

McCollum's office: mailing letters to historical societies in Kansas and Missouri, offering to donate topographical models.

Allan McCollum  
The Kansas and Missouri Topographical Model Project

## RHEA ANASTAS

In June 2003, a letter was sent to a list of small historical society museums across Kansas and Missouri offering a donation of topographical models cast in Hydrostone.<sup>1</sup> “I am an artist from New York,” Allan McCollum wrote, “and a number of these models were made for an exhibition at a Kansas City gallery called Grand Arts. I am hoping a few of them can find use beyond the boundaries of the contemporary art world.”<sup>2</sup> McCollum included snapshots to give the recipients an idea of the objects on offer: thick, weighty slabs whose surfaces carried the precisely carved topographical features of the two

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1. McCollum compiled a mailing list of the historical societies and regional museums in the two states based on the *Directory of Historical Organizations in the United States and Canada*, 15th edition, by Terry A. Cook and Susan C. Walters (Nashville, Tenn.: AASLH Press, American Association for State and Local History, 2002). He sent approximately 250 letters offering to donate the models to the museums' collections (museums in Kansas were offered one Kansas relief model, museums in Missouri were offered one Missouri model). A similar offering letter was sent by email to Museum-L, a listserv for museum workers reaching a membership of around 4000.

2. Allan McCollum, offering letter to Kansas and Missouri Historical Societies, June 15, 2003, Allan McCollum, project documentation and correspondence, New York, NY.



Allan McCollum. Topographical models of Kansas (4 x 11 x 27 inches) and Missouri (3 x 23 x 17 inches), 2003. Cast Hydrostone.

respective states, based on Geographical Information Systems data.<sup>3</sup> Portable, the functionally-scaled models featured edges which had been cut to the contours of the states' shapes, an added sculptural and political or cultural quality.

The artist left his three-dimensional maps blank, primed in white and ready to be painted or finished by the historical society recipients. The acceptances McCollum received, just over 120, were united in gratitude: "We would be very glad to get the stone and have exactly the place to put it where it be well appreciated by all our visitors."<sup>4</sup> Unequivocal about the compatibility of

McCollum's donation with their programming, some recipients shared ideas about how they planned to exhibit the models or to integrate them into existing displays: "Thank you for giving us the opportunity to own this unique piece of Art. We visualize using it to display the early day trails across Kansas, painted by our in-house artist."<sup>5</sup> Another offered: "I would love to discuss with you how we might impose several different views on the model, such as the Indian tribes, the local animals, the prairie grasses, etc. Perhaps an overlay of thin plastic that could be fitted on top and removed for different views."<sup>6</sup> The implicit humor in depicting the topography of Kansas in particular was not lost on

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3. McCollum worked with Solid Terrain Modeling, a company based in Fillmore, California to produce computer-carved relief models from satellite Geographical Information Systems data. These rough cut models were used as patterns to make the rubber molds from which the two types of models in Hydrostone and ceramic were made in collaboration with the production staff at Grand Arts. See Allan McCollum, June 2003, "Allan McCollum Project in Progress at Grand Arts Workshop in Kansas City," <http://home.att.net/~amcnet3/-topos/workshop1.html>.

4. Letter July 10, 2003, Rayonna Savage, Curator, Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, KS, Allan McCollum, project documentation and correspondence, New York, NY.

5. Letter July 14, 2003, Gerald Barnard, President, Oswego Historical Society Museum, Oswego, KS, Allan McCollum, project documentation and correspondence, New York, NY.

6. Letter July 15, 2003, Jean F. Barnett, Projects/Exhibits Chairman, The Independence Historical Museum, Independence, KS, Allan McCollum, project documentation and correspondence, New York, NY.

this audience: “We appreciate your offer and would like to add your map to our collection. We feel it is important for visitors to realize that Kansas is not ‘flat.’”<sup>7</sup>

As explained in his offering letter to the historical society recipients, the donations comprised only one aspect of McCollum’s new project. The Hydrostone relief model was conceived to supplement another model, this one construed as an example of contemporary art by a well-known American artist whose prior works have been exhibited and collected widely by museums and private patrons. Cast in a smaller number and in the finer craft material of ceramic and finished in brightly colored glazes, the latter model is intended for display in a sculptural group on pedestals in the Kansas City galleries of Grand Arts.<sup>8</sup> McCollum conceived the project and its two groups of models as a vehicle through which to recirculate funds made available to him as a fine artist, as an invitee to Grand Arts to produce a new work. Travelling himself with a collaborator to distribute the models beyond the Kansas City art community, McCollum hoped to expand his sculptural project in number, audience and function.<sup>9</sup>

