

Dubuffet-Mc Collum

New York, May 16-July 28, 2024

Perceptions: Jean Dubuffet and Allan McCollum

As an art history student, one learns to be wary of comparisons. There lies a risk of misunderstanding. Formal parallels between artworks can lead to the worst blunders in the game of pseudomorphoses. One can easily be ridiculous. Such is the case with these forced analogies between two different cultures or two histories sharing nothing in common except appearance. A requirement as ethical as it is epistemological is that “appearances cannot be trusted.”

However, while it may incite mistrust and doubt, the game can be enlightening. Who has not been tempted to compare two artworks simply because they look alike? “Birds of a feather...” and so on... This is too simple, one might say, because we neglect the context and history of each one. We forget intentions because we are surprised by the similarities and because what brings them together is not so much what characterizes them as our gaze, and, no doubt, what we like about them.

As a teacher, I often used this method. I would project two images of similar artworks and try to highlight their common characteristics, formats, colors, and techniques before warning the audience and encouraging them to identify the problem: “See now why one monochrome has nothing to do with the other! Understand why the two gestures, though seemingly similar, have completely different meanings!” I was proud of my demonstration. It made me wiser than I was and granted authority to my words.

The idea of juxtaposing a set of works by Jean Dubuffet and Allan McCollum seemed absurd. I saw nothing that could bring them together except, again, the purpose of learning to keep us from comparisons. In my opinion, the two artists do not share much in common. Neither their reciprocal origins nor their cultures, probably not their intentions, even if I immediately searched in the former’s inclination for denouncing the “asphyxiating culture,” a possible analogy with the latter’s denunciation of artistic conventions. In short, I was searching and twisting the neck of my prejudices. This beautiful exhibition is well worth it.

I admire Dubuffet’s work, his taste for circuitous paths, and his “clandestineness.” I like his inventiveness, his ever-renewed experiences, and his defiance of know-how. I respect his vigorous criticism of any dominant culture. I love that he stirs up controversy and finds admirers among the fiercest followers of Protest Art. I peek at his fits of anger and do not hate that he is sometimes belligerent, even fierce towards museums, preferring “amateurs of all kinds” to them.

I appreciate the work of Allan McCollum and his never-ending investigation of a world subjected to mass production. I like that his artwork leads to the erosion of the notion of a work of art. I like his *Surrogate Paintings*, of which any discerning collector must, ironically, own at least one copy. I like the critical humor of a plethoric production for manufacturing objects in large quantities where each piece is unique. I like the fact that he is a paradoxical craftsman who never ceases to classify; the apparent uniqueness of his production is, in the

end, a way of reminding us of the sad uniqueness of individuals. Finally, I also like that he wanted to be an actor and “came to art through theatre and Fluxus¹.”

In short, these two men, who have probably never met, offer more than one reason for anyone wanting to bring them into a dialogue. If words have a meaning – let us say they do, or else, I should stop here – I would say that both elaborate projects with robust critical power. The former is because he questions the very definition of creation by celebrating – for lack of another notion – what he calls “Art Brut,” while the latter attacks standardization and mass production. There it is: Jean Dubuffet and Allan McCollum meet on the grounds of disobedience.

Both are also, in their own ways, very attentive to popular culture. One is keen to celebrate what he calls “true art” that he perceives where most (of us) “do not expect it²” and walk by without seeing it, while the other, as critic Jill Gasparina (subtly) notes, functions “as a commentary on the state of culture³.” Let us say that the two colleagues are apostles of a welcome reading of art’s mode of production and reception.

Moreover, both show their anger at all forms of standardization. To Michel Thévoz, speaking of the notion of Art Brut, Jean Dubuffet explains: “To determine a common character to these productions — some have sought to do so — is meaningless because they respond to an infinite number of positions of mind and transcription keys, each having its status invented by the author, and their only common feature is their capacity to follow paths other than those of approved art⁴.” In a conversation with D.A. Robbins, Allan McCollum clarified: [...] “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 powers⁵.”

Jean Dubuffet and Allan McCollum (unknowingly) share a pronounced taste for craftsmanship. One is admittedly a handyman while the other is more so than it seems. In the words of the former: “[...] I consider these kinds of know-how and gifts as futile [those of professional artists] [...]”⁶. The remark should be read as playing on the paradox of the latter, reminding us in the course of the conversation that if his artwork is a product of “the culture of the multiple,” he nevertheless appeals to the many interfering hands: “Look at any object in the room you are in and think about the number of hands involved in their making⁷.” In fact, Jean Dubuffet and Allan McCollum erase the boundaries between industrial, artisanal, and artistic production. They blur and escape from them by favoring “the individual, the particular, the different⁸.”

In the course of these justifications and comparisons about which I cannot forget that according to the (famous) saying, they “do not provide all the answers,” I fail to recall what

¹ An interesting read is Allan McCollum’s interview with Paul Bernard in *Frog*, Issue 10, Summer 2011.

² A delightful read is the catalog *Retrospective Jean Dubuffet*, Paris, Éditions Musée des arts décoratifs, 1961.

