

Looking for the Recognizable, Everywhere at Once

Allan McCollum's
Perpetual Photos and
The Recognizable Image Drawings from the
Kansas and Missouri Topographical Model Donation Project

September 1 – October 2, 2004
Opening Reception: September 9, 6-8 pm

The Friedrich Petzel Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of Allan McCollum's *Perpetual Photos* and *The Recognizable Image Drawings* from *The Kansas and Missouri Topographical Model Donation Project*.

Allan McCollum began his *Perpetual Photo* series in 1982, the same year he started making his *Plaster Surrogates*, which followed his 1978 series, the *Surrogate Paintings*. The *Perpetual Photos* extended his explorations into what he felt was an important relationship between the "art object" and the "photograph of the art object," a topic he had touched upon in three previous series' of works.¹

It was one of his observations that for every minute's worth of film shown on television at twenty-four frames per second to an audience of one million viewers, there were over three-and-a half billion photographic images appearing throughout the broadcast area. He further surmised that if this figure were multiplied by the full number of television stations throughout the entire world, the number of images appearing would be, for all practical purposes, infinite: a perpetual and unending universe of photographic space.

As his thinking progressed, McCollum developed a special fascination with out-of-focus images of artworks; and when he combined this with his interest in the "framed artwork as a ubiquitous cultural prop," explored in his *Surrogate Paintings* and *Plaster Surrogates*, he began producing the *Perpetual Photos*.

¹ A group of blurred images of his own *Surrogate Paintings* (used as announcement cards in 1979-80), his *Glossies* of 1980 (imitation photographs, made with inks on paper covered with self-adhesive plastic laminate), and his *Surrogates on Location* of 1982 (snapshots taken from the television screen, when objects resembling his *Surrogate Paintings* appeared in the background).

He described the series in this way:

When I see a picture frame that contains an indecipherable image in the background of a television scene, I take a snapshot of the TV screen. I then enlarge this indecipherable image photographically, and put it in a new, larger frame of my own. The source of the *Perpetual Photo*—the original snapshot taken from the TV screen—is pasted on the back of the frame, only to be viewed by removing the *Perpetual Photo* from the wall and turning it around.

McCollum frequently described these works as “pictures of the desire to see a picture.” He has said that what he finds poignant in the *Perpetual Photos* is

“. . . that no matter how many times you enlarge the little blurs in the picture frames, you’re no closer to any answers to any questions. Part of the beauty the images have for me is the way they invite a futile impulse to use logic in an attempt to discover an emotional truth. And because these pictures are in a constant state of appearing and disappearing everywhere at once, it’s as if we are all perpetually suspended in our wishes to make sense of the represented world, and forever lost in our search for the recognizable.”²

Fantasies of ubiquitous distribution—or, as McCollum puts it: “our dreams of things appearing everywhere at once”—has been a recurrent theme in his work for most of his career; yet some of his projects over the last decade have moved well beyond simply quoting the practices of mass-production within the context of the fine art gallery: he has produced a series of attempts to infiltrate, or participate in the circulation of symbolic objects in the world at large, beyond the boundaries of the art community. Many of these projects have involved the making of artworks—in public places and in private galleries, in urban centers and small towns around the world—that are specifically designed to be supplemented by objects that are widely distributed at little or no cost, such as educational booklets

² The theme of searching for the “recognizable” has repeated itself in many of the artist’s projects, including: the 1985 *Actual Photos* (nearly unrecognizable portraits of tiny, seven-millimeter tall human figures used in toy trains, photographed through a microscope, produced with artist Laurie Simmons); his 1991 *Dog from Pompei* and the 1994 *Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah* (cast replicas of naturally degraded and deformed fossils); and his public project *Allegories* of 2000 (newly cast polyester resin replicas of the deteriorated ruins of eighteenth century statues in Montpellier, France).

and flyers, souvenirs, gifts, and scientific models, often utilizing the world wide web to aid in the distribution.

Within these projects, his curiosity about “recognizability” has evolved into a number of different forms as well. In his *New City Markers* of 2001 he created a symbolic system of aluminum emblems that were used to supplement street addresses for an entire neighborhood of over 1000 new apartments in Malmö, Sweden, thereby allowing every apartment dweller to recognize his or her own home by a visual symbol. With his *Small World Drawings* of 2000 and his *Each and Every One of You* print portfolio of 2004, he created projects that involved the production of thousands of individual artworks, each using a common given name (i.e. Mary, David, Sam, etc.), so as to employ the desire of the viewer to recognize his or her own name in the group.

In 2003, he organized the most ambitious of these, a project using familiar geographic shapes that a very specific audience could recognize and identify with emotionally: “*The Kansas and Missouri Topographical Model Donation Project.*” The enterprise involved producing and donating 120 plaster topographical relief models of Kansas and Missouri to 120 independent historical society museums throughout both states—each model to be painted by each museum’s own staff, and displayed according to each museum’s own wishes.

As an integral part of his Kansas and Missouri project—and as an inverse complement to the dreamy and diffuse imagery in his earlier *Perpetual Photos*—McCollum also began a series of artworks that involves our collective wishes to precisely represent the boundaries of the territories in which we live: *The Recognizable Image Drawings*. With the help of local assistants, he produced framed graphite drawings of the silhouettes of all 220 counties that make up the states of Kansas and Missouri, each undoubtedly to be recognized only by those viewers who happen to live in the counties represented. The drawings were displayed for the Kansas and Missouri public at the Grand Arts Gallery in Kansas City—a city that straddles the border of both states.

The *Recognizable Image Drawings* were produced with the financial help of the Grand Arts Gallery in Kansas City, Missouri, and architectural historian Cydney Millstein.

More information on the artist’s work may be found at:
<http://home.att.net/~allanmcnyc>

A selection of critical writings on the artist’s work in downloadable PDF format may be found at:
<http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/amcarticles/mccollumpdfs.html>