Viewers in Kansas City will most likely experience the donation project through a display of documentation or this brochure text. The historical society recipients, spread out across the two states, may not see the sculptural display of the ceramic versions of their gifts in the exhibition at Grand Arts.<sup>10</sup> Yet the two groups of objects are physically linked, since both were produced from the same computer-carved models and rubber molds.<sup>11</sup> The Hydrostone models, left unfinished (save the primer), will be painted, marked, overlaid, hung or displayed according to the programming needs of the history society recipients.<sup>12</sup> In the historical society displays, a model made by McCollum might

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7. Letter July 7, 2003, Anna Wilhelm, President, Jackson County Historical Society, Holton, KS, Allan McCollum, project documentation and correspondence, New York, NY. The email I selected to cite only coincidentally represents responses from one state (Kansas) only. For correspondence from societies in Missouri, see Allan McCollum, July 2003, <http://allanmccollum.net/amcnet3/topos/ksandmoemail.html>.

8. *The Kansas and Missouri Topographical Model Project*, November 7— December 20, 2003, Grand Arts, Kansas City, KS.

9. McCollum was assisted by project partner Cydney Millstein, a Kansas-City based architectural historian and writer. The two made four separate trips across the two states, over a period of approximately four weeks, personally delivering around 120 models in a rented van.

10. In the past McCollum has turned to plaster and cement mixtures such as Hydrostone (*Plaster Surrogates*), Hydrocal (*Individual Works, Natural Copies*), reinforced concrete (*Perfect Vehicles, Lost Objects, Parables*) and occasionally to plastic-based materials such as polyurethane or cast resin (*Visible Markers, Allégories sur l’Esplanade Charles de Gaulle*). In the deskilled tradition of Fluxus, minimalism and conceptual art, traditional fine art materials and medium-specific notions of craft were avoided for materials of the everyday, or those available over the counter from hardware stores and industrial suppliers, and for jobbing-out fabrication to metal shops and other fabricators, lending the objects a broad field of social reference. McCollum uses ceramic, a material with artistic or high craft associations, for the first time in this project.

11. Two different types of molds were made since they had to be used for casting in two different materials and processes (plaster and ceramic slip), though they are linked to the original foam relief models and first rubber molds. For details see the slide show and captions, Allan McCollum, June 2003, “Allan McCollum Project in Progress at Grand Arts Workshop in Kansas City,” <http://allanmccollum.net/amcnet3/topos/workshop1.html>.

12. In leaving the models unfinished, McCollum brought a participatory dimension to the artistic process and opened it to the receiver, in this case museum staff and volunteers at the historical societies. Lawrence Weiner famously set such a precedent in his “Statement of Intent,” asserting through writing that the work of art need not be realized materially, and that the viewer, receiver or collaborator shares authorship, equating the creative

commingle with other maps, old photographs, historical documents, postcards, souvenirs, artifacts and all order of objects of local interest—antique farming tools, inventions, doll collections, geological samples, and fossils, as well as the work of local artists.

In contrast, at Grand Arts the models are presented with other works of art by McCollum. In the exhibition installation, the sculptural display of the ceramic relief models of Kansas and Missouri was complemented by the presentation of a second series made collaboratively with Grand Arts, *The Recognizable Image Drawings*, 2003. This group of 220 hand done graphite on paper drawings depicted all of the counties in Kansas and Missouri. Each black silhouette was carefully centered in a three and one-half-inch square, framed within a mat (whose opening measures four inches), and placed in a wooden frame (measuring eight x eight inches). Installed in rows, the 218 *The Recognizable Image Drawings* line the gallery walls, arranging, through an accumulation, a visually rich picture of the two states built from a mass of tidy county silhouettes.<sup>13</sup>

