

From:  
ALLAN McCOLLUM  
Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art  
Malmö, Sweden; 1990

## CODA



Allan McCollum Paster Surrogates. 1982/83. Enamel on Hydrostone.

## LARS NITTVE

Could it be that the quiet yet radical dismantling of the Modernist belief system as it is manifested in visual art, a dismantling that has proceeded at a varying but unhalting pace since the '60s, has created a new kind of culture hero? More and more in European politics one sees men and women becoming expert in the task of abandoning formerly entrenched positions that have now become untenable. Is there a parallel in art? This possible narrow application of questions was forced on me while reading Hans Magnus Enzensberger's essay *Heroes of the Retreat*<sup>1</sup>, in *Dagens Nyheter* at the end of 1989. As I read the essay, I was waiting for the start of live TV coverage of the New Year festivities in Berlin...

ACCORDING TO ENZENSBERGER, the events of the past few decades have created a type of political hero hitherto unknown in the West. These heroes are neither triumphant victors nor bold conquerors, but specialists

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<sup>1</sup> - Hans Magnus Enzensberger: Atertagets hjaltar (Heroes of the Retreat), *Dagens Nyheter*, December 31, 1990.

in dismantling and winding down, in scrapping and negating what has gone before. Often ridiculous and pathetic, they must nevertheless be learnt from, Enzensberger writes, "for they are the ones our part of the world has to rely on if it is to survive." They include "pioneers" like Krushchev and Kadar, followers like Suarez, Jaruzelski, and Krenz (perhaps as tragic as they are indispensable), and last but not least the true hero of the group, a man who has elevated the difficult act of dismantling to a new level: Gorbachev.

I'M SURE I could find a Krushchev in '60s art, and maybe a Suarez, a Jaruzelski, or even a burlesque Krenz in the art of the '80s. But even if one believed that artmaking was absolutely no different from any other activity of our society "our culture—from waging war to bookkeeping," in Allan McCollum's words, I have a feeling that the artists who have been most successful in taking apart the metaphysical apparatus of Modernism may have escaped the common fate of the political demolishers: that of being remembered ungratefully as figures of negation, pushed aside by the very forces that they helped to set free. McCollum's surely among the most important artists within the process I am describing. And in speaking of his art—as is fitting in an essay for the catalogue of this major exhibition of his at the Rooseum—I find myself forced to substitute something more definite for that phrase I just used, "I have a feeling," especially in light of his two latest series, *Individual Works*, 1987/88, and *Drawings*, 1988/90, and of the way in which they in their turn have influenced and broadened the conceptual and expressive register of his earlier works.

IN MY ESSAY for *Implosion—A Postmodern Perspective*<sup>2</sup>, I stressed—I have to say enthusiastically—the negative power of such earlier works as the *Plaster Surrogates* and the *Perfect Vehicles*, which ably deconstructed such key Modernist concepts as "originality" and "aura." And a text that McCollum himself chose for that catalogue characterized his work as "the grand ritual funeral of the accumulation of legitimizing signs—legitimization of power, of wealth, or of social status."<sup>3</sup> The words are worthy of a hero of negation. Yet this negativity obviously lies not only,

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<sup>2</sup> - Lars Nittve: Implosion, in *IMPLOSION—ett postmodernt perspektiv/A Postmodern Perspective*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm 1987, pp.33.

<sup>3</sup> - Claude Gintz, in *IMPLOSION.— ett postmodernt perspektiv/A Postmodern Perspective*, Moderna Museet Stockholm 1987, p. 93.

or even primarily, in the works themselves. Rather, it is an expression of our need, in our particular historical circumstance, to use McCollum's art in a certain way. This was breathtakingly confirmed in the decisions made by children working in the Moderna Museet Workshop. Inspired by McCollum's installation in *Implosion* hundreds of *Plaster Surrogates*, they covered a whole wall with pictures that were limited to the same elementary signs McCollum had used—a black surface surrounded by a frame (though the children often omitted the obligatory mat)—but that also exploded with color and joy. In every respect, these pictures seemed the opposite of "pseudo-events and manifestations of the death wish,"<sup>4</sup> as the catalogue had described McCollum's own pieces.<sup>5</sup>

