

Review of exhibition at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery,  
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Allan McCollum  
*The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida*  
(With Supplemental Didactics)

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Lightning bolt, 1997. Artificially triggered with a small rocket, by Allan McCollum, at the International Center for Lightning Research at Camp Blanding, Florida.

*... the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an action, for the operation of a subject called lightning. . .*

—Nietzsche, *Toward a Genealogy of Morals*,  
First Essay, Section 13

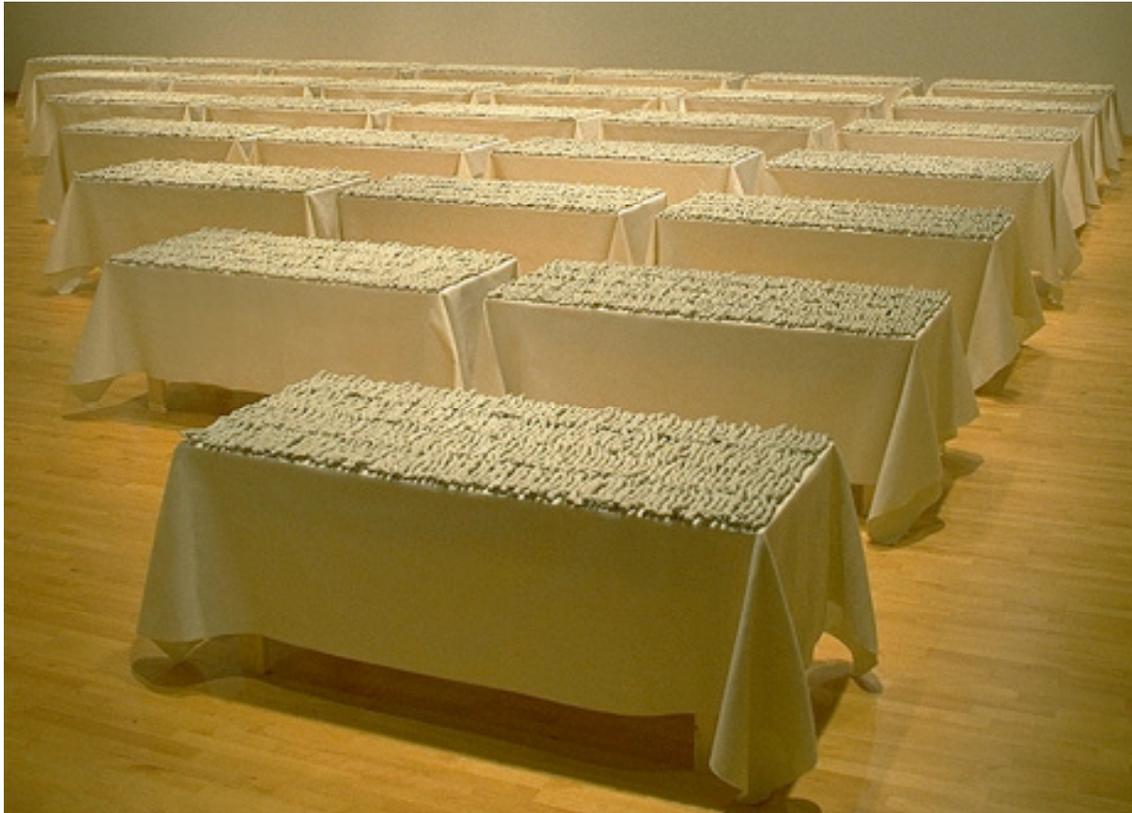
And through much of the history of Western philosophy, it has been the operation of the less than popular mind to commit the re-fusion—to piece together again the lightning and its flash, to re-assemble the distraught parts of an artificial distinction, an isolating discrepancy of what is in fact all of a piece—to haul thought back to match the truth it evades, to refuse the alienation. From Heraclitus to Leibniz to Nietzsche, an unbroken,

identifiable thread in the dense weave of developing philosophical thought has proposed the inconceivable reintegration of actors and actions that defies clarification through thought, that attempts to recognize the original identity of what is done and that which does it, and cuts back the distance between mind and the world. It is a buried philosophical tradition, which observes what was also originally an identity—that philosophy and poetry are the same, and that the truth to be told may be said only in song, for only by the lyrical may we recognize the difficulty of telling the dancer from the dance, for the uninflected syntax of descriptive language separates out the noun from the verb, and thereby segments the world it describes into like quantities. It is the pro-saic that conceives the world by breaking it into sentence structures, and loses thereby the rhythm of the refusal.

