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Allan McCollum. **Perpetual Photo No. 4**, 1982/84. Silver gelatin print, unique.



Allan McCollum. Source for **Perpetual Photo No. 4**, 1982. Photo from TV.

## *An Interview with Allan McCollum*

D.A. ROBBINS

*"Paintings are everywhere you look; they're all over the place – like cars, or buildings."*

**DR:** The surrogates are clearly "fake paintings," imitations of paintings. I'm curious as to whether you have contempt for painting.

**AM:** Well, to begin with, I don't think that it's only my surrogates which, are imitations of paintings - *paintings* are imitations of paintings in some way, aren't they? With each one reflecting every other one? No, I don't think I have contempt for painting; that would be like having contempt for culture. Paintings are everywhere you look; they're all over the place – like cars, or buildings.

There is some parody, I think, in the way I reduce all paintings to a single "kind," to a universal sign-for-a-painting; the gesture can be read as an ironic mimicry of modernist reduction, for instance, or as some kind of reference to the relations between modern art and modern industrial production - people can make these associations. But my interests are much more centered on discovering what kind of an object a painting is in an *emotional* sense, without the patriarchal noise of aesthetics intruding into the relationship. What is it we want from art that our belief in "content" works to hide from us?

**DR:** When I visit a gallery or a museum, I am seeking out objects to meet a need. That need is fulfilled through a pseudo-event engaged in with a real, physical object. I believe the surrogates catch me in the act of seeking out this emotional connection with inanimate objects, and force it back onto me. They do not allow for the same kind of release that the conventional art object is made to transact.

**AM:** Well, that's just what I'm trying to do, to frustrate the habitual mislocation of meaning within the objects, yes; and that's why the paintings are so "reduced," you see, that's why I reduce them to simple tokens of exchange. The other day I read a remark by the psychoanalyst and pediatrician D. W. Winnicott which I thought was nicely put, in which he claims that there is no such thing as a "baby," because "if you

set out to describe a baby you will find you are describing a *baby and someone*.” It’s the same with the art object, of course, and I’m interested in locating the meaning of my work – and the emotional content of my work - somewhere within those transactions which occur between the various “someones” who are involved in the artwork’s circulation. To do this, I have to try to dislocate the object’s so-called *content*. When we speak of a content as residing somehow within the art object, we disregard the object’s meaning as an item of exchange in the real, social world, and replace this with all sorts of imaginary constructs.

**DR:** What do you think a person is really “looking for” when he or she walks over to look at a painting?

**AM:** Well, that’s a big question. My theory is that one approaches an artwork to displace some anxiety, or to achieve some feeling of safety and security – freedom from fear. Through artworks people for themselves an imaginary sense of freedom. But this feeling of freedom can be constructed in lots of different ways, of course. On the most conscious level, I guess, it can be evoked through illustrative devices, in an overt way: pictures of “nature,” nudity, leisure activity, travel, that sort of thing. Freedom from moral conflict may be suggested by images of innocent children, animals, happy peasants, righteous patriots, religious heroes, “artistic” eroticism, and so forth. We shouldn’t forget the moral purity of “pure form,” either, the ideal space of the “non-representational.” There are the expressionisms, too, which invite the viewer to identify with the spontaneity of the artist himself, his freedom from the strictures of tradition, his freedom to be creative, to express rage and passion, etc.

But I think these are all fairly obvious devices, and they don’t really accomplish too much by themselves – the cinema does most of this so much better than painting anyway. The real sense of imaginary freedom we seek out through art comes through our wishful identification with the forces of money and power which we associate as supporting it., or underwriting it. We identify with the art’s patronage; we find a feeling of safety and security by imagining that we belong to an elite group of some kind: a group whose tastes we share and who will protect us from harm. If one has money and power on one’s side, we believe we are free from all significant anxiety.

