

UVC - ASSIGNMENT 2

Allan McCollum 'Plaster Surrogates':

Look at Allan McCollum's work *Plaster Surrogates* and explain its

Relationship to Modernist Art and Theory



Figure 1 - Allan McCollum, Collection-of-forty-plaster-surrogates, 1982 - (McCollum, 1982/4)

Assignment Task: Look at Allan McCollum's work *Plaster Surrogates* shown at the beginning of this chapter and explain its relationship to Modernist art and theory.

To address this question, you should first familiarize yourself with the work by looking at the different ways it is displayed in a gallery. Also give due consideration to the title as well as the medium and the way the individual elements are formed. Key to understanding the work is the term 'monochrome' – in what ways have artists before McCollum produced monochromes.

Also consider what is meant by the distinction between a monochrome and a blank canvas. Some artists to look for: Kasimir Malevich, Alexandr Rodchenko, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Klein, Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin and Allan McCollum.

Thierry de Duve's essay 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas' is an important text though also a rather demanding one. (1500 words)

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Introduction: The void as a spatial experience for renewal of art

Art does not reproduce what we see. It makes us see.

- Paul Klee (1879-1940)

Allan McCollum's 'Plaster Surrogates' can be seen as a critique and satire of Modernist art and a reflection on a myth of painting related to its precious originality of art. This essay will argue that McCollum is addressing those questions in a formalistic approach reflecting his roots in Modernist terms. It will also show how 'Surrogates' are an illustration of the literalness of form, shape and space towards generic art of objects alongside a shift in experience of reality. McCollum's 'Surrogates' of mass-produced serial objects, reflecting an estranged modern cultural life of commodity consumption, can be experienced through a staged installation spectacle in a gallery space. The 'Surrogates' are a reflection on the Modernist self-referentiality and self-criticism that returns the question of authenticity to the viewer. The question whether contemporary painting can fill the 'void' that the 'blank canvas' denied will be discussed from today's perspective and attitude towards originals of painting and art as enabler for a critical discourse.

'Plaster Surrogates' as reflection of Modernist Art

A 'look of the "void". A monochromatic flatness that could be seen as limited extension and different from a wall automatically declared itself to be a picture, to be art. – Clement Greenberg, 1967

McCollum's 'Surrogates' can be seen as a formal reflection on Modernist Art in a Greenbergian sense. Point of departure are C. Greenberg's criteria expressed in his essay 'Modernist Painting' (1967) of a self-critical attitude and a 'self-definition with a vengeance' (Greenberg, 1995b, p. 86) stressing the limiting conditions of each discipline of art and rejecting any depiction of illusionistic spatial realities. With that each discipline would achieve quality in 'purity'. For painting this meant to embrace 'two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness' (Greenberg, 1992, p. 131). While emphasizing opticality and negating tactile associations specific for sculpture, the paintings in the first half of the 20th century, from Cubism till Post Painterly Abstraction, were much guided by those principles.

Mc Collum's 'Surrogates' as replicas of framed pictures do appropriate those limiting conditions formally and literally, consisting of frame, mat and a black picture portion as 'paradigmatic structures' (Wilmes, 1988). Nevertheless, McCollum's single pictures of the 'Surrogates' do stay within the cultural convention and formal response to the shape of a framed canvas. All what it does is to emphasize the literalness of a picture. How could the limiting convention of shape be overcome and how could those limitations be 'pushed back indefinitely –before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object' (Greenberg, 1995b, p. 90). The question of painting of art versus the notion of being considered a mere arbitrary object, an aesthetic question of art versus non-art, were at stake. A question that was not answered yet.

'Plaster Surrogates' as illustration of literalness and objecthood towards an end of painting and creation of generic art

I have covered all of you with a square and without me you will not get out of it. - Kazimir Malevich

As stated above, the black picture portion in the 'Surrogates' rejects any illusion of form, composition or any references to artistic manual interrogation. The 'Surrogates' are an expression of a 'void', an ultimate emptying of the canvas from illusionistic naturalness, optical illusion of figure and ground, and subject matter. They stand in a tradition of Modernist 'Monochrome' paintings. Starting with Malevich's suprematistic 'Black Square', 1915 and the artist notion of an iconic 'tabula rasa', as spiritual freedom and expression of 'purity' by its placement in the upper corner of a room (Malevich, 2003, p. 293, Tupitsyn, 2017) towards the culmination in Ad Reinhardt's black 'Abstract Paintings', 1960-66 as the total negation of subject matter, form, composition, colour, contrast, gestures and any external references beyond the pictorial plane (Collings, 2000, p. 156). These and other artists like Frank Stella, Robert Ryman, Sol Le Witt, Daniel Buren had 'replenished painting with quintessential, non-illusionistic forms of self-referential content.' (Rorimer, 1989). Furthermore, monochrome paintings were continuously been exhibited as series of works at gallery walls, seeking for the viewer's attention of its overall presence and to subtleties of variations.

Accordingly, the negation was still restricted to literal conventions of painting based around an ultimate blank canvas that made Greenberg to conclude 'thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture'. (Greenberg, 1995a, p. 131). We can see how the 'blank canvas' turned into the black picture portion, the void of the 'Surrogates', as if to illustrate the idea, while still adhering to the convention of the black 'monochrome' paintings.

Nevertheless, the 'Surrogates' are not flat paintings, they are 'bas-reliefs', moulded, casted, manual painted. What seems like another illustration of Greenberg's statement that artists 'go from painting to coloured bas-relief' (Duve, 1990, p. 258).

In short, critiques like Douglas Crimp were proclaiming the end of painting. And Arthur C. Danto extended this view in expressing that ‘the narrative of modernism was at an end’ (Danto, 1997, p. 142). The end was rather an end of a separation of medium-specificity by art disciplines and the evolvement of 'mixed media' approaches. The trouble with Modernist painting around Greenberg’s argumentation was its articulation as problem-solving activity for basic ‘literal’ problems.

In view of this, we need to look at a larger scale beyond individual disciplines and with an extension into the third dimension: Minimal Art was evolving with new spatial experiences built around the relationship of objects (the art object) and subject (the viewer, the beholder). A spatial experience that was already partly present in Malevich ‘Black Square’ and Ad Reinhardt’s way of installation. The literal interpretation of shape, awareness of size, ‘wholeness’ and extended spatial experience, was what Michael Fried called the ‘objecthood’ (Fried, 1998) and Greenberg ‘the conditions for non-art’ (Greenberg, 1995c, p. 254)

Therefore, in embracing ideas from Minimal Art the 'Surrogates' can be seen as the embodiment of shape as spatial experience and as a development towards ‘generic art’, unmediated by the convention of a specific medium (Duve, 1990, p. 249). This implies the question of formal aesthetic judgement of art or non-art that found a different perspective in Joseph Kosuth’s statement when ‘one begins to realize that art’s ‘art condition’ is a conceptual state.’ (Kosuth, 2003, p. 857). ‘Art as idea’, that goes back to Duchamp’s readymade of his ‘Fountain’ that he submitted 1917 for an institutional jury approval for exhibition.

In other words, McCollum’s ‘Surrogates’ do relate with the blank canvas and the readymade. The multiple variants of objects, ‘picture-objects’ as generic art objects, and as the expression of an idea of a ‘sign for the totality of pictures’ (Wilmes, 1988). The

individual picture was not important any longer. So how could one experience a ‘totality of pictures’? This question and the importance of the gallery space will be addressed next.

‘Plaster Surrogates’ as extension of a staged illusionary experience of reality

If anything, and everything can be intuited aesthetically then anything and everything can be intuited and experienced artistically. If this is so, then there turns out to be such a thing as art at large: art that is, or can be, realized anywhere and at any time and by anybody." - Greenberg, 1975 (Duve, 1990, p. 300)

Experience of pictorial reality in painting was once considered as the window to the world. This perception changed with the turning point of ‘Monochrome’ painting as the ultimate self-referential experience of a painted surface as itself. The ‘zero base’ of reality perception shifted outwards with Minimal Art and Conceptual Art towards the physical space of an exhibition room as spatial experience of art objects. An experience of the room that Sol Le Witt stated as the space of a ‘complete entity – as one idea’ (Rorimer, 1989).

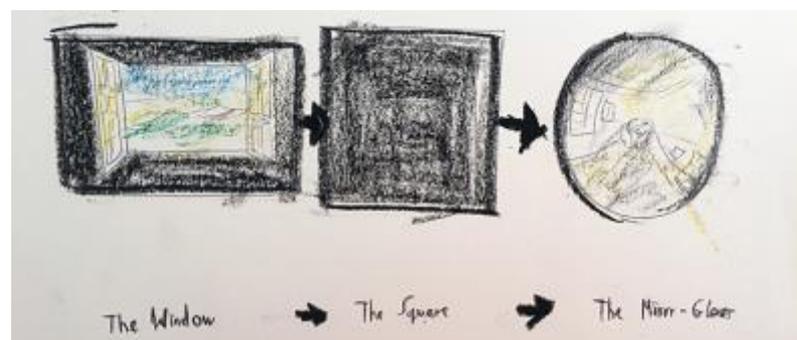


Figure 2- Reality of Art - ©Stefan J Schaffeld, 2017 - (Schaffeld, 2017)

An example of the extension of the pictorial space from its inner relations moving outwards and embracing the exhibition space was already a matter of discourse in Barnett

Newman's painting 'Wild', 1950 and the question of the impact of a frame around a painting on its spatial perception (Allan, 2013).