It is itself a lightning flash of thought that reintegrates the world, and the best known of the bolts is the thought of the 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. That thought is also clearly and inescapably the gloss on the latest series of identical or nearly identical works by Allan McCollum, which constitutes the current exhibition at Friedrich Petzel. McCollum is one of the most critically analyzed of contemporary sculptors, but the implicit reference to the Nietzschean thought—which is well supported by McCollum's own remarks concerning these works—adds a new dimension to the overall and incrementally developing project of his art.



Allan McCollum. Fulgurite, 1997. Fused zircon sand. Produced by the artist by artificially triggering a natural lightning bolt, at the International Center for Lightning Research at Camp Blanding, Florida.



Allan McCollum. *THE EVENT: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with supplemental didactics)*, 1998. Installation: University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, Tampa, Florida, 1998. Over 10,000 casts of an actual fulgurite produced by lightning triggered by the artist at the International Center for Lightning Research at Camp Blanding, Florida.

*The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida* presents in the first gallery room 10,000 copies of a fulgurite, laid out on 20 tables, lying side by side and making an overwhelming display of the same strange and oddly compelling object repeated almost to a seeming infinity. Fulgurites are naturally occurring fossils of lightning. They are created when lightning hits sand—the lightning bolt continues traveling into the soil and fuses the silica of the sand into glass, in essence forming a glass mold of the path it takes below ground. The form of the fulgurite is literally the form of the underground section of the lightning bolt.

In this instance, McCollum began by fishing deliberately for his fulgurites. Working with professionals from the University of Florida’s International Lightning Research Facility, in the summer of 1997 the artist set off lightning strikes by launching into storm clouds small rockets with copper wires trailing behind them. Lightning bolts were triggered and flowed down the wires into containers of sand, in which they formed the fulgurites he sought. McCollum selected one of them and engaged a local souvenir manufacturer to cast the series of 10,000 replicas in epoxy and zircon sand brought from the area where the artist had created the original.

Accompanying the display of re-cast fulgurites are a set of pamphlets—the “Supplemental Didactics” of the exhibition title—over 13,000 copies of 65 titles bound in color covers, wrapped in stacks, and set on six tables in the back room of the gallery. One copy of each pamphlet has been put on display near the gallery entrance. They are bound in beige covers and are available for reading. Each contains a text about fulgurites and lightning—some concern McCollum and his

project; some are reprints of scientific texts on lightning dating as far back as the late 19th century; some are reprints of the work of Dr. Martin Uman, chairman of the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department of the University of Florida, Gainesville, an expert on lightning, and a collector of fulgurites. (It was in an article on Dr. Uman that McCollum first learned about fulgurites.) A few are of farther ranging interest: one pamphlet lists the references to lightning in the Bible, another reprints a short essay by Kandinsky that employs lightning as a metaphor for artistic inspiration. (All the pamphlets are available in PDF format for downloading on the well-designed and enormously helpful web site for the exhibition, which can be found at: <http://www.usfcam.usf.edu/McCollumPDF/Contents.html>).

*The Event* plays squarely into the critical appraisal of McCollum. The artist has been the producer of various series of close to identical reproductions over the years. In series such as *Plaster Surrogates*—small plaster wall objects of varying size and shape that McCollum began making in the late 1970s and that vaguely resemble framed paintings with the painted surface in black—and *Fifty Perfect Vehicles*, 1985-89—large ginger-jar looking cement vases of different sizes and colors—McCollum has been viewed as placing the emphasis of attention on the nature of the art market, or “foregrounding” it, if one must use the jargon. These sequences of barely distinguishable objects purportedly expose with a unique efficacy the function of the gallery and the museum exhibition space in defining what constitutes an art work. They cast a spell that is taken as clear in this instance—a spell of mystique over not just anything whatsoever, but in this case, virtually nothing whatsoever: objects that are virtually as much a result of mass production, each one palely and pathetically struggling for a dim uniqueness, as any other commodity. The redundancy of empty replicas, of empty production, is taken as invoking an awareness of the modality of presentation and response—of the system of reaction the production feeds. What ought to be an art object in its own right is a mere sign—a chip empty of meaning to be played in a ritual game of commerce and consumption, and the ritual is everything. The ritual is all we have, is all we do.

But with *The Event*, McCollum plays for higher stakes, for he has shifted his focus from the world of culture to the world of nature, from the production of human-fashioned objects of delectation to the natural production of objects of fascination. We already know, or should, that culture is an artificial system of our own making, an arbitrary system of marks and signs that we have devised by and for our own logic of reaction. We know that there is nothing necessary about it, nothing that is true in the sense that it must be what it is. There is really no news in this revelation. But nature is another matter. Nature is supposed to be, is by definition, something beyond our decisions, something outside the range of our making. We do not get to decide if the earth is flat or round—it is supposed to be whatever it actually is.