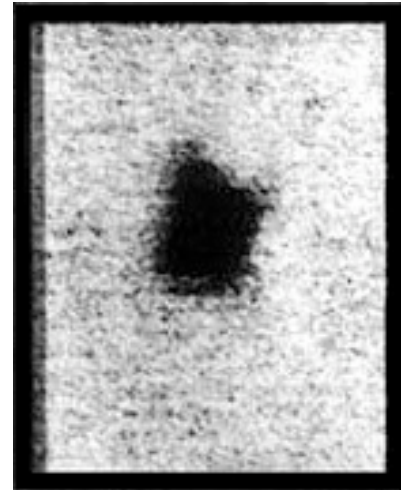
**DR:** So art in general represents a pleasurable suspension of conflict.

**AM:** Yes, I think so. But because art works to contain anxiety, it also comes to *represent* anxiety, to invoke it, to speak for it. An effective work of art can render out of us anxieties we never knew we had, and in turn, mediate the repression of these anxieties in an orderly, socially acceptable way.

It is the *expectancy* of this transformation that I’m trying to effect in a viewer, without offering its fulfillment. I’m trying to create a susceptibility, a vulnerability, to that sort of emotional deferral, but stopping short: trying to create the experience of subjectivity rather than creating subjective experience.

**DR:** How did this come to be the focus of your work?

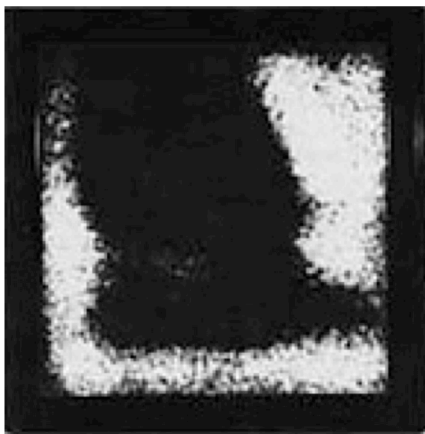
**AM:** Well, I think this focus originally grew out of an interest in the idea of “defining” painting, the notion of reducing painting to a simple set of essential terms, and then “expressing yourself” within those terms. This was what a lot of painters seemed to be thinking about in the late Sixties and early Seventies. I began



Allan McCollum. **Perpetual Photo No. 10**, 1982/84. Silver gelatin print, unique.



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



Allan McCollum. **Perpetual Photo No. 2**, 1982/84. Silver gelatin print, unique.



Allan McCollum. Source for **Perpetual Photo No. 2**, 1982. Photo from TV.

first impulse was to make only one painting, and exhibit it over and over again, to create a sort of archival object – like the government’s Bureau of Standards maintains the standard “inch” in platinum. But this solution eliminated the possibility of exchange transactions – and how could a thing represent an art object if it couldn’t be bought and sold?

I ultimately decided to use a single but *repeatable* image, one which I could vary minimally in size and proportion, but which remained essentially the same: a frame, a mat, and a black center. I made many of these out of wood from 1978 until 1982, at which time I began to cast them in plaster from rubber molds. At this point I dropped the designation “painting” and began to call them “plaster surrogates.”

**DR:** So you’ve fabricated a sort of generic painting. Was your decision to use molds related to increasing the volume of your production?

**AM:** Sure, but also because plaster as a material carries with it the connotation of artificiality, and I needed this nuance to accelerate the theatricality of my installations. Without really anticipating it, you see, I was becoming something of an installation artist. After mounting a few exhibits, I learned quickly that the surrogates worked to their best effect when they came across as “props” – like stage props – which pointed to a much larger melodrama than could ever exist merely within the paintings themselves. The surrogates, via their reduced attributes and their relentless sameness, started working to render the gallery into a quasi-theatrical space which seemed to “stand for” a gallery; and by extension, this rendered me into a sort of caricature of an artist, and the viewers became performers, and so forth. In trying to objectify the conventions of art production, I theatricalized the whole situation without exactly intending to. But, even so, there it was.

to see this sort of thinking as really absurd, somehow. It seemed to me 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 an artwork resides in the role the artwork plays in the culture, before anything else.