McCollum's new project involves the exhibition and distribution of two versions of the same emblematic object, creating an analogy between two types of exhibition languages, between two economies of production and distribution, and between two modes of perception and consumption. For Grand Arts, exemplary of contemporary art spaces, the ceramic models were produced in a much smaller run, each of them a unique object, for exclusive exhibition and sale as fine art. For the historical societies the objects were produced in quantity and donated to the small historical societies throughout the two states.<sup>14</sup> As educational aids, signs or props in museum displays, or curiosities, their status as art is far less certain. At one point in his project correspondence, McCollum divided the two versions of the model according to function in a note: "the models will 1) be shown in the gallery as beautiful art object . . . and 2) be distributed to little regional

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process, usually finished during a time before the work is beheld, to spectatorship and consumption (or ownership) in any form: "1) The artist may construct the piece. 2) The piece may be fabricated. 3) The piece need not be built. Each being consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership." If economic exchange is implicit in Weiner's statement as the fundamental structure which supports that a work is received as art, McCollum employs the gift economy of the donation in this project as a point of contrast for the marketing of contemporary art. First published in *January 5-31, 1969*, exh. cat. (New York: Seth Siegel, 1969), n.p.

13. The donation project was based on a similar, multiple logic of the distribution of smaller shapes within the states, visualized in the maps McCollum designed to track the locations of the recipient societies. Two large laminated maps marked with pins was included in the documentation of the project at Grand Arts. Two maps marked with icons of the state shapes can be found on McCollum's website, Allan McCollum, June 2003, <http://allanmccollum.net/amcnet3/topos/ksmapmapslist.html> and <http://allanmccollum.net/amcnet3/topos/-momapmapslist.html>.

14. In practical terms, McCollum used Grand Arts' financial support, earmarked to produce a contemporary art project for the art community of Kansas City, to effect a redistribution of these funds to include the historical societies. Through the gift of this quasi-functional, quasi-artistic object, the institutions receive an object they wouldn't have otherwise been able to afford to produce or own. This gesture opens the lack of transparency in the economics of contemporary art and punctures the sense of privilege and prestige associated with funding in the cultural field. The recipients' responses are suggestive of the potential for the models to obtain a host of meanings within a diversity of local contexts, as works literally completed by a collective of producers of cultural and historical meanings of another type than the contemporary artist.

museums and historical societies as didactical display objects.”<sup>15</sup> McCollum, whose record of exhibition in the art world spans nearly thirty-five years, is among the artists who have explored the question of art’s function and identity from both inside and outside the art gallery. “I think it’s altogether another thing to bring in an object that functions so much like an art object that it’s very difficult to explain why it isn’t,” McCollum stated in a recent interview.<sup>16</sup> Employing the language of cartography and an evocative morphology of state shapes, McCollum’s relief models and *Recognizable Image Drawings* resonate with Robert Smithson’s interest in geological metaphors to effect a re-siting of art: “The earth’s surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art. Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other—one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects, or what I will call ‘abstract geology’.”<sup>17</sup>

McCollum’s method, to democratize sculpture through familiar casting techniques and to produce and distribute on a scale familiar to American consumers, also shares in some of the hybrid metaphors of Smithson’s writing and work.<sup>18</sup> The artificial or prop-like presence of his objects, and of his exhibition designs for galleries, employ means of artmaking which are accessible to anyone in order to amplify art’s broader social and cultural significances. McCollum’s particularities of tone and excess serve as means to bring emphasis to the often abstract and hidden workings of power, economic and symbolic, through which works of art accrue meaning and value. In the Grand Arts project, McCollum reached his historical society recipients through a mass mailing, and delivered his work as gifts in the way traveling salesmen once sold their wares. Meanwhile, in the galleries of Grand Arts, a New York-based artist presented the shapes of Kansas, Missouri, and their counties, a display of dozens of rectangles and dozens of more irregular shapes, with the reverential tone of a map room or library and the considered craft of a shrine.

This method can be traced back to his *Plaster Surrogates*, 1982, objects which were cast from molds made from his prior series, the *Surrogate Paintings*, 1978. The *Surrogate Paintings* and the *Plaster Surrogates* were, “exactly what you’d expect to find in an art gallery,” but with a difference.<sup>19</sup> Objects shaped and hung like paintings, the *Surrogate Paintings* were made of layers of museum board mounted on wood and painted over in

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15. Allan McCollum, project documentation and correspondence, New York, NY.

