

McCollum's Aura

by NICOLAS BOURRIAUD

Allan McCollum's series' challenge the "essence of painting," and attempt, using new means, to recreate the aura of the work of art.

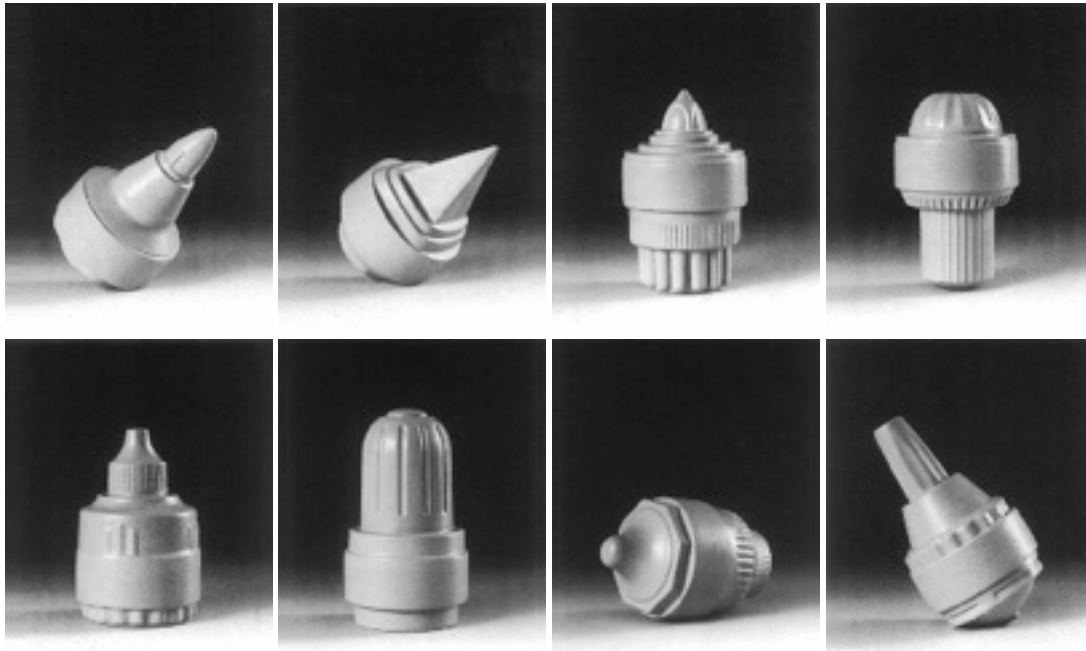


Allan McCollum. *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works*, detail. 1987/88.
Enamel on cast Hydrocal, 2" diameter each, lengths variable.

In order to understand what constitutes the originality and substance of Allan McCollum's work it is important to emphasize what it is that separates him from the new wave of New York artists: more than to simulationism, to which he has been associated, McCollum belongs to the line of American painters of the "sublime," from Barnett Newman to Robert Ryman, and his inquiry goes largely beyond his contemporaries' fascination with the object. Certainly he manipulates the psychological mechanisms of the market: notions of rarity, uniqueness, authenticity, the law of supply and demand... But his work is neither cynical nor does it surrender to what is easily ascertainable. The simulationists usually stop at the substitution of an artifact for reality, by superimposing two different types of exchange values. What is left of the dialectical in Jeff Koons' or Haim Steinbach's work? When one can no longer discern order from chaos, choose between the real and the simulacrum, matter or thought, it is easier and above all more reassuring to simply affirm the order of illusions; which is an order like any other, capable of underwriting a law

for anyone who might desire it. But plastic thought has more to do than simply provide an "ordering," it aims at the unknown, the plurivocal, at exquisite harmony. Though starting with the same elements as the simulationists, what McCollum seeks to achieve is the original aura, the sublime of painting, unattainable today "in the era of its technical reproducibility." Where Koons proposes one-dimensional icons, objects whose brilliance induces a halo without aura, McCollum tries to re-constitute a value of transcendence, starting with all the elements which are, a priori, contrary to it. His work is characterized by an economy of means which is close to indigence. Since he began working in the 1970's he has limited himself to a set of four or five matrix-ideas: the *Surrogates*, monochrome or bichrome "substitute paintings." The *Perpetual Photos*, enlargements of art works from film scenes photographed off a T.V. screen; the *Perfect Vehicles*, polychrome, faceted vases. And today there are the *Individual Works*, objects the size of a hand grenade, of an undefinable blue-green color. From each of these series an undetermined number of "copies" is "pulled." But the paradox of this work is that it leads us insidiously to no longer even raise the issue of the original and the copy. There are already more than ten thousand *Individual Works*, and the exact number will never be known.

Just as with any object of current consumption, "abundance" and "availability" are what dictate their production. "It's as if art wanted to deny the idea of abundance," explains McCollum. His ruse is to install



it in a trivialized version of the souvenir shop, to dissolve the object in the hypertrophy of its constitutive elements and the uncertainty of its numbers. Everything is played out in the “interstices”: each of the *Surrogates* has a unique color and each of the *Individual Works* is endowed with an original form. Thanks to a game of infinite differences, it is impossible to recognize the object, just as it is impossible to deny it an original identity. This ambiguity is accompanied by a fault in naming: what among this display of forms can be called a “work of art”? The ideas? The installation? The object? McCollum supplies the equivalencies of art, a satellite work which places itself on the artistic orbit, as if to point at its emptiness: this “unveiled nothing” which Malevitch spoke of. Just as the placebo effect of drugs says a lot about the possibilities of the nervous system, the ersatz quality of McCollum’s products allow them to assign new functions to the gaze and its economy. The “zero degree” which they attain is akin to that of Newman, Kosuth or Ryman. All utilize logic and geometry to construct a negative metaphysics. All three have made use of the dominant currents of their time to express it: abstract expressionism for Newman, conceptual art for Kosuth, minimalism for Ryman; and simulationism for McCollum. His own preoccupations are fed by collective thinking. His immediate field of reflection is “the alignment of reality on the masses and the masses on reality,” to take up Walter Benjamin’s expression. McCollum, whose parents worked on an assembly line, observes that the international capitalist nomenclature prevents all human exchange. “Commerce as a form of social discourse has been totally banished from our lives.” It has become a privilege, reserved for the buyers of art. “Exchange is dematerialized,” we no longer even exchange sweat. For McCollum, art fulfills Nietzsche’s prediction, that of an art of commerce reserved for the elite. “We can imagine,” writes the philosopher, “social conditions which would eliminate the need to buy and sell (...) it is only then that commerce would become a refined affair, and the noblesse would give themselves over to it with as much predilection as they once had for war and politics.” Much more than a fetishization of the object, Allan McCollum’s work is an estheticization of commercial exchange, one which seeks to unravel the essence of painting. And if, as Benjamin explains again, it is contrary to this “essence” to foreground a simultaneous collective reception, then it is from this “against nature” phenomenon that McCollum will work, because today this is the common condition of artists. Abundance and availability, mechanical reproduction, stop being the gravediggers of the aura which surrounds the work of art: they become the necessary means to recreate a new effect of fascination, closer to our daily lives and to our habits of perception. In this way the *Perpetual Photos* reveal something of the mystery and the poetry of televisual circulation. McCollum has understood that the deployment of the “aura” could only be done on the ground of his worst enemy. Come what may.

—Translated by Moyra Davey