³ A pleasurable read is Jill Gasparina in *L’Art à une échelle de masse*. Sur The Shape Project d’Allan Mc Collum, Paris, M19/n°2, Revue de textes critiques sur l’art, 2012.

⁴ *Ibid* 1, Jean Dubuffet in the preface by Michel Thévoz, 1975, p. 6.

⁵ An interesting read is the interview of Allan McCollum with D.A. Robbins in *arts Magazine*, New York, 1985.

⁶ *Ibid* 1, p.35.

⁷ *Ibid* 4

⁸ In Catherine Queloz, “The Emblems of the Multitude,” *op. cit.*, p. 26, on Allan McCollum.

any serious analyst must begin with, which is to emphasize the facts: the two artists are two generations apart. At the end of the war, Dubuffet fiercely attacked the dominant culture of the time. He made a clean sweep of the knowledge taught and “deconditioned” himself. He searched and researched. From the 1950s, he crafted the surface of his paintings and created rugged reliefs, leading to the *Soils and Terrains* and the *Mental Landscapes* series.

The other studied at the Technical School in Los Angeles and developed his first pieces in the early 1970s in the context of an America won over to mass production. His work originates in the movement of serial and minimalist aesthetics, but “the New York artist also acts as a perfect legatee of institutional criticism, since he invents devices aimed at removing the work from its programmed rarity and questions the convention of its uniqueness⁹.” Here are two different paths, two courses that nothing justifies bringing together.

And yet, here is the eye and its reasons for sowing trouble. Below the visible, the imaging consciousness takes precedence. Something of what I would call, recalling Oswald Spengler, a “pseudomorphoses” – which André Malraux contradicts when he writes after Walter Benjamin that “Every surviving work of art is amputated, and first of all of its time¹⁰” – urges me to be cautious. This is because the method to which this exhibition invites us is primarily sensitive and not naively comparative since, beyond the shared features that I want to detect, it responds first and foremost to the arbitrariness of the person who imagined the project. What is the end of comparing once we admit the two projects are incomparable, were it not for the fact that there is a dimension in every work, however tenuous, that goes beyond the author’s intention and that only belongs to whoever makes himself the bearer of it?

Because when we compare – be it David Fleiss, you, me, or anyone else – we invent and accept that the artworks in question invite us to do so. In the desire to compare undoubtedly lies an exercise in admiration. Of course, I can already hear the moaners. What are the grounds for comparing the *Topographies*, *Texturologies*, *Materialogies*, and other *Areas and Sites*, the fruit of “field research” that Dubuffet carried out between the end of the 1950s and 1961, with the *Perpetual Photographs* that Allan McCollum captured, quite facetiously, from the television screen some fifteen years later, if not to be allowed to recognize in both their work, no doubt, similar intentions: a taste for the most rudimentary as well as the most sophisticated experiments, a taste for the erosion of the notion of a work of art in its common understanding; one by crushing the paste and the other by fiddling with the screen. Two ways of facing and fighting with images. Look at Allan McCollum’s *Glossies* or his *Perpetual Photographs* series presented here: the photographic enlargement of works of art in the background of television sets so that the image loses all legibility and drowns into “junk abstraction.” I also want to emphasize that both artists have their own sense of humor and ridicule.

Furthermore, while Dubuffet “reaches the heights of the most arid but also the most poetic abstraction¹¹” and McCollum is amused by “junk abstraction¹²,” both lead us to question what we see and want to recognize.

One might say, however, that all this is only a matter of perception and adventure of the mind, a matter of impression and representation: mental images imposing disturbing analogies on

⁹ Ibid 2

¹⁰ André Malraux, *Les Voix du Silence*, Gallimard, 1951.

¹¹ Daniel Cordier (et al), Introduction, Baudoin-Lebon-Galerie de France, 1988, p. 11.

¹² Allan McCollum, *Encore*, Exhibition Presentation, MAMCO, Geneva, 12 February-18 May 2014.

the gaze. Could it simply be something of a visual illusion? Aware that we see only what we know, Goethe claimed that “the discovery consists in seeing what everyone has already seen and in thinking what no one has yet thought¹³.” Thus, it is probably not the least merit of this exhibition to confront us with ourselves and to offer the possibility of an experience of art that is undeniably essentially an adventure of the mind.

The former, always jokingly and suspicious, wonders: “Art is a character passionate about incognito. As soon as it is detected or someone points to it, it runs away, leaving place to a laurelled extra carrying a large card on the back marked Art, that everyone immediately sprinkles with champagne and that lecturers take from town to town with a nose ring¹⁴.” The subtle latter says: “A large part of my desires as an artist comes from my annoyance at the way elites look down at mass-produced common objects, even though they might have value to those who own, preserve, and appreciate them¹⁵.” Reading one and the other, thinking about one in relation to the other and vice versa, there is no doubt that the two companions would have had many things to tell each other!

¹³ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections (Part I)*, trans. Sigismund Sklower, Brockhaus and Avenarius, 1842, p.14.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 1, p.42.

¹⁵ *Ibid* 2