THE EXAMPLE OF children in the museum workshop is actually a little unfair — it is really a case of recontextualization (even though the venue is still the museum) and of the effects of this change on the way the work is received. But it does tell us something about the flypaperlike relationship of the *Surrogates* to meaning. McCollum knowingly makes use of this relationship in his manipulation of the reception of the work by "framing" the objects, conceptually rather than physically, with interpretive statements, and in the way he chooses to present and sell them. His way of working is further unique in that the central groups represented in this exhibition are still in production. Thus he is able to contribute actively to his earlier works' inevitable changes in meaning when they are viewed with more recent pieces in mind. He may, for example, release a fresh version of an old piece alongside a completely new work, or juxtapose an earlier work with a new one in a new constellation. It strikes me that this strategy has its parallels in the development of model changes in the automobile industry.

I AM TRYING to follow McCollum's path from being primarily engaged in dismantling the system regulating art in our society (this in his capacity as a "hero of negation") to articulating an alternative vision. The hero of negation is certainly worth our respect—any cretin can throw a bomb,"

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<sup>4</sup> - Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> - The view of McCollum as a "hero of negation" is naturally not univocal. An early exception is an article by Paul McMahan in *Real Life Magazine*, no. 10, Summer 1983, where he opposes against McCollum's tendency to talk about his work as "fraudulent" and "nightmarish." McMahan instead finds them "accessible" and "humorous": "far from being misanthropic, these pieces have a friendly and open attitude about them. They are there for us, totally receptive, like pets."



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

Enzensberger reminds us, but "disarming one is a thousand times more difficult"<sup>6</sup>—and his difficult task is a necessary one. Yet the big challenge, after all, is to press onward without falling back into the ruts that you have just negotiated, and without being seduced by any reactionary forces that may oppose the earlier beliefs less constructively.

IN MY VIEW McCollum began to develop what might be called a more distinct "positive" vision in his comments as well as in his work in conjunction with the conception of the *Individual Works* and the *Drawings* in the late '80s. I will not try to imitate

Lynne Cooke's excellent analysis of the *Individual Works*, and of the unexpected way in which these fist-sized, serially produced, but still unique objects manage, in their dual capacity as artifacts and as art, to create an identity of their own out of the abundance of mass production—"its own type of aura," as McCollum remarks, "one that warrants serious recognition."<sup>7</sup> Instead I would like to focus on the *Drawings*, which though conceived a couple of years earlier were shown for the first time in the spring of 1990, after the other essays here had been written.

IF THE *INDIVIDUAL WORKS* differ from earlier groups such as the *Plaster Surrogates* by not obviously harking back to established, coded genres such as painting, sculpture, or photography, the *Drawings* differ by being rather more representative of a genre, at least in the technical sense. The *Surrogates*, for instance, could never be called *paintings* without the addition of quotation marks or other explanatory notes. But the *Drawings* carry

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<sup>6</sup> - See note 1.

<sup>7</sup> - Quoted by Lynne Cooke in this catalogue, p. 24. Cooke refers to an interview with the artist on July 14, 1989.

their name proudly: they are indeed handmade drawings in pencil on museum board, and are conventionally mounted in glass and frame. More than 2,000 of them, all shown in the upper gallery of the Roseum, McCollum executed early this year with the aid of 25 assistants. To make them he designed 200 templates, which he combined according to a simple numerical system so that no picture would be identical to another. The quantitative potential for this work is enormous: with the aid of the templates it is theoretically possible to produce billions of unique drawings.



Allan McCollum. *Drawings*, 1989-93. Pencil on museum board, each unique. Installation: Centre d' Art Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland, 1993.

THE MASSIVE INSTALLATION is made slightly claustrophobic by this overwhelming abundance. The framed drawings cover both walls and ceilings one thinks of some superwarehouse, and of the shocking homogeneity of most objects created for mass exposure. Yet these are unique objects, and one also thinks of the exquisite individuality within multiplicity of the monastic scriptorium, for example. Always minutely precise in matters of staging, McCollum manages to set the object in limbo, oscillating

between the masses and the individual. The installation mirrors each drawing character of being something other than the categories to which we usually resort in order to grapple with the crowd of pictures and artifacts that confronts us: these works seem freed both of their relationship to an original—they are neither representation nor copy—and of the burden of being an original—in the theological tradition of *l'art pour l'art*: of art that pretends to be Being in and of itself.

