



Allan McCollum and Louise Lawler, *Ideal Settings: For Presentation and Display*, 1984.

ALLAN McCOLLUM AND LOUISE LAWLER

DIANE BROWN,
NEW YORK

At the back of the gallery, Allan McCollum and Louise Lawler composed a critical installation, a reflection on the limits imposed on art by the gallery under capitalism. Lawler and McCollum are friends, and, as artists, share certain concerns. Their decision to work together can thus be seen as exemplary for collaboration, describing an area of intellectual coincidence rather than the kind of market combination that characterizes most recent endeavors.

Ideal Settings appeared to take the form of a monument, a reminder of and commentary on the place common to those

transactions that we describe as “esthetic.” In the center of the darkling gallery stood a series of some hundred Hydrocal objects, the sort of square black form with central circular steps that is used for display of statues and commercial ware. Blue lighting illuminated these plinths, making them the exhibition’s focus; some were arranged in rows, while others were upended so as to show the date and the artists’ names on the back. Through these labels, Lawler and McCollum isolated these forms as their products, providing the essential artistic attribution. Behind them a projected slide indicated in strong black numbers that other signal factor, their commodity value—\$200.

By privileging the base over its conventionally superimposed object, Lawler and McCollum

pointed to display as the valorizing force in art; it is through display that material products become objects of contemplation and enter the cycle of consumption.

Moreover, the rhetorical devices employed in this installation—lighting, color, and “staged” presentation accentuated the gallery’s glamorization of goods. For it is only their context—that of commerce or exchange—that confers on these neutral and undifferentiated objects a meaning not inherent in themselves. However, Lawler and McCollum would seem to have gone further, for they demonstrated correspondences between esthetic and political ideologies. These “ideal settings”—putatively the optimum arenas for the presentation of art—are also the loci of idealism; the primacy accorded to the base (as to the frame) phrases the terms of art’s transcendence, of its detachment from the external world. And if this privileged isolation ensures art’s value within bourgeois society, it also ensures its location, and circulation, as a commodity. Thus, what we witness is a paradoxical elevation and devaluation of the artwork as it enters the reified conditions of capitalism. “Credit” goes to this collaboration for demonstrating the inevitable.

—Kate Linker