16. Robert Enright, “No Things but in Ideas: An Interview with Allan McCollum,” *Border Crossings*, Issue 79 (Vol. 20, no. 3, 2001): 35.

17. This is the opening sentence of Robert Smithson’s “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,” *Artforum* Vol. 7, no. 1 (September 1968): 44. Smithson used the wording “abstract geology” and “material maps” in this essay, variant thinking on the artistic union of perceptual and conceptual, or material and abstract registers of experience of his better known theory of the Nonsite.

18. The mass-mailing is a strategy of promotion rooted in the same logic. McCollum’s use of production in large runs in a fine art context has also been consistently accompanied by packing, shipping and record-keeping procedures that mirror other forms of bureaucratic work.

19. Catherine Quéloz, “Restoring the Cases Required Nearly as Much Work as Preserving the Artifacts: An Interview with Allan McCollum About the Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Eastern Utah,” first published in *Documents sur l’Art* (Spring 1995), see Allan McCollum: <http://allanmccollum.net/amcnet2/queloz/quelozinterview.html>.

many coats, a departure from the medium-specific painting: paint applied to an unworked canvas support. The *Plaster Surrogates* were cast from the *Surrogate Paintings*, yielding objects which carried the form of painting but the materials and techniques of artisanal sculpture. By making these works smaller than contemporary painting had become and including the mat and frame as part of the composition, the *Plaster Surrogates* approached what McCollum called “a standard type of cultural object that we make, save and value”: a sum of the shared physical characteristics of a fine art painting, a framed photograph or poster, or a reproduction.<sup>20</sup>

Thomas Lawson called the *Plaster Surrogates* “little model paintings,” apt wording for the shared identity of something “generic” and bearing the essential characteristics of a copy.<sup>21</sup> Participating in a tradition since the late 1960s of artists’ challenges to modern art’s institutions, discourses and canons, McCollum’s use of the term “surrogate” brought a bold degree of fiction to the socially and historically accepted role of the romantic figure of the artist as the origin of unique works of the imagination. Presenting “surrogates” (of the artist, of the work of art) in the art gallery, McCollum also highlighted the cloaked system of economics on which the formal appreciation of art depended. His “fakes” reminded us that the work of art has a monetary value, and that the process of sale, exchange and ownership is part of the meaning of a work of art.

More recently, McCollum has challenged the viewer’s expectations of what is seen in art spaces by working with objects that share the qualities of rarity and preciousness with art works without actually being works of art (collectibles, souvenirs, minerals, fossils, natural copies). By collaborating with non-art museums (natural history museums, paleontological museums and small community museums), McCollum has also raised the stakes by considering these expectations within much broader historical and disciplinary frames than those provided by the art gallery. Specifically, the geological metaphors of the Kansas and Missouri relief models can be traced



Allan McCollum. *Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah*, 1994-95. Enamel paint on cast polymer-enhanced Hydrocal, 30 x 30 x 30 inches each. Natural dinosaur track cast replicas produced in collaboration with the College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum, Price, Carbon County, Utah.

20. McCollum as cited in Enright, 26.

21. Thomas Lawson, “Review: Marian Goodman Gallery Exhibition,” *Artforum* (March 1983): 82-83. Allan McCollum. *Model of Mount Signal (El Cerro Centinela)*, 2000. Painted plaster, 30” x 40” x 96”. Installation: University Gallery, San Diego State University, San Diego, California, 2000.

to a series of projects in which McCollum extended his method of the copy from the *Plaster Surrogates* to naturally-occurring copies. Fossils and natural casts yielded a new kind of surrogate relationship: art from found sculpture or earth works. From these objects, concretions and traces authored by momentous geological events, the geological metaphor emerges as an operative proposition for how an art object might not merely comment on but also carry an expanded range of significance. <sup>22</sup>