With the seemingly endless sequence of reproduced fulgurites—castings made from an original that was itself a naturally occurring cast, results of human actions that mimic a natural process, that are as close to a natural process as a human action can be—McCollum raises the same questions about the authenticity of significance, about the inherency of meaning, with regard to the natural world as he has previously raised about the world of culture. In short, if a fulgurite—or what may in each instance here be taken as a fulgurite of a fulgurite—can play the same role as any other mass produced object, does it signify to us anything more than do those mass-produced objects? If a natural object invokes the same automatic fascination as an empty sign, is it, in the end and to us, anything more than an empty sign? Does our gaze evacuate nature of its meaning, making it merely what little we make of it by our rituals of attention and finance?

This is, of course, the Structuralist position—that we do not encounter nature but rather we view nature through the scrim of our cultural values and definitions, and those values and definitions do not possess the universal necessity of a Kantian “Transcendental Idealism”—principles of interpretation common to all human mentality—but are discretionary and specific to each spe-

cific culture. We are alienated from reality, encased inescapably in the prison of what our cultures impose on us, seeing only what they show us. The real is forever elsewhere.

McCollum has entered this territory before, has addressed natural rather than cultural matters of reproduction and consumption, with his previous series of reproductions of dinosaur bones and tracks, as well as his replicas of a cast of a dog discovered in the lava of Pompeii. But the use of the fulgurite raises the ante even further, for it brings the issue into the range of concern Nietzsche charted in his text—that the objects of reality are illusions, concretions we create for ourselves, precipitations that exist only within the world of our perceptions, and in fact, in the world of actual fact, there are only evanescent flashes of events, momentary occurrences that are gone almost as quickly as they appear—that everything that occurs is like a bolt of lightning, which is not a bolt at all, but a suddenness, preceded by a suddenness, attended by others, and followed by still others. The “things” of the world, the things to which nouns pertain, are evident to us only because we use nouns—we see them because we use words for them, we see them because we use language and we impose the logic of that language onto the world we describe by language. The things we name are not actually there—they are ghostly presences, substanceless apparitions. We concretize the agents of action like a lightning strike concretizes a fulgurite—the

object is merely a by-product, a trace, perceptible only to us, for we create its appearance. The nouns are false; only the verbs are real.

None of the texts McCollum presents in his pamphlets quotes or acknowledges the Nietzsche passage. But it is an inescapable gloss on this exhibition for anyone who has read it, and McCollum does include a text by the linguist Benjamin Whorf that argues the same point Nietzsche makes regarding the actual inextricability of the lightning bolt and the lightning strike. In addition, McCollum speaks himself to the same point in a quotation included in the press materials; “The Petrified Lightning project was created to explore this idea—an exhibition to enact the ‘event’ as always already absent, with the residue and the meaning always already appearing in its place.” Here, he acknowledges that the object is mere residue, a leftover from an event that is always too quick, too evanescent, for our eyes. Thus, all we see are the traces that we concretize into objects.

The emptiness of the object, the vacuity of it, the meaninglessness of it, is a tangible fact in McCollum’s exhibition. His castings of the fulgurite are



Allan McCollum. *Over 13,000 copies of 66 different booklets on fulgurites, lightning, the people involved in the project, and related topics. Edited and designed by the artist.*

laid side by side, inert and unchanging, unequivocal, like corpses laid on autopsy tables. They seem dead, unanimated, curious objects that one might poke and peruse, and dissect to discover they bear within them no secret at all. They are just there, over and over again, all 10,000 of them. A perfect emblem of the meaningless redundancy of nature—just the same thing, again and again, one example after the next, one generation after the next, and not even a “thing” at all, merely the leftovers of events we missed. And anything these traces might be taken to mean is bound up in a pile of books, meanings that we ourselves have composed, placed somewhere else, in another room.

And the issue goes further still. As Nietzsche explains, there is an ethical concern involved. The separating of the action from the agency of action, of the doer from the deed, implies a code of ethics. The full passage makes the matter clear:

“A quantum of force is equivalent to a quantum of drive, will, effect—more, it is nothing other than precisely this very driving, willing, effecting, and only owing to the seduction of language (and of the fundamental errors of reason that are petrified in it) which conceives and misconceives all effects as conditioned by something that causes effects, by a ‘subject,’ can it appear otherwise. For just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an action, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was free to express strength or not to do so. But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything. . . . no wonder if the submerged, darkly glowering emotions of vengefulness and hatred exploit this belief for their own ends and in fact maintain no belief more ardently than the belief that the strong man is free to be weak and the bird of prey to be a lamb—for thus they gain the right to make the bird of prey accountable for being a bird of prey.”