In conclusion, the presentation of McCollum's 'Surrogates' in a gallery space (Figure 1) can be related back to key concepts of Minimal Art around 'objecthood', the Gestalt and its presence that demands the viewer to take the objects into account. Michael Fried criticized this as a staged and theatrical situation as it 'distances the beholder not just physically but psychically' in a 'non-personal or public mode' (Fried, 1998, p. 154) McCollum actually embraced that notion of theatricality, appropriated and satirized it with his 'Surrogates'. His intention was to 'turn the gallery into a sort of stage set, with props that stood for painting' (Dellinger, 2013). We can see how this is putting Fried's fear that 'art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre' (Fried, 1998, p. 164) not only in a new cultural context. Moreover, it also questions Greenberg's differentiation between aesthetic and non-aesthetic context (Duve, 1990, p. 294).

Nonetheless, the 'Surrogates' do develop 'in the context of specific exhibition conditions' (Wilmes, 1988). The installation of the 'picture-objects' presents kind of paradox experience for the viewer. Contradicting a conventional absorptive look at individual pictures, the distancing and alienating effect of the 'void' and meaningless of individual objects is falling back onto the viewer as a self-reflective and self-referential experience (Figure 2). Particularly, Andrea Fraser's performance as a spectacle of seeing can be considered as a self-critical reflection of McCollum's work and an open discourse with the audience of today's cultural context of mass consumption of art as commodity (Fraser, 1991)

Alternatively, one can state that the spatial experience in a gallery space is a controlled environment, mediated through artists and institutions. The question would be what happens in other, less controlled contexts?

‘Plaster Surrogates’ as a sign for mass-consumed cultural products and the myth of painting

It's better like that, if you want to kill a picture all you have to do is hang it beautifully on a nail and soon you will see nothing of it but the frame. - Pablo Picasso

McCollum are addressing the changing cultural context of mass- production and its questioning the notion originality that came along commodity consumption. His reflection through the ‘Surrogates’ as imitation of painting and thus ‘sign for paintings’ is aiming at ridiculing the sense of originality and authenticity through serial production of moulded variants of picture-objects. He wanted to ‘devalue the mystic’ (Art21, 2010) of the artist and, being annoyed by limited editions, he copied the cultural mode of production and consumption analogue to advertisement. As a result, he confirmed Walter Benjamin’s notion that the original is not important any longer (Danto, 1997, p. 144). Consequently, all could move further into imitations of pictures with a sense of hyperrealism, simulation and distancing effect as Baudrillard expressed it 1976 (Baudrillard, 2003).



Figure 3 - ACE HOTEL MURAL BY TIMOTHY GOODMAN - (Goodman, 2017)

Thus, Picasso's words of 'killing a picture by seeing eventually only the frame' would be actualized and the end of painting history. Alternatively, the attraction of original painting and art is not disappearing. The sense for aesthetic authenticity of art originals while visiting galleries and museums do through 'the purely formal aspects of the art (which is, after all, often very beautiful) offer the sole pleasure of viewing' (Wolff, 2005). It is also evident that McCollum's idea of de-valuing art through mass production is ultimately not happening (yet). Value of art is estimated by collectors, not the artist, though mediated through institutions and mass-media.

Notably, and kind of irony, the 'Surrogates' are produced with an 'original' master mould. McCollum could have truly embraced the readymade through making the 'Surrogates' from stock frames from a department store.

To conclude, the frame as sign for painting is therefore a myth, based on cultural conventions, and nowadays an empty form with less meaning when more contemporary paintings are presented without a frame. Nevertheless, McCollum 'Surrogates' as critique and sign are going to be appropriated further, as another sign for commodity and 'refilled' with arbitrary picture contents (**Error! Reference source not found.**)

Conclusion: The Void and a New Beginning

This essay highlighted the influences of Modernist Art and Minimal Art on McCollum's serial work 'Plaster Surrogates'. References to the 'blank canvas' as the void to fill in and underlying art theories placed the work into context of generic art.

McCollum's work appropriates and illustrates Modernist Art through a formal and literal approach. A critical reflection on mass-consumption and questions of originality is emphasized through a serial production of the picture-objects. Seeing the cluster of 'Surrogates' in a gallery environment keeps the viewer of a staged spectacle at distance and

rejecting a deeper connection with individual pieces. Besides, the void that opens up encourages the viewer for a deeper interrogation as a self-reflective experience. Though the 'Surrogates' are representing a sign for the totality of pictures as imitations, they are not prohibiting a desire to see art work as originals in order to experience its presence. The idea of 'Surrogates' as commodity product is being appropriated further in other areas.

The conclusion based on the sources covered in this assignment essay do suggest that the 'Surrogates' can be seen as illustration of the Modernist self-referentiality and self-criticism that returns the reflection of context back to the viewer. It may be that not all questions have been answered considering that the 'Surrogates' were made long after Post-Modernism was 'declared' and other theories might be relevant in understanding different perspectives of McCollum's serial produced art objects.

(Total word count: 2279)

Images

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