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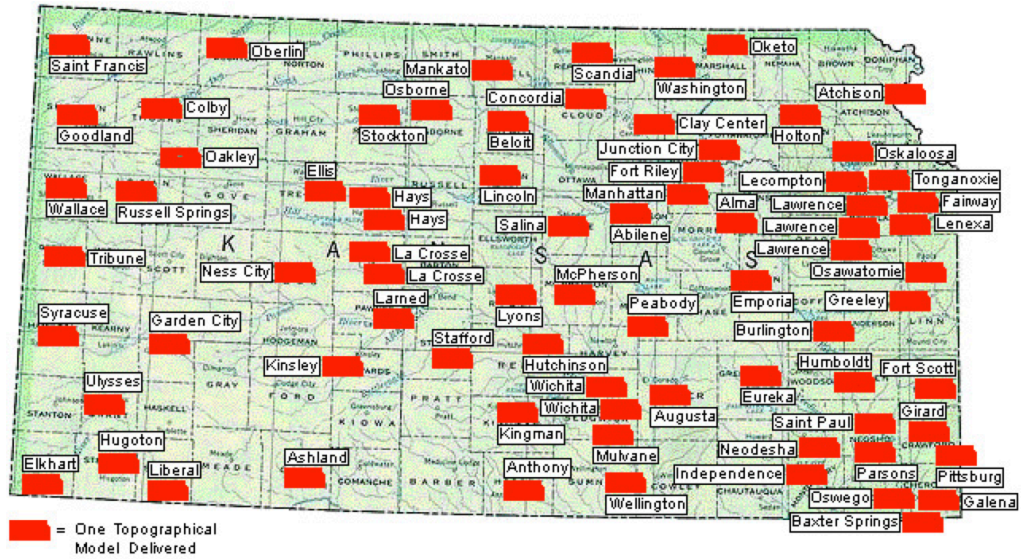
Allan McCollum. *The Dog From Pompei*, 1991. Cast glass-fiber-reinforced Hydrocal. Replicas made from a mold taken from the famous original “chained dog” plaster cast of a dog smothered in ash from the explosion of Mount Vesuvius, in ancient Pompeii, in 79 A.D. Produced in collaboration with the Museo Vesuviano and the Pompei Tourist Board, Pompei, Italy, and Studio Trisorio, Naples, Italy.

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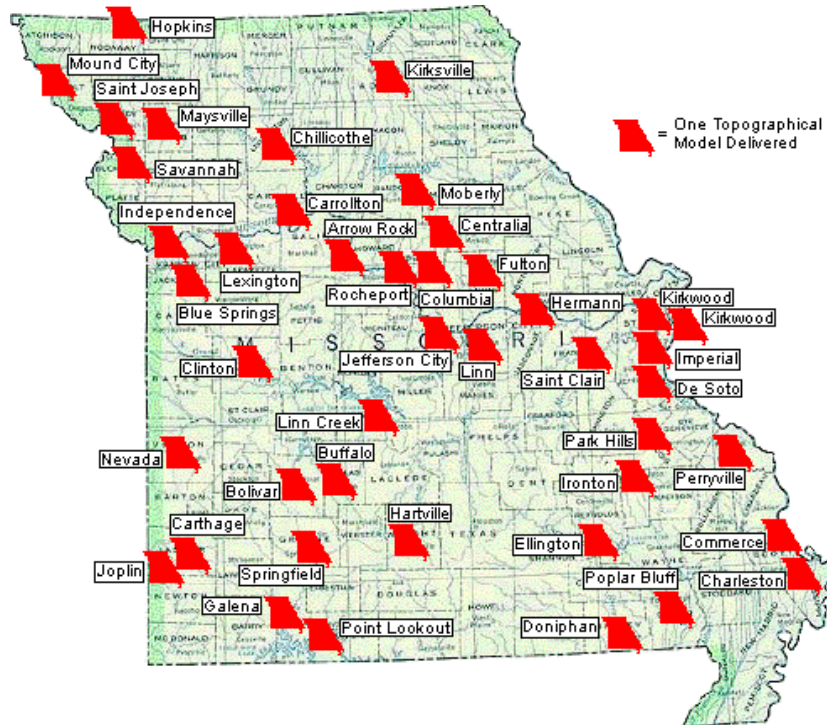
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22. Examples include: *The Dog from Pompei*, 1990 (made from the plaster cast of the Museo Vesuviano’s “chained dog,” itself made from a cast of a cast made from a mold formed naturally by the capture of a dog in volcanic ash in the famous eruption in 79 A.D. at Pompei); *Lost Objects*, 1991 (cast from fossil dinosaur bones in the collection of the Vertebrate Paleontology Section of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History); *Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah*, 1994 (recast from natural “track casts” in the collection of the College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum, casts of dinosaur tracks which were uncovered, removed and saved by coal miners in and around Price, Utah); and *The EVENT: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with Supplemental Didactics)*, a collaborative project to trigger the production of fulgurites, tubular formations of sand created when lightning strikes, and to cast over 10,000 replicas of McCollum’s fulgurite for presentation with over 13,000 booklets of supporting literature.