MCCOLLUM MIGHT WELL have managed to assign the same position of limbo to another type of image, but the fact that all of the 2,000-odd *Drawings* are *emblems* is quite significant. An emblem is usually a symmetrical form that rests on a neutral flat surface. It does not extend to the edges of the picture plane: the cross of the Swiss flag is an emblem, but not that of the Swedish. An emblem may basically be described as a picture that is neither a representation nor a surrogate for a real presence, but rather a kind of symbol. It follows that its size is not proportionate to something reproduced, like a smaller or larger projection, but has, like a hieroglyph, its own specific measure. The emblem is itself, in its own material.

IT IS NO ACCIDENT that an artist who places such emphasis on issues of address<sup>8</sup> is tempted by emblems, which unlike the traditional image, as Rosalind Krauss points out, have their specific existence precisely in their relationship to the receiver: They are a "directive address."<sup>9</sup> Nor is it an accident, given the affinity between emblems and flags, that in his *Drawings* McCollum has developed an interest in how "a singular, unitary thing can be made to represent a multiple amount of other things—like the way a national symbol might claim to signify the spirit of a state's entire population. What if 300,000,000 people were represented by 300,000,000 *different* symbols, for instance?"<sup>10</sup> Yet this talk of emblems would in the end be no more than a digression were it not for their status as I remarked earlier; as images "freed both of relationship to an original—they are neither representation nor copy—and of the burden of being an original in the theological tradition of *l'art pour l'art*: of art that pretends to be Being in

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<sup>8</sup> - See for example *Ibid.* p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> - Rosalind Krauss: *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1981, pp 151.

<sup>10</sup> - Allan McCollum, statement published by John Weber Gallery, New York, in connection with the exhibition "*Drawings*", March 1990.

and of itself." These words echo an essay by the Italian philosopher Mario Perniola on the Jesuit theory of representation developed around 1600 by Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino.<sup>11</sup> Bellarmino's theory differed both from that of the *Iconoduli* who saw in the icon a connection or coidentity with the original (God), and that of the iconoclasts, who, to protect the purity of the original, insisted on the complete separation of original from representation. These views are actually related, for they share a common point of departure: the icon's dependency on a prime source, an original. Against them Bellarmino opposed a revolutionary view in which the image "is honored in another site and in another way than the original"—as an independent historic quality.

THE IMAGE PRIMARILY associated with this radical Jesuit theory is obviously the emblem. Like its predecessors and inspirations in late-antique Roman trophies, triumphal arches and apocryphal constellations of symbols like the *Horapollo*, an emblem does not have to rely on something else in order to be valued. Nor is it tied to a certain historical form or style as in Loyola's doctrine that one should "rejoice equally in all things created." An emblem, as Perniola not surprisingly points out, is intimately associated with the development of industrial technology, and first and foremost, with the art of printing.<sup>12</sup> It "denotes the moment when fiction ceases to be nihilistic without reestablishing metaphysics and when conflict ceases to be destructive without restoring past structures."<sup>13</sup>

IS THE JESUIT BELLARMINO a suitable role model for the kind of hero who must follow after the Krenzes and Gorbachevs of negation and dismantling? Is there not a Jesuit overtone to McCollum's words: "If we could come to embrace the mechanisms that drive our passions, and understand these along with the passions that animate our machines—maybe then we could begin to look for an art which is both repeatable *and* expressive, both copy *and* original, both abundant *and* precious; an art to embody both the horror and the promise of modern life, without shrinking from either"?<sup>14</sup>

*Translated from Swedish by Kjerti Board*

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<sup>11</sup> - Mario Perniola: *Icone, visione, simularci*, in *La societa dei simulaeri*, Capelli 1980.

<sup>12</sup> - *Ibid.*, pp. 55-57.

<sup>13</sup> - *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>14</sup> - See note 10.