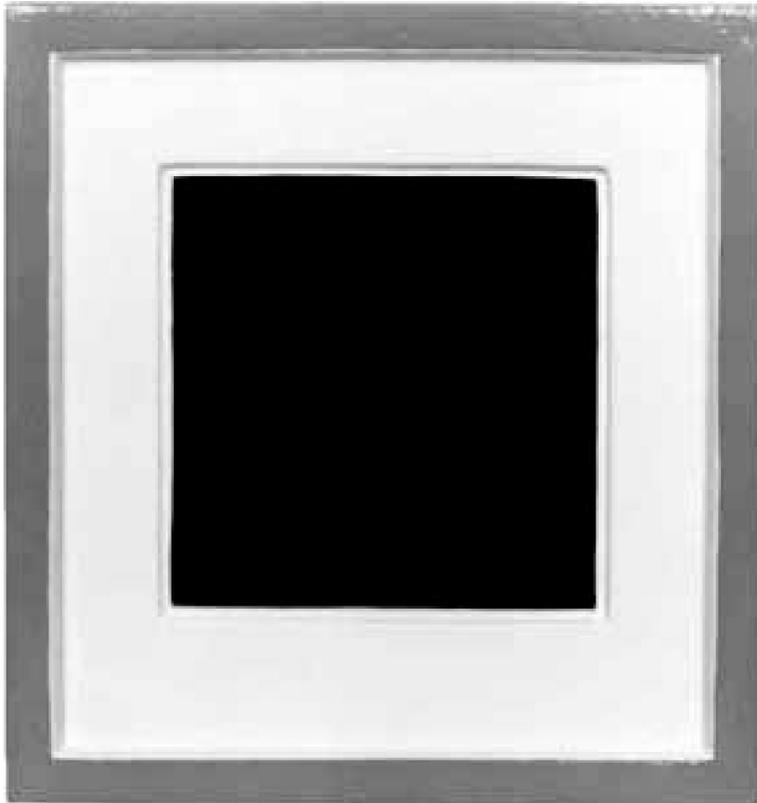


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*Allan McCollum.  
Plaster Surrogate.  
1982/1. Enamel on  
Hydrostone.*

*Painting as Empty Space  
Allan McCollum's Subversion of the Last Painting*

JOHANNES MEINHARDT

In the late fifties and early sixties the essential or ontological reductionism of abstraction began to reveal its inextricable aporia. This was most evidently manifested by Ad Reinhardt who, beginning in 1960, painted his "Black Paintings" for five years. He kept making the 'last picture', an empty repetition of the same square black painting. Abstract reductionism had sought to ban all contingent, non-essential, sensual aspects from the painting, from the surface, so as to reveal, by way of reduction, the basic ontological categories and important definitions of painting, that is to say the painting itself, the first or the last picture. By contrast, reductive monochromy revealed an irresolvable contradiction in each attempt to uncover the notion of painting in a visible way. In the last picture, the notion of 'painting' converged with an individual painting, which, however, showed nothing contingent, nothing sensual and thus nothing existential. Instead, it just stood for

the notion of it, but it was no longer painting, no specific, individual painting. A painting that would only stand for a general notion of 'painting' would be no painting. Reduction does not lead to a significant foundation or essence but rather to an emptiness, a nothingness: the absence of anything visible, anything sensually concrete. What remains is the empty convention which governs from the outside, by means of a framework, what institutionally is perceived as a painting. A picture which only stands for painting can, however, be used as a surrogate, a proxy for any other possible picture. It can assume the place of a painting within a framework or an institution; it then functions as a vacant space, an ersatz which keeps the place of a painting vacant and thus allows its absence to be perceived.



Allan McCollum. *Surrogates on Location*. 1982. Snapshot from T.V.

The sign which only stands for the notion of 'painting' is itself a sort of pictogram and indicates an empty space, a zero-point of painting. At the same time this contradictory generic painting can become a sort of meta-painting. Since the latter is also empty and void of meaning, simply a conventional and cultural form of painting, it can serve to question the social and cultural genre of art' or 'painting' per se. It no longer has any pictorial, aesthetic or artistic implications.