McCollum first pursued the metaphor of topography in 1998-2001 in his *Signs from the Imperial Valley: Sand Spikes from Mount Signal*, commissioned in part by inSITE 2000. This investigation centered on a rare object of curiosity in mineralogical circles, the sand spike, produced by the slow concretion of sand, of a shape particular to a place: the base of Mount Signal, located in the desert of the Imperial Valley, which straddles the U.S./Mexico border. Of an especially phallic and surreal shape, this sand spike became the basis for a multi-venue site work during which McCollum oversaw the production of a large plaster topographical model of Mount Signal and the production of quantities of souvenirs, presenting the topography in a miniature takeaway, along with replica sand spikes. The project involved five venues for exhibition, see Tina Yapelli, “Signs of the Imperial Valley: Sand Spikes from Mount Signal,” exh. Cat. (San Diego: University Gallery at San Diego State University, 2000), and Allan McCollum, Selected Texts, <http://allanmccollum.net/allanmccollum/yapelli2.html>



Map posted on the web by McCollum, indicating the locations of Kansas historical societies that received topographical models.



Map posted on the web by McCollum, indicating the locations of Missouri historical societies that received topographical models.

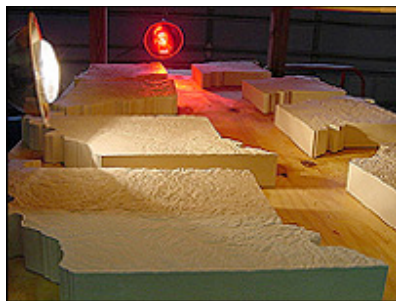




Allan McCollum. *Plaster Surrogates*, 1982-3. Enamel on Hydrostone. Installation: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York City, 1983.



McCollum's studio, during a production of his cast Hydrostone *Plaster Surrogates*. Photograph by Louise Lawler, 1983.



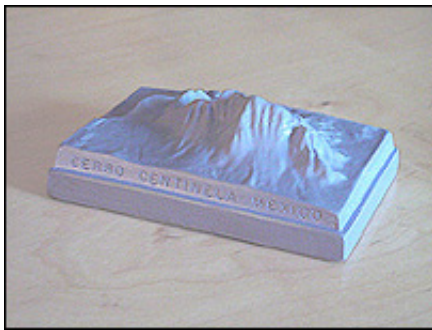
McCollum's cast Hydrostone Topographical Models of Kansas and Missouri, in drying rack at the Grand Arts workshop, Kansas City, Missouri, Summer 2003.



Allan McCollum. *Mount Signal and its Sand Spikes: A Project for the Imperial Valley*, 2000. An inSITE 2000 Project, installed at the University Gallery, San Diego State University, San Diego, California. Enlarged 'Sand Spike' model and 1000 souvenir replicas produced in collaboration with the Imperial Valley Historical Society Pioneer Museum, Imperial, California, from an actual Mount Signal sand spike concretion in their collection, and exhibited along with over 50 paintings, drawings, and photographs of the mountain by local artists from California and Baja California.



Allan McCollum. *Mount Signal and its Sand Spikes: A Project for the Imperial Valley*, 2000. An inSITE 2000 Project, installed at the University Gallery, San Diego State University, San Diego, California. Mountain model produced in collaboration with El Museo Universitario de la Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexicali, Mexico, and exhibited along with over 50 paintings, drawings, and photographs of the mountain by local artists from California and Baja California.



Allan McCollum. *Souvenir Model of Mount Signal (El Cerro Centinela)*, 2000. Enamel on Hydrostone, 2" x 4" x 6" each. Produced in collaboration with inSITE2000, using Geographical Information Systems data. Approximately 1000 were made.



Allan McCollum. *The Kansas and Missouri Topographiocal Model Project*. Installation of ceramic models at Grand Arts Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri, 2003.



Allan McCollum. *The Kansas and Missouri Topographiocal Model Project*. Installation: documentation of donation project, at Grand Arts Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri, 2003.