**DR:** Art as a distinctly non-transcendent activity.

**AM:** This seemed like an important truth to keep in mind, and yet I found it difficult to think of a painting as simply a term within a whole set of other terms precisely because I couldn’t picture a painting that didn’t aspire to be a world-in-itself. Such paintings didn’t seem to exist. So I took it upon myself to create a model, a standard sign-for-a-painting which might represent nothing more than the identity of painting in the world of other objects.

**DR:** As if creating an advertisement for painting, or better still, *art object*.

**AM:** Yes, like an advertisement, or a logo. I wanted to install a useful image in my mind and in the minds of others. My

At this point, I think, I let myself become the victim of my own thesis, so to speak. The artificiality of the work functioned pretty well to displace content, as I intended, but it also gave me no outlet for the very real desperation that underlay my drive to make art in the first place. I think it was the nightmarishness of this no-exit situation that triggered the exaggerated and obsessional repetitiveness of my work as it exists now. By removing the possibility of catharsis through the work itself, I led myself into a kind of madness of production.

**DR:** Which, given the international nature of the art world's structures, and the production demands made on artists to supply those structures with objects, seems a very appropriate "madness" to engage. You engaged your work over into psychoanalysis.

**AM:** Yes, I think so. Once I began to locate the content of my work as dispersed throughout that whole behavioral complex of exchanges and meanings that is the art world, I began to discover the powerful grip of all those emotions which go into making, showing, buying, selling, and looking at art. There's a lot more at stake in these transactions than meets the eye, so to speak. You and I participate in a sect, a sect in which all the action pivots on this single token, the art object; but it's the emotional politics surrounding this token which provide the meaning and the value. The artwork is always just a substitute, a surrogate.

**DR:** The fetishistic center of our attention.

**AM:** Yes, the artwork is a kind of fetish – a kind of substitute for real power, or maybe I mean a kind of sign representing imaginary power. Like I said, we look at art for security, security against loss or death. I've tried to design these surrogates to *invite* a fetishistic attachment, the kind of attachment one might develop towards a literal sign, like maybe the old Coca Cola sign, for instance. Remember how adolescent boys liked to steal public street signs and hang them in their bedrooms? Appropriating the signs which emanate from authority? I make my work smooth and shiny, with many coats of enamel, to humanize them. Their corners are slightly rounded, they're small, they're nice and solid. One can carry them around, one can put them in a purse, one can wash them...

**DR:** They're user-friendly.



Allan McCollum. **Twelve Perpetual Photos**, 1982/84. Silver gelatin prints, each unique.



Allan McCollum. Source for **Twelve Perpetual Photos**, 1982. Photo from newspaper..

**AM:** Well, maybe. But anything *designed* to function as a fetish shouldn't be trusted, I suspect. I think a fetish inevitably represents the fear of the absence it is meant to replace, and is therefore a kind of scary object. A fetish is a function of fear. It is in this area that I try to draw parallels between the art object and the object produced for mass-consumption; both rely on fear for their circulation. Advertising works to make us insecure about what we lack, and then offers us the fetish-object designed to displace this anxiety: the product. All the while, the vast economic powers which underwrite the entire system of industrial production work to intimidate us from above, creating the insecurity and feelings of helplessness which

make us susceptible to this kind of ploy in the first place. So the mass-produced consumer product, then, as a fetish, both threatens us and offers us freedom at the same time. We are seduced, of course; it's just a cheap trick.

**DR:** Like art?

**AM:** Well, yes, as I said before. With art, the viewer imagines he belongs to a select and powerful group through his sharing in their good taste. When we purchase a consumer product, we achieve an imaginary identification with the powers responsible for its production, and feel we have won the protection of these powers. It's a really similar kind of thing, I think.