Such 'ersatz'-paintings are analytic instruments to be used within the socially existing places and institutions of art to demonstrate the functioning of the

context – venues, situations and institutions – of art. Giulio Paolini’s “disegno geometrico” (1960) or Daniel Buren’s works with striped awning material (from 1965 on) were used as instruments; Allan McCollum’s early works (1969–1977) are a continuation of this critical-analytical exploration.

With the “Surrogates” (as of 1977/78), McCollum found a tool to increase the range of critical analysis. As of 1982 the artist made large series of plaster cast “Surrogates”, which at first were made of wood. In relief form, these works depict the material corporeal composition of the conventional picture as its ‘picture’, its subject. Dark, black surfaces surrounded by white ‘passe partouts’, which, in turn, are set in differently colored frames (cf.ill.).

These plaster reliefs are not just surrogates for paintings in the sense that they depict and simulate the conventional structure of a graphic work (frame, cardboard, passe-partout, drawing) in a painted relief. In a stricter sense they are also proxies for paintings, they take its place on the wall and in a specific setting. They are material placeholders. And like paintings, they become individual through a banal, consistent combination of predefined formats on the one hand and frame colors on the other.

The ironic, subversive move against the essentialist quality of abstraction, through which the essence of painting proves to be an effect of framings, economies and institutions, becomes particularly clear in McCollum’s “Surrogates on Location” (as of 1981/82). These works are made of photos showing TV scenes or magazine photos in which “Surrogates” appear in the decor of the scene, somewhere in the background, as a sign of cultivatedness and as social or class-specific distinction. Some framed pictures became “surrogates”, which because of poor lighting and too great distance in its situation, in the scene, and because of poor resolution of the screen are only visible as black squares. Allan McCollum demonstrates, yes, even proves in an ironic sense that the social and cultural meaning of paintings is always fully exhausted in the mere signs of painting, in the “surrogates”. It thus becomes clear that he only reproduces existing pictorial signs with his plaster cast surrogates. In media imagery he discovers – sarcastically “surrogates”, as models preceding the non-conceptual and pre-primal.

The pictures no longer need a museum. As cultural status values, as signs of social distinction they move in all realms of life. The cultural status value of paintings enhances its place or its owner. Nothing of the painting must be recognizable other than the empty sign of its value. It has to be recognizable as an artwork and it is best when it can be recognized as the work of a specific artist. The painting itself becomes a sign in cultural and social terms in that it proves to be value – a value of exchange and as one of distinction. By entering the economic cycle of exchange as an exchangeable vehicle of value, it no longer shows itself as painting, as visible work. Instead it reveals its social surface as a sign which it codes as a rare, valuable good.

In this sense it resembles money, the equivalent or ersatz. It is also similar to a commodity which as such is mainly a superficial sign of its exchange and

distinction value (commodity fetish) and only secondarily, if at all, to be qualified in terms of use or function. On economic levels, the artwork is always only its own proxy, its own equivalent, its own semiotic surface – its own surrogate.

The “Surrogates” function like artworks: the original is alien to them. They are the product of a repetitive, quasi-industrial process, casts of a mold, itself the product of a cast. They are commodities based on a model and no longer the mimetic imitations of an original. They are copies or illusions and no longer copies, since they do not imitate a model. Rather, they are created through the vacuous iteration of industrial production. Yet within the economy of art, of an economy of rarer and more significant goods, they still also function as artworks.

As opposed to the commodity, the “surrogates” are not just embedded in situations in which their surface, their value is stressed, they also relate to the place and to the context of painting. There they barely fulfill the minimum expectations of painting. They allude to Marcel Duchamp’s subversive strategies at the point where they ostentatiously create a noticeable opposition between the basic fulfillment of the expectations given in a specific situation, governed by the context, the institution, and the disappointment, the lack. This opposition can and should become productive in perception in a critical and analytical sense.



*David Teniers, circa 1550.*