

Projects 33 : Matthew McCaslin : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 18-June 2, 1992

[Fereshteh Daftari]

Author

McCaslin, Matthew, 1957-

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matthew mccaslin

The "pardon-our-appearance" look of Matthew McCaslin's work is deliberate and natural. McCaslin has worked as a building contractor to support his art, and this experience influences everything he does. The electrical cords and naked light bulbs of his wall and floor pieces, his grid-shaped metal armatures, and his suspended ceilings all evoke the half-articulated construction sites that form his immediate visual source. McCaslin plans situations in which the art could be passed unnoticed; a viewer may stumble over industrial material, not see a half-lowered ceiling, or ignore the unassuming presence of aluminum studs.

McCaslin's formal choices recall the mathematical grids of Minimalism and the looser morphology of Post-Minimalism. Yet his interest in time and metaphor runs contrary to the Minimalist insistence on self-referentiality, and he avoids the theoretical tenor that characterizes much Minimalist thinking. Some of his pieces, like those in which he punctuates the mellifluous lines of electrical cords with flashes of incandescent light bulbs, bring to mind the early Post-Minimalist works of such artists as Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier, and Bruce Nauman. But McCaslin does not underscore the aggressively industrial or formal properties of his medium. Instead, he uses materials to

explore ecological notions of consumption and the depletion of energy.

Tribute to a Moment, a site-specific installation created for a niche in The Museum of Modern Art's Garden Hall, is a stage set for a drama. The regimented alignment of the vertical studs and horizontal outlets contrasts with an unruly jumble of electrical wiring. Five clocks, each set to a different time zone, are connected to the network. In this confusing tableau, two antagonistic systems are played off each other: the rational order of the grid system, which reflects a Minimalist's predilection for geometry, vies for control with chaotic elements that hint at a Surrealist's interest in disorder.

The studs and the wires of an architectural structure — its skeleton and nervous system, so to speak — are ordinarily hidden from view. In McCaslin's hands, they are exposed. Yet, in their nakedness they hide an invisible force. Enter the viewer, who finds a switch within easy reach. Simply flicking the switch triggers the previously dormant electrical energy, sending it through convoluted conduits. Its rush is made partly visible by the awakened clocks and the sudden animation of a single light bulb, which casts a legion of shadows. A new level of contrast enters the work: the inert physicality

of matter competes with notions of time and energy. Much as in a dream, suspense prevails but the outcome remains unknown.

The discombobulated clocks are inexplicably scattered within this surrealistic atmosphere. Sending mixed messages, they refuse to conform to a single reality. This undisciplined element brings the work a welcome dose of humor and a playfulness that is extended even further by other unpredictable factors. The very motion of a viewer passing in front of the work creates an optical effect that disrupts the structure's formal rigidity. This motion finds an immediate echo in the shifting light that plays across the silvery surface of the bars.

But standing still and confronting the structural framework, which is energized to a potentially dangerous level, we come to a final realization: that in *Tribute to a Moment* all the antagonistic elements serve a single phenomenon. Power is the principal performer — intimidating and alluring, regimented and chaotic all at the same time. A moment of consciousness allows us to see its anatomy and guess its energy, and McCaslin's tribute is precisely to that moment. Infused with humor and poetry, the piece captures the magic of unexpected and unassuming possibilities.

— Fereshteh Daftari

biography

Born Bayshore, New York,
March 14, 1957

Lives and works in New York

education

Parsons School of Design, New York
B.F.A., 1980

selected individual exhibitions

1992

Rolf Rieke, Cologne

1991

Le Consortium, Dijon, France

Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

Daniel Newburg Gallery, New York

Jennifer Flay Gallery, Paris

1989

Daniel Newburg Gallery, New York

1987

Bess Cutler Gallery, New York

selected group exhibitions

1992

Not Quiet, Jennifer Flay Gallery,
Paris

The Big Nothing, The New Museum,
New York

1991

Itineraries, Castello di Rivara, Turin

The Museum of Natural History,
Barbara Farber Gallery, Amsterdam

Idiosyncrasies in the Expanded Field,
Postmasters Gallery, New York

1990

Work In Progress? Work?, Andrea
Rosen Gallery, New York

The Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh

Detritus, Jack Tilton Gallery, New York

selected bibliography

Ardenne, Paul. "Matthew McCaslin," *Art
Press*, no. 163 (November 1991), p. 104

Avgikos, Jan. "Matthew McCaslin,"

Artforum, vol. 29, no. 9 (May 1991), p. 145

Faust, Gretchen. "New York in Review:
Matthew McCaslin," *Arts Magazine*,
vol. 64, no. 7 (February 1990), pp. 96–97

Ostrow, Saul. "Matthew McCaslin,"
Tema Celeste, no. 31 (May–June 1991),
pp. 100–101

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Foundation, The Contemporary Arts
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Art, and the National Endowment for
the Arts.

Tribute to a Moment, 1992. Steel studs, clocks, wire,
light bulb, and mixed mediums, 11 1/2 x 16 x 6'. Courtesy
the artist (artist's rendering by John Mason)

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