Allan McCollum, "A Canvas the Color of The Wall," *Interview Magazine,* 2015.

Interview

ART

A CANVAS THE COLOR OF THE WALL

At the end of November, French artist Claude Rutault came to New York for the first time in 30 years for the opening of his debut American solo exhibition at Galerie Perrotin. While Rutault considers himself a painter, he physically does not touch paint or his canvases. Rather, the artist creates a set of written instructions for a gallery, collector, or institution to follow for the implementation of his work. A set of directions has become known as "de-fininition/method" and the place showing the work–referred to as the "charge-taker"–then follows the method to "actualize" the piece.

Since the 1970s, nearly all of Rutault's works have dealt with painting as a concept in itself, rather than symbolizing another event, place, or action. He takes the space in which his works are presented into account–many de-finition/methods require canvases to be painted the same color as the wall on which they're shown–although he does not comment on or aim to highlight architectural elements. He keeps the focus on the canvases, the colors, and what the objects themselves might mean, allowing every viewer to come to his or her own conclusion because as Rutault says, "There is no answer."

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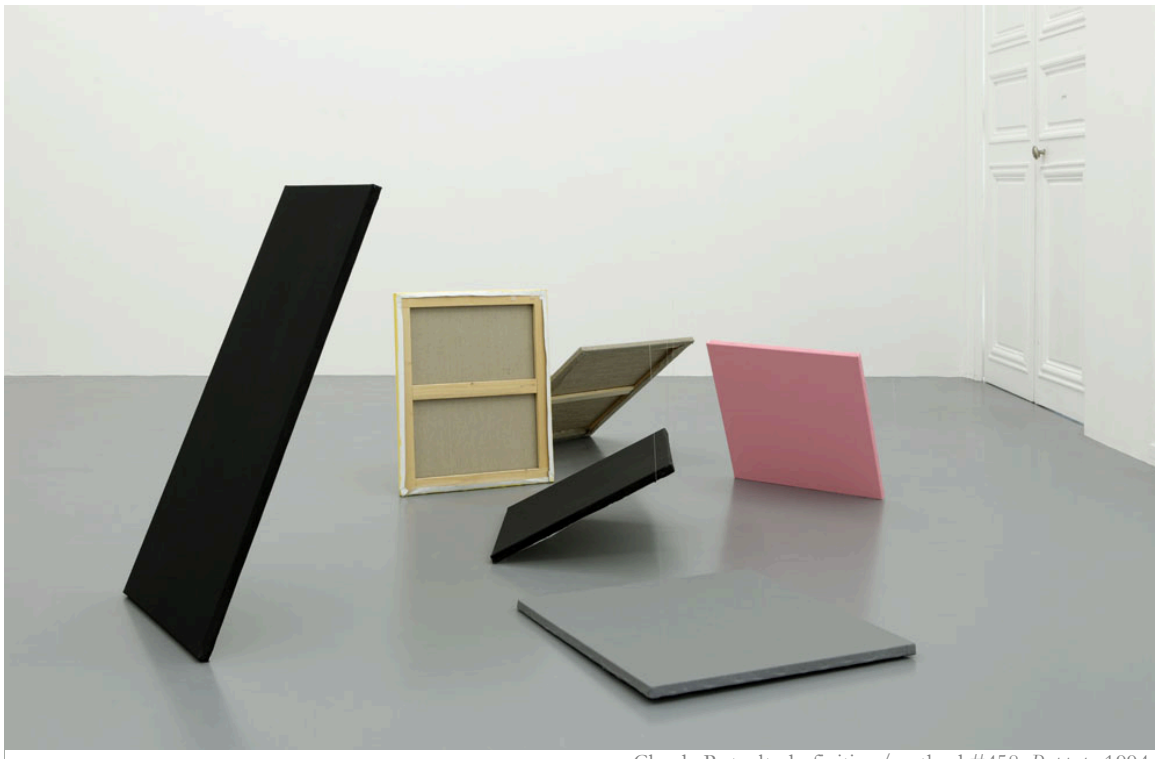

Claude Rutault, de-finition/method #458, *Puppets,* 1994.

