quoted in Ulrich Wilmes, 'Works 1978-1988', *Allan McCollum*, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 1988/89, p. 57. Catalog of an exhibition held at Portikus Frankfurt am Main and De Appel, Amsterdam.

⁹ The Nicholas Wilder Gallery in Los Angeles, which handled McCollum's work in the early 1970's, held many exhibitions of Color Field painting during these years.

¹⁰ This and subsequent quotes by McCollum are from conversations with the artist, summer 1989.

¹¹ Sol LeWitt, quoted in Bernice Rose, 'Sol LeWitt and Drawing,' in *Sol LeWitt*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978, p. 32.

¹² Robert Ryman, quoted in *Wall Painting*, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1979, p. 16.

¹³ Ryman, quoted in *Art in Process IV*, New York: Finch College Museum of Art/Contemporary Wing, 1969-70, unpag.

¹⁴ Roy Lichtenstein, quoted in John Coplans, *Roy Lichtenstein*, Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum, 1967, p. 12.

¹⁵ McCollum, quoted in Robbins note 2, p. 41.

¹⁶ The existence of this group was brought to my attention by McCollum. See Adrian Henri, *Total Art: Environments, Happenings, and Performance*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974, pp. 180-181.

¹⁷ George Maciunas, quoted in Clive Phillpot, 'Fluxus: Magazines, Manifestos, Multum in Parvo,' in Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988, p. 13.