

Allan McCollum

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Props. Decoys. Small, anonymous, more or less identical objects. Small, blank, solid stand-ins for framed images. Solid-state simulacrum of paintings. Fools-gold versions of painting. Plaster surrogates. Surrogate paintings. Surrogates of surrogates. Signifiers of signifiers. Pseudoartifacts. Archetypally cultural objects. Little nonimages. Little model paintings. Generic paintings. Vacant paintings. Empty cases of paintings. False pictures.¹

The terms of deception that surround Allan McCollum's *Plaster Surrogate* paintings – the work for which he is best known – can themselves be deceptive. There is, of course, nothing false about the objects themselves. (How can objects be false? Only subjects deceive and are deceived.) McCollum doesn't employ illusionism or *trompe l'oeil*. His surrogates aren't forgeries of paintings. They're not even paintings – only plaster objects, which may, at a distance, resemble framed images. If the art objects that McCollum produces present themselves as false, it is only because they are the products of a false artistic practice, a practice reduced to a going through the motions of artistic production. Similarly, the terms of reduction that surround McCollum's work can themselves be reductive. There is, Of course, nothing missing, nothing lacking in the objects themselves.

(Nothing is lacking in the real. Only subjects experience lack, not objects.) McCollum's reduction of the art object to minimal signs for paintings, or, with the *Perfect Vehicles*, for culture in general (the vase), is not an end in itself; if it were, one of each would suffice. It is, rather, a function of his reduction of artistic production to that labor necessary only to define it as such.



Allan McCollum. *Surrogate Paintings*.
1980/81

¹ This list of words and phrases used to describe McCollum's *Plaster Surrogate* paintings (by the artist as well as critics who have written about his work) was gathered from various reviews and articles, many of which are listed in the bibliography of this catalogue.



Allan McCollum. *Perfect Vehicles*. 1986

In a recent interview, McCollum described his practice as “a sort of ‘working to rule’”: a job action in which workers do precisely and only what is required contractually, both refusing excess work and excessively observing rules and regulations. “In a sense, I’m doing just the minimum that is required of an artist and no more.”² Each and every surrogate painting (McCollum has produced more than two thousand since 1982) is signed, numbered, and dated on the back. No two surrogates are identical; all those of the same size have slightly different colored frames and vice versa. Although McCollum works with assistants, he insists on painting the outer edge of every black center and the inner edge of every frame. The signature, the artist’s touch, the unique work – the bare minimum of what still constitutes artistic labor.

The idea of an artist working to rule may seem contradictory, in as much as modernism is conventionally understood to have dispensed with the aesthetic codes and conventions that once determined what could be considered art. Today, it would seem that nothing is required of artists. Yet it is precisely this “nothing,” this apparent lack of requirement, that McCollum problematizes – not to take up the avant-garde project of exposing and transgressing the rules that artists work to, but, rather, to call into question the privilege of freedom that artists enjoy with respect to their labor. What working to rule both violates and exposes is not the terms of factory guidelines but those of an ideological pact with managerial authority, according to which workers must mistake the necessity of labor for a freely chosen commitment to work. Unable to refuse work, they refuse instead the gift of surplus labor (labor expended without compensation) with which this freedom is purchased.³ Working to rule is thus a retraction of effort, cooperation, judgment based

² “Allan McCollum, interviewed by Gray Watson,” *Artscribe International*, no. 55 (December/January 1985/86): 67.

³ “The labourer purchases the right to work for his own livelihood only by paying for it in surplus-labor.” See Karl Marx. *Capital, Vol. I* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 515. Surplus labor is, strictly speaking, labor expended in excess of necessary labor. Necessary labor is, strictly speaking, only that labor time that produces the equivalent of the worker’s labor power’s value, and



Allan McCollum. Source for *Perpetual Photo No. 10*, 1982. Photo from TV.

on experience – the “creative” aspects of work denied in the standardization and mechanization of the labor process but nevertheless necessary for the efficient and profitable functioning of industry. Instead of accepting the superficial freedom and petty transgression of rules allowed by management, workers transform a strict adherence to factory regulations into a much more threatening transgression: collectively refusing freely, willingly, to invest their labor in work to the profit of their employers.