With over 600 sets of instructions for actualization, variables in his works include everything from specifications on color and material to how the piece can be sold or auctioned. Take for instance Rutault's most recent de-finition/method, *Charity Begins with Others* (2014). The piece mandates the charge-taker to donate three of the five original canvases to three different charities, all of which can do as they please with the works, and the remaining two canvases must be displayed next to a photograph that depicts all five canvases. Another de-finition/method, *I'm/Mobilier* (2010), is sized according to the price of the building in which it is actualized.

In 1978, the last time Rutault was in New York for an artist residency at MoMA PS1, he met Allan McCollum, an American contemporary painter known for his exploration of objects and how they achieve both public and personal meanings in a world of mass production. Here McCollum speaks with Rutault for one of the first times since their original meeting. -*Emily McDermott*

This conversation was done with the help of a translator.

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ALLAN MCCOLLUM: So Claude, I was very, very happy to see you. It's been maybe 30 years since I've seen you? When I was first figuring out my project the *Surrogate Paintings*, I read about you and got so excited because I couldn't think of anybody else who overlapped into that territory. When I met you at PS1 in 1979, I remember running over to you and talking about how much I was interested in your work and you walked away and I felt very hurt. [*laughs*] Then you came back and said "I'm sorry. I don't speak English." [*both laugh*]

CLAUDE RUTAULT: I also followed your work very attentively. I saw many works of yours—of course the *Surrogate Paintings,* and a lot of images of your work. As I was thinking about this interview I looked at many of your works and publications that I didn't know about. I want to ask a question: Do you still make your *Surrogate Paintings?*MCCOLLUM: No, I haven't made any in many years. I collaborated recently with the artist Andrea Zittel–we took old surrogates that I hadn't painted and that I made in 1992 and painted them new colors, but that was a few years ago. I have run out of them. I could always make more, but I'm involved in other projects. My work has continued to explore different kinds of collectables–from vases to busts to souvenirs, from things you put on the wall to things you put on the floor–and the ways collectables are distributed in galleries, stores, fairs, and so forth. Surrogates still are prominent in what I do, [but] they just represent paintings, whereas other works have represented other types of collectables.

RUTAULT: You are doing works in series that are almost infinite, almost unlimited. You take a form or a shape, and then produce it in billions. It's all the same, yet all different.

MCCOLLUM: I think this is connected to you also–the beautiful thing about your canvases is that they are painted the same color as the walls and involve instructions to follow after purchasing the work. In a way, your works never die because they change as they move. If you paint the wall, they change again, so what we have is a kind of artwork that is never quite finished and that makes it alive. The works never go dead–they will survive beyond your death–because they're going to change in the way that a plant grows or the world changes. In my dreams, the shapes project that I'm doing will go on for thousands of years. There are 31 billion possibilities and I'm trying to figure out a way to have this as a legacy that goes on after I'm dead.

RUTAULT: This is how I think our works converge in a very vague sort of way. You're producing a lot of very, very different objects, although you're also producing the same objects with minimal changes barely noticeable to the eye. In a way, these are in themselves finished objects, whereas with my work, the painting keeps moving over time and is never finished. In a way, we have the same goal, but the forms are different.

MCCOLLUM: [*laughs*] I feel similarities also. It's nice to hear you say that. I decided to be an artist in 1967 and before that I knew nothing about contemporary art. I never went to art school and I grew up amidst a period where minimalism, post-minimalism, and conceptualism were talked about everywhere. One of the important groups was the BMPT artists. I also felt a connection with the Support/Surface artists. I thought I was much more leaning towards BMPT, but I understood the Support/Surface group as taking apart paintings and putting them back together in different ways. The BMPT made paintings that were more or less signs that led you to look elsewhere and seek out political meanings in the institutions that showed them. I felt stuck between, like I didn't want to go too far in either direction.

In an interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist you said that these two groups were the terrorists at the time. [*laughs*] I still laugh when I think of that because I'm not completely sure what you meant. How did you feel in relation to those groups of artists? Did you identify with them? Or did you want to move away from them?

RUTAULT: I had very little relations with Support/Surface. I was very critical of Surface. I was interested in the painting, but the political discourse seemed very unlikely. I was more interested in the BMPT movement and the artist Niele Toroni and the prints that he makes...

MCCOLLUM: The little marks?

