

The Reenchantment of Art, excerpt

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Allan McCollum, *Plaster Surrogates*. 1982/84.

We are now faced with a curious situation in which meaning has become so detached from itself that its central collapse defines much of the art of our time--to the point where the “will” to meaning often deliberately courts meaninglessness and even finds satisfaction in it. Nowhere, for instance, is what Baudrillard calls the “beautiful effects of disappearance,” better illustrated than in the *Plaster Surrogates* of Allan McCollum, works that simultaneously dramatize and thwart our desire to look at pictures. On closer scrutiny, McCollum’s “paintings” reveal themselves to be simulacra--pseudoartifacts in which picture, mat and frame are all one seamless object, molded in plaster--yet there is nothing to see. In place of any communicating image is a dark, thick substance, like pitch--a pure screen of black, whose emptiness would seem to express the posthumous condition of art and culture. To simulate is to play what Baudrillard calls the “disappearing game” of postmodernism, which he claims is the best we can afford today, since nothing is real anyway. “If only art could accomplish the magic act of its own disappearance!” states Baudrillard. “But it continues to make believe it is disappearing when it is already gone.”

McCollum’s simulations of conventional art objects are like signs from a language, but not the one you think you know. Hung in groups to resemble a crowded salon show, sometimes by the hundreds, they are like steps to a palace that can never be rebuilt or remembered--where only the allegory of the empire remains. “I’m just doing the minimum that is expected of an artist and no more,” McCollum has stated.

“I’m trying to orchestrate a charade.” If these objects are intended to make us aware of a particular ideological delusion, then we must ask ourselves what it is that we are deluded about. In the age of simulation, video dogs and cats can be bought for twenty dollars that will chase after video bones and balls of string, providing (to quote an article from *Time* magazine) the “full, rich experience of owning your own pet without the mess and inconvenience of the real thing.” Computer scientists are now working on creating artificial realities that will allow people to play simulated tennis games, for instance, without ever leaving their living room, by wearing a special computerized helmet and gloves. Within these competing visions of staged masquerades and *tableaux vivants*, the line between the art of the simulacrum and the psychologically charged spoof is a very thin one.

Since nothing separates true from false anymore, how can we possibly assess the reaction of the power of structure to a perfect simulation?, asks Baudrillard. By feigning a violation, he suggests, and putting it to the test. “Go and simulate a theft in a large department store,” he proposes in *Simulations*. “Or organize a fake hold-up.... How do you convince the security guards that it is a simulated theft?” You won’t succeed, because the web of artificial signs will be inextricably mixed up with real elements (a police officer will really shoot on sight, or a customer will really faint from fear). Likewise, I shall ask, how do you convince an art dealer that McCollum’s pictures are not “real” works of art, but simulations? You won’t succeed here either, because collectors will buy them, dealers will show them and critics will write about them; even simulations cannot escape the system’s ability to integrate everything. And so it is that art survives its own disappearance: somewhere the real scene has been lost, but everything continues just the same . . .

Exposing the inability of present institutional models to bring about transformation has been the chief value of the aggressive ground-clearing of deconstruction. Allan McCollum’s *Plaster Surrogates*, are a shrewd commentary on what occurs when a guiding truth becomes bankrupt; they exemplify, perhaps better than any other deconstructive work, the paradigmatic inertia of aesthetic codes that have become just another petrified formula for an image-driven society of spectacle. With the *Surrogates*, we have come full circle, to the zero-sum point of Kurt Schwitters’s statement at an early stage of the modernist project: “The picture is a self-contained work of art. It refers to nothing outside of itself. Nor can a consistent work of art refer to anything outside of itself without losing its ties to art.”

By representing the art object in its modal existence as commodity and spectacle, McCollum is simply laying bare the function it fulfills in relation to the culture at large. When art, as Peter Halley puts it, “has been reconstituted according to the processes of bourgeois consciousness,” the thing that everybody really talks about is how to get a show. This is the shadowy juncture where aesthetics melds with economics as the main metaphor for a single value system in which the artist, without any other social role to play, seeks to gain the attention of collectors, curators and critics. A crisis of purpose is at stake here, and as Baudrillard succinctly puts it, “the boil is growing out of control.” “We are no longer in a state of growth,” he writes in “The Anorexic Ruins,” “we are in a state of excess. We are living in a society of excrescence, meaning that which incessantly develops without being measurable against its own objectives.” Through overproduction and excess, the system overextends itself, accumulates, sprawls, slides into hypertrophy, obliterates its own purposes, leaves behind its own goals and accelerates in a vacuum. McCollum captures it all brilliantly, in a single Gestalt: the intensification of the aesthetic process in a void. Production and then overproduction and exhaustion of creativity at the same time. Our whole culture’s cooptation into the growth economy and the codes of consumption. The context of no-context. “They’re not even paintings,” McCollum says about the *Surrogates*, “only plaster objects which may, at a distance, resemble framed images.” But every surrogate has been signed, dated and numbered, and no two are identical. We are in the presence of “original works.”