Engaging in art practice is the profession of choice *par excellence*; it is inaugurated not by material need but by desire. Artistic practice, one may say, is entirely surplus labor; there is no necessity about it. And it is precisely for this excess, which wage-earning members of society expend without compensation, that artists are paid. Art can thus serve as a monument to the maxim that work is the way to freedom, but only if it is transformed into art work, the work that produced it being effaced in the process.

McCollum neither superimposes the conditions of industrial production on artistic practice nor attempts to raise them, in a heroic gesture, to the status of high art – as modernist sculpture has been wont to do from David Smith to Richard Serra. Producing, archetypally cultural objects in mass, McCollum is not an artist posing as a worker but a worker posing as an artist. The *Plaster Surrogates* and *Perfect Vehicles* don't constitute McCollum's work in the usual art usage of the term, i.e., according to Webster's Ninth, “something produced by the exercise of creative talent or expenditure of creative effort.” They are, rather, only the products of his work, i.e., his labor.

Reduced to pure repetition, McCollum's is no longer a practice in the sense of an exercise repeatedly engaged in to achieve proficiency. While the gradual introduction of marginal differences can lend an artist's practice the illusion of a progress toward mastery (or masterpieces), McCollum's is stripped of this narrative overlay. He only goes through the motions of practice – for the purpose of achieving efficiency. Practice – as activity instituted by a desire for mastery that appears to move it toward an object, a goal, a possible satisfaction – becomes production, an activity instituted by the demands of capital.

Desire for mastery emerges from an identification with the master's imagined satisfaction. If artists are, above all others, those members of society who are supposed to find pleasure and satisfaction in their work, is it not because, being free from the

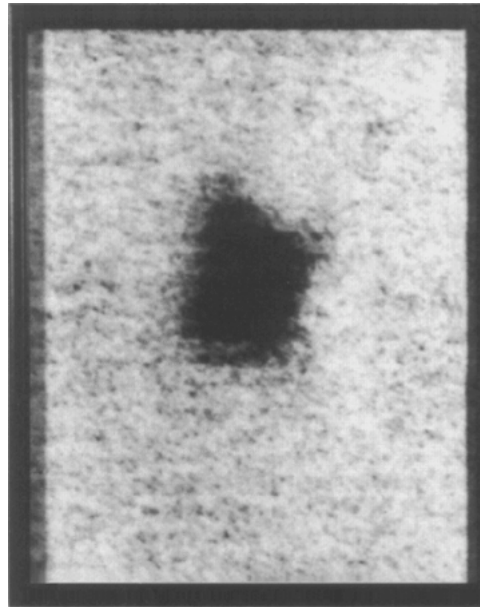
is necessary for his or her subsistence. Surplus labor, because it is given gratis, is thus that labor which produces surplus value (profit) for the employer.

necessity of labor, they can identify with the (ruling) leisure class? The pleasure of working to rule manifest in McCollum's work is entirely different: self-empowerment through a refusal of the prerogative of the class for which one works.

If working to rule is a withdrawal of identification with managerial authority, when transposed to artistic practice it can be understood as a withdrawal of identification with the power and prestige that high art traditionally has represented. The objects that McCollum produces are nothing but emblems, insignia, trophies instilled with pure prestige, installed in the places of power. But for *Perpetual Photographs* and *Paintings on location – Incidental to the action*, he finds and re-finds the products of his labor in a thoroughly disenfranchised identification, photographing them “on location” in newspapers and television behind presidents and movie stars. The imagined satisfaction found in universal recognition appears reversed in these photographs, as the universal recognizability of insidious, ever present objects-in-the-background.

Refusing the privileged consumption as well as production of art, McCollum looks for it not in galleries and museums but on soap operas, reruns, late-night movies-leisure-time melodrama. An after-hours search for some respite from work, some specter of satisfaction.

Refusing the aesthetic prerogative of recognizing oneself and being recognized in the products of one's labor (rather than confronting the conditions of that labor itself), McCollum's work is emptied not simply of images but of the satisfaction of the subject who produced them. He is not them. What becomes manifest is the desire, or lack, of a subject that refuses to mistake the expenditure of surplus labor for a chosen self-commitment to work, who refuses to appropriate the emblems of another's prestige as the objects in which his or her own desire may be recognized.



Allan McCollum. *Perpetual Photo (No. 10)*
1982/84