RUTAULT: Yes, the little marks with his brush strokes. To me, it's the beginning and the end of painting. It's the two things at the same time. It seems to me that he is the only one out of all the BMPT artists who really survived the course of history. In American painting, I was very interested in the rigor of Carl Andre's work compared to Toroni. I'm also interested in [Ad] Reinhardt, because at the end of his career he was doing the same painting over and over, as if he was blocked and as if it was a sort of failure in his works. I'm also interested in [Frank] Stella and the vigorous stripes he used to do. I find his move from the stripes to a more baroque style at the end astonishing. As for the word terrorists, they're salon terrorists; they're living room terrorists.

MCCOLLUM: Frank Stella, to me, was also very influential, but there were many artists in America [and Europe] that reduced painting to the simplest possible way, like Robert Ryman with just the canvas and paint. Also Roy Lichtenstein, and others who reduced painting to a kind of sign for painting, like Neil Loeb. You call them paintings, but they are a sign or symbol that stand for painting. I'm also interested in that period because, at least in America, there were artists who were devising works that contained rules, like [Daniel] Buren had all these rules about measurements, whether it had to touch the ground, and so forth.

This leads me to another question: You use the term, "definition and method," but at the same time, Hans-Ulrich was using the term "rules and instructions." "Rules and instructions" has a vague connection to the law and the army, always following the rules. There's an authoritarian overtone in English to the word "rules." I'm wondering if "rules and instructions" is the correct translation from "definition and method"? Have you avoided using words that have that authoritative overtone?

RUTAULT: There was an evolution with my terms. Recently I found the word "definition" too authoritarian, so I created a hyphen and made it "de-finition." The "de-finition" is not finished; it's a "de-finish-on," so that reduces the inherent authoritarian overtones. As for the word "method," I chose that because it has to do with processes and relates to the large amount of freedom in my process and the fact that it should remain open–you can do whatever you want, use whatever color, hang canvases anywhere and everywhere. I hate the terms "rules and instructions." It is not the right translation. I don't call them rules, because my work is about being open and combining different things.

MCCOLLUM: And language is very important in the way you express that.

RUTAULT: Yes. Absolutely. [*pauses*] I have a proposal for you.

MCCOLLUM: [*laughs*] Okay.

RUTAULT: You can choose whatever number of *Surrogate Paintings* you want, whatever dimensions you want, and their color. Then I'll repaint half of the surrogate paintings you choose.

MCCOLLUM: [*laughs*] If I choose four, you'll do two?

RUTAULT: Yes. I'll repaint them the same color of the wall, so that it's a combined work; it's a work done by four hands and it'll never be finished. I think we should move from this verbal discussion that we're having onto a pictorial discussion, or a discussion in painting.

MCCOLLUM: Okay, I'd love to. [*laughs*] I'll pick four surrogates, paint them, send them to you, and then you'll paint them.

RUTAULT: The work is not to be separated.

The surrogate paintings that you make and that I will repaint should always be shown together so that it's a joint work. It's going to be two *Surrogate Paintings* by Allan McCollum and it could be *Surrogate Paintings Painted* by Claude Rutault.

MCCOLLUM: That would be lovely. I'd like to have my reputation combined with yours. [*laughs*] Then two of my surrogates would never be finished. They would be alive.

RUTAULT: I was almost sure that you would agree.

MCCOLLUM: This is the kind of playfulness that I think is wonderful in your work. I read about your very early work, the hopscotch series. What struck me was that hopscotch is a children's game with very simple rules. There always have been rules, methods, or routines that you follow. Something I think about a lot is how rules and methods hold our culture together—how do you set the table? Where do you put the forks? Do you put your arms on the table or in your lap? Do you show your breasts or not? People write scripts for plays and they're used forever. People can sing songs that are 500 years old because there are instructions; music is written. It's not just games that have rules. All of life has rules, and you emphasize this through a very simple, playful, and enjoyable explanation.

RUTAULT: I agree. It's a game, it's playful, but it goes beyond just a mere game. It's related to painting, to the history of art, but it's also like throwing a dice, right? You don't know what my work will become. You don't know what color it will be painted. You don't know where it will be shown. There's a part of playfulness and game, but it's also very serious in a way.

MCCOLLUM: It reminds me of certain Fluxus projects where you create a simple task and execute it—every time it's different, but there's a very simple set of rules. I want to ask another question.

You've never moved from canvas and paint to any other material, which, to me, takes a huge amount of courage and dedication. When I first met you, you had a piece of paper that you carried around in your wallet and it had all the sizes of stretched canvases, like the standardized canvases in a commercial art store. [*laughs*] By choosing commercially made canvases, you aren't simply referring to the high end, fine art side of painting. You're referencing paintings that your children could do, that your grandmother could do on Sunday afternoon. Is that something you thought about? Or is that just my projection?

RUTAULT: Yes, I'm interested in this. I always situate myself in the frame of mind of non-invention.

MCCOLLUM: Non-invention?

RUTAULT: Yes. I'm not concerned with originality of the formats. I always begin with found forms because everyone is influenced by existing formats. Everyone who paints has seen paintings on canvas, so there is an implicit and general convention that has lasted over the centuries. There have been huge changes, but it seems that everyone goes back to fundamental figures and standards, so there's no necessity to invent new figures. Earlier on I tried to do a triptych, but I abandoned that project because it seemed as though I could do the exact same thing with existing formats–without having to divide a single canvas into three. I'm using the tradition of representation, like a canvas that is hung length-wise will always represent a seascape.

MCCOLLUM: I noticed in your *Translation* series that you're using a seascape proportion, but turning it 90 degrees so it couldn't possibly be a seascape or all the water would run out. [*laughs*] Have you progressed to making up your own sizes? Or are you still using the same proportions you could find in an art store?

RUTAULT: I still use standard formats, but sometimes play with them and adapt the formats. But what I'm interested in with the standard formats is their neutral quality. For instance, if you think of the artist Hans Arp, the shapes that he did always evoke something–a flower or a figure–so it's always evocative of something other than what it is. Whereas I think a rectangular canvas is as neutral as it can be and I'm interested in painting, not the things that painting evokes. Someone seeing a painting on a wall painted the same color as the wall will ask, "What does that mean?" It's that question that interests me, the fact that someone will ask that and not, "What does it evoke?"

MCCOLLUM: When I think back to French artists in the late '60s, I think of Daniel Buren and his paintings, if you want to call them paintings, which kind of functioned as a sign for a painting. He was making the wall itself symbolic of a whole other range of issues. Does the wall reference a larger meaning for you? Does it have more meaning than just being a flat surface upon which you paint and hang a painting of the same color?

RUTAULT: I need the wall in order to paint the canvas the same color as the wall, so it's a constitutive element of my work. I don't like to speak of the wall just as the wall. If one speaks about the wall, then one has to speak about everything around the wall. I'm not interested in illustrating architecture. Usually, I never like to use a place in order to make a statement. To me, if you use a place in order to make what you want to reflect it seems too decorative.

I'm well aware that painting has a decorative side, but it seems to me that when one [uses place for meaning], one easily falls into the pitfall of decoration, something I try desperately to escape.

MCCOLLUM: So painting the wall makes it a conversation with the canvas, which therefore does not allow the canvas to be simply decorating the wall. Rather the wall and the canvas are in a conversation?

RUTAULT: That's what I want! [*both laugh*]

MCCOLLUM: I have one last question. What's the deal with the fish [in your current show]? [*laughs*] It was a very happy looking piece, but is this a new direction where we're going to see fish or bowls of flowers?

RUTAULT: No, it's not a new direction and you're not going to see any more of these in the future. This was in relation to Matisse, because Matisse painted a lot of bourgeois interiors and there was often a bowl of goldfish, which was very decorative. I rarely install and actualize this work. I promise I will not do this again. [*laughs*] But I am a fisherman. I used to go fishing a lot. So I don't paint fish. I eat them.

[*both laugh*]

MCCOLLUM: Well, I just want to say the show is a fantastic introduction to you and what you've done in the last 35-40 years. I'm very proud to have discussed this with you.

RUTAULT: I was delighted to speak with you, especially to speak with a painter because it's become rarer and rarer; we're all so isolated. If you come to Europe, contact me and I will hopefully be able to see your show and you. Also, my proposition is still valid.

CLAUDE RUTAULT *IS ON VIEW AT GALERIE PERROTIN IN NEW YORK THROUGH JANUARY 3, 2015.*

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