**DR:** The surrogates engage volume and surplus more than they do mammoth scale. The quantity and variety of them – you told me before you've made over 2000 of them – forces the viewer into choosing favorites, which, if they want to buy some, becomes a parody of the shopping experience. You've even devised a sliding scale of discounts which is to be applied if they're purchased in quantity. So, the theatricalization extends to commerce as well.

**AM:** Oh, yes. I hear people complain all the time about how the work has become too commercial, but I really think that just the opposite has occurred: commerce has been completely banished from our lives as a form of social discourse. Instead, we engage in a highly controlled and sterile consumer "behavior." The pleasure of actual commerce is available only to those of privilege, those with property and power; the rest of us just stand namelessly in line in an endless series of department stores, exchanging money for what we're told we need, with a lot of nameless cashiers.

**DR:** Credit cards remove even more of the touch.

**AM:** Right. That way, no sweat is even exchanged. The marketplaces in other cultures can be hotbeds of human exchange and interaction. In our culture, the pleasure of this anarchy is reserved for the few.

So when we set art against commerce, we distort both, I think. To define art as a "spiritual" activity, and then to deny human commerce any spiritual value, well that's ludicrous. What else does art stand for in people's minds anymore if not as a symbol of wealth, a symbol of some certain few people's success at commerce? We see art as a kind of spiritual reward for being wealthy. When we experience the spirituality of art, we are usually only constructing a chain of fantasy identifications which lead to power - not mystical power, but just brute, human, political, and military power. The reason for this is simple: we make this association because we figure it takes money and power to own art. Even with inexpensive artworks, stylistic devices always serve to refer to the artworks owned by the privileged – the aristocracies of the past, the museums of the present.

How does art ever become "great" except through such associations? Whenever I hear the term "Great Art" I immediately think of the procession: great collectors, great museums, great countries, great armies, great weapons. This is one of the main ways that value and meaning develop in this world. It's very human, I guess, but it's sad I think. And the mythology we construct about art and its place in the world works to disguise this simple fact, because recognizing the implications of power leads us right back to our anxiety over our powerlessness and it is exactly this anxiety that the arts are designed to alleviate. So instead of creating artifacts to carry meaning amongst us through social exchange, we create artifacts to facilitate our imaginary identifications with those who dominate us.

By being involved in this activity of "creating culture," by making artworks, I believe we are often simply averting our eyes from those powerful people who frighten and threaten us. We make signals to them with our artworks that we are engaged in a harmless activity, that we are not rebels.

**DR:** Our popular notion of artists as being childlike is perverse, but what seems stranger is the number of artists who agree to that assigned behavior.

**AM:** Well, you know it's very important to us that our artists be powerless, like children. The artist is elected to articulate subjectivity for the culture at large, and we require that that subjectivity be passive, and voyeuristic, without effect. All passions which might feed into any desires to disrupt order are displaced into "artistic" expression. The way we characterize the "artist" in our culture - it's a clue to how we construct our emotional lives with regard to the social whole, I think. While we attribute many "positive" features to the artist, we also attribute a whole set of complementary "negative" ones. An artist may be spontaneous, expressive, idealistic, sensitive, creative, sensual, and brilliant - but he or she is also neurotic, infantile, self-centered, sexually obsessed, impractical, parasitical, and so forth. It's easy to see how the popular mind imagines that the positive traits necessarily imply the negative ones! Sensuality leads to hypersexuality, idealism to ineffectiveness, expressivity to infantilism, and so on. The artist's character is like an object lesson to most people, a walking argument for moderation in all things. I think people sometimes choose to be artists because they desperately need to play this privileged, doomed role. It's kind of like being a human sacrifice, but without any such cathartic reward!

**DR:** The artist assumes the role so that the rest of society doesn't need to. But why does the artist, or perhaps more accurately, "the artistic," conform to this well-worn patch of personality between Peter Pan and Joan of Arc?

**AM:** Well, when I say that the action of the art world pivots on the art object as a token of exchange, it is this quality of being *privileged* which forms the actual signified, I think. What we seem to be exchanging are our mutual illusions of being special, which I read as meaning protected or safe and secure. Certain people can't feel that they can exist unless they feel special and privileged in a really broad and exaggerated way. Artists spend their entire lives developing circumstances for themselves in which their signature becomes a valued object, one which is actually worth money.

**DR:** Picasso's signed dinner napkin.

**AM:** Yes, and I think the collector of art consumes not only the art but the artist too, in a way. He acquires the fruits of the artist's moral instability from a safe distance, without having to assume the artist's politically inferior position. The collector thinks the artist represents his innermost self, his unrealized or deferred self, and when he acquires the art object, he rewards himself for his success at repressing his infantile nature, you know, he rewards himself for his superior socialization. The collector thinks he has the best of both worlds - he buys back the part of himself he has lost, so to speak. The artist recognizes himself to exist only when he is recognized by the collector, and the collector recognizes himself only when he recognizes the artist.

**DR:** It's a mutual con.

**AM:** Exactly. A narcissistic dyad. Who's kidding who? We use art in our culture to construct imaginary relations to others. Now, I don't mean to say that I think that this is the ultimate and irreversible destiny of art, that it should continually reproduce this model of human relations. But I do think that our artworks and our relationships to them are just shadows of what they might be, if we didn't constantly pursue an imaginary mystical union with the powers of industry, only discovering ourselves through perpetually repeated acts of *buying* things, because we are a consumer society.

**DR:** We tend to say to ourselves that the art object is *above* the commodity, above the pair of shoes that I buy, because art isn't tied to a utilitarian basis.

**AM:** And yet the absolute utility of art is pretty clear: we are meant to discover our subjectivity in these objects-objects which are owned or controlled by the wealthy, the privileged, the powerful. Artworks function to regulate not only the way objects *mean*, the way they are valued, but also the consciousness which sets out these operations. To describe art as "useless" is to reproduce a really insidious falsification. The world of artworks makes up an extremely useful and monstrous totemic system through which we all trace our imaginary lineage to power. Do you know about the Nelson Rockefeller Collection Gallery up on 57th Street? Where you can buy hand-made copies of art-objects in the Nelson Rockefeller collection? We think this is really funny, of course, because we think we are above all that - but isn't this just a gallery



which is just a little more honest than usual? To see this gallery as an aberration only normalizes those other institutions – like the Museum of Modern Art, for instance – which work to accomplish very similar ends, really. The museum’s board of acquisitions collects artworks from a certain very narrow spectrum of art activity (most of which might never even have been created if it weren’t for the possibility of such an institution collecting it), and is therefore very handily involved in what comes to be considered “art” in our culture. In this way, a really influential institution effects the very subjectivity we experience as our own. Our so-called “unconscious” is conventionalized, and artists reproduce museum-type art all over the country, if not all over the world. We produce our own hand-made copies.

**DR:** And official culture is established.

**AM:** Yes, unofficially, of course. We do it ourselves, through our mimicry of those with power. It’s an identification-with-the-aggressor kind of thing, or an identification with the object-of-envy. The privileged exclude us, but offer us an imaginary relation to their exclusivity as a substitute. Thus we exclude ourselves even from one another. The class boundaries which separate the privileged from the powerless are very real, but their representation in the consciousness of the powerless is made to be really vague and obscure, and so they can only take the form of phobias and obsessions, repetitions and rituals: boundaries of false difference.

**DR:** Is the multiplication of effect afforded by exhibiting more than 700 imitation paintings in one location designed as a mockery of that authoritarian aspect?

**AM:** Well, it’s related. I see repetition as being one of those devices used a lot in the maintaining of power relations. It is a device used by religions everywhere, and by the military, too, to construct a hypnotic spectacle. Repetition is a kind of meaning in itself. Possibly it is the language of power *par excellence*.

**DR:** Inventing an event or an object is a wonderful thing, but inventing it *again* has more to do with power than it does with invention: you are proving that you are powerful enough to arrange the same conditions and make it happen again.

**AM:** Look at the way, AT&T invented a new logo just a couple of years ago, and now it’s absolutely everywhere you look. It’s truly magical. We love this vast spectacle of repetition that arises out of industrial power because of the safety it seems to offer, the security of a predictable authority. We are protected from loss in the glow of a perpetual industrial fecundity!

But I think this is a very fragile security we’re speaking of, and this gets into one of the main reasons I produce my work in such vast quantities and install so many in one exhibit. As I said before, I think the artwork and the consumer good are both a kind of intentionally designed fetish; I believe that you can only reduplicate the fetish so many times before the accumulation begins to turn on you, and the fetish becomes your persecutor: this is why all mass-produced objects have a certain ominous presence. I might like to have a Sony video recorder, but to come face-to-face with *all* the Sony video recorders in the world would be a truly terrifying experience – this I’m sure of. There’s a certain point, like a critical mass, where the fear that animates the fetish-object submerges the safety it offers and works against it. I think the Sorcerer’s Apprentice sequence of Disney’s *Fantasia* depicted this sort of transformation from the helpful object to the object which threatens death. From the nurturing object to the persecuting object.

When I was a child, both of my parents worked on the assembly line of a large aircraft factory in Southern California. On Christmas, the company invited all the employees of this huge industrial complex to bring their children to an enormous party in one of their larger warehouses, and all of us were given exactly identical Christmas gifts. There were giant stacks upon stacks of these gifts, all in identical wrappings, stacked very high. There must have been hundreds and hundreds of them, maybe thousands, and we all had to stand in line for maybe half an hour to get one – handed to us by a Santa Claus, of course. What is a corporation trying to communicate at a moment like that? Generosity? Power? Threat? I found the whole experience really frightening, as I recall, but, naturally, I wanted the gift. This is the sort of nightmarishly ambiguous atmosphere I try to create with my installations, sometimes – not just to be nasty, but to try to free up some of the desperation and anxiety which I believe is inherent in the showing and viewing of art,



but which a smaller amount of artworks would only work to defer and to contain. As I've said, so much of art is about fear-in-the-face-of-power.

**DR:** So you are demonstrating your mastery over that fear.

**AM:** My *attempts* to master it. Through my own personal imaginary identification with the processes of mass-production, probably!



**DR:** What led you to take pictures off the television?

**AM:** Well, you know, like I said before, I wanted my surrogates to represent all paintings, all artworks. I wanted to show that all artworks, everywhere, are just a kind of prop – a prop which has meaning only in relation to the action which takes place around it. A stage-prop seemed like a perfect metaphor for this, of course, and I was surprised to see how often images which looked exactly like my surrogates appeared in the backgrounds of television dramas, old movies, and so forth. I started taking these pictures as a kind of facetious “proof” that my works were an accurate rendering of a real-life phenomenon, I think. I was offering a kind of pseudo-argument for my project’s right-to exist. A fictitious *provenance*, as one friend put it.



But to be completely honest, I'm just really fascinated at finding my work on TV. It makes me feel important, in a really infantile way; I sort of *display* this omnipotence fantasy as a part of my work, to make a point, some of the same points I've been trying to make in this interview. Through art we construct imaginary relations to power. But also, and also very importantly, I use these pictures to ephemeralize the actual plaster objects, to enhance their *sign* qualities. I'm reproducing a certain kind of strategy where photographs are used to manipulate the meaning and the value of an object, a strategy we're all familiar with: it's the strategy that the world of advertising shares with the world of selling art. There's a certain way I like to look at my surrogates, sometimes: that they exist solely to be photographed.

Allan McCollum.  
Surrogates on Location.  
1982

**DR:** And for the TV pictures, the art is photographed to show its prior existence, to naturalize it.

**AM:** Yes, but usually only in the fantasy-world of the televised melodrama. I do make a special attempt to discover my surrogates on walls behind politically powerful men, though. I've found “my work” in the same rooms with John F. Kennedy, Harry Truman, and Gerald Ford, among others. On a certain level I'm making a parody of a sales technique, the technique of celebrity endorsement; but in a more important way, I'm using my own infantile wishes as a metaphor for the way we relate to art in general, for that very basic wish we all share, *the wish to be in the picture*.

**DR:** The wish to participate in history, where one's existence has been shown to count for something - *recorded*.

**AM:** To be in on things at the source, to be involved in the Primal Scene, not out in the hall looking through the keyhole. To be present with those who have the power, to be under their gaze, and to be protected by them. We want to be somewhere within the circle of power, but safely preoccupied with something harmless at the same time, maybe. To be absorbed with something sublime and beautiful which is contiguous with something powerful and threatening. These wishes operate all the time while we look at art, but we do not experience them as part of the “content.” It is only within the context of this wishing, however, that content is sought out.

**DR:** While the plaster surrogates themselves are about locating where art is in the cultural hierarchy as commodity, in the emotional hierarchy as mediator, in the political hierarchy as class sieve, the TV pictures are about locating the place of art in the representation of life by the mass media. George Trow says that





Allan McCollum. **Plaster Surrogates**. 1982/84. Installation: Metro Pictures Gallery, New York, 1984.

TV represents the scale of national life. It's the national home we all share. If that is so, then the TV surrogates represent that national life's use for and placement of art.

**AM:** Sure, I guess so. On the wall, out of the way, incidental to the action. We have to remember that as artists, critics, art dealers, and so forth, we see art in a grossly distorted way.

**DR:** As a hugely important thing.

**AM:** Absolutely vital to life! I'm always especially happy to find an image with either a violent, or melodramatic, or historically important activity going on in the foreground, with the inactive painting on the wall in the background mutely signaling. This is the ultimate location of art, in the background - as it should be, I suppose.

**DR:** In the second phase of the TV pictures, the ones you call *Perpetual Photos*, you've isolated the tiny images from framed paintings in the backgrounds of TV scenes of domestic life and blown them up to show us what the broadcast interpretation and placement of art really looks like.

**AM:** Sometimes I'll find a picture that has a tiny framed picture on the wall in the background, and the image within that frame is indecipherable, just a blur. When I enlarge these little meaningless smudges up to life-size - 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. There's something parodic in this gesture of mine, I think, and some thing pathetic. Looking for the limits of representation; seeking to discover those limits at which the binding of a picture gives way; releasing those emotions the representation sought to contain. This is a kind of synthetic expressionism I am doing here.

**DR:** But it's also an important retrieval. The first TV pictures are placed surrogates, while the second - the *Perpetual Photos* - are displaced images of art, grotesque abstractions which represent the bourgeois recognition of art. You have retrieved them in order to bring them back to art so that we might understand art's mediated image, its place in the world.

**AM:** Well, I think that through this “retrieval,” as you call it, I’m also trying to mimic one’s search for meaning in the artwork, too, one’s quest for the sublime and the transcendent, one’s quest for one’s own unconscious, and so forth.

**DR:** You’ve been very critical of the art machine as it’s currently constructed. How do you answer those who accuse artists who espouse this point of view of being self-righteous or moralistic?

**AM:** I’m interested to encourage an analysis of art, but through the pleasure of looking, that’s all. I would like to see us be a little more anthropological in the way we assess our own cultural production. I feel that art now functions to keep people apart, to reinforce and maintain class boundaries, and to encourage exclusion and inequality through the cull of “taste.” I think this is wrong; yes, I am moralistic about this. I hope that my work might play some role in the analysis of this situation, and I hope it does so by bringing some pleasure into the discovery that the problem does not necessarily lie with art but with those forces which work to legislate its meaning.

DA Robbins  
New York City  
Summer, 1984