The separating out in thought and comprehension of the actor from the act necessarily implies that the actor commits the act out of determination—implies that any act might have been otherwise, for the actor is a stable, restful, inert and contemplating object anterior to the action. This is a view that implies that any actor might commit, or be made to commit, any action, for it assumes that the action is not inherent in the actor. It assumes that the action and the actor are something essentially different. And so it follows that the actor is devoid of any essential nature, that there is nothing any actor must essentially do, that the actor is not defined by the quality of its natural action. The agency of action—in essence, each of us—has no core nature, it is void of nature, and it can be required to become something other than what it is, for it is, in the end, nothing at all.

This view opens the door of personal responsibility, but it opens also the door for denial of personal nature, for the claim of a standard to which all must assent. It opens the door for an assumed and imposed universality of “nature.” In short, it opens the door for a denial of individuality, for if the actor begins as a passive and passionless contemplator free to decide on any act and inclined toward none in particular, then those who would wish to level the extremities of human nature can demand those extremities be denied, and can demand that strength of conviction and devotion be dismissed as unnecessary to the souls of those who feel them.

This is very much the story of our time, a time that quavers in the face of bold action. Ours is a moment in which strength of will and nature is shunned, and personal courage rejected as incredible and undesirable because the agent of action precedes the action, begins in inertia, and any movement forward is a deliberate policy that might be otherwise, that can be required to be otherwise. It is not quite an irony that the view of the cultural discretion in the interpretation of

nature results in a universal flattening of human nature—universal within the culture to which it applies. Structuralism results then in an enormous conformity—a requiring that all the members of a cultural group have “always already” had their discretion determined for them. They may not be who they are; they must be what their culture requires them to be—all of them together.

But what is finally at stake in all this is greater still, for what is at stake ultimately is us. To observe the unreality of the actor, the illusory aspect of the agencies of action, is to confess the unreality of ourselves. If there are no objects, there are no people—none of us is real. If only the lightning strike is real, if there is no object that may be named a “lightning bolt”—if the “subject” is only an appearance that results from our use of language to conceive and describe the world—then we, as subjects ourselves, do not exist. Only what is done is real, only what happens—we, as those who do what is done, are not. We are just appearances the actions leave behind as traces, like the fulgurite, which looks like lightning but is not, which is really nothing much at all. We are merely traces, after-effects of the actions we think we are committing. We are without substance; we are the ghosts. This is what hangs in the balance of the issues that McCollum is addressing, and is addressing knowingly. The artist has broken through to the fundamental issue, the issue at the heart of everything we may be concerned with.

Our very reality is at the core of McCollum’s critique of the system of artistic production and consumption, it lies in the center of what he brings into question. But a critique is not an action, and to question is not to offer an answer, and one must ask: Where is McCollum is all this? What is the effect of this exhibition? What is McCollum’s point here?

It is not at all clear that there is one. There is only the vision of the redundancy of manufacture, the seemingly endless and pointless redundancy of the manufacture by human beings and by nature—repetitions in the thousands that seem to be going nowhere, that seem to have nowhere to go. They are just there, and so is this exhibition. It makes you doubt, but it makes no apparent point about what is brought into doubt. Given what is being brought into question—given that we ourselves are finally being brought into question—there ought to be something of an assertion. Are we to perceive that we ourselves are evanescent presences, not durable enough to last from one moment to the next, as fleeting as a lightning flash with only residue left behind? Or are we just to wonder if this may be so? What exactly does McCollum conclude about this? What does he feel about this?

The question is first of all about the efficacy of McCollum’s art. Does it make enough of a point? Does it make any point at all? Does he raise questions and doubts without actually considering them carefully and taking a position himself? This question, this doubt, concerning the credibility, the substantiality, of McCollum’s thinking has arisen before. *In Recoding: Art, Spec-*



Allan McCollum at the International Facility for Lightning research, preparing rocket used to trigger lightning, at Camp Blanding, Florida. 1997.

*tacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1986), Hal Foster doubts the efficacy of McCollum's implicit critique of the art market through his series of plaster and concrete "surrogates."

"Yet just as it may be unclear whether the McCollum surrogates 'dislocate' the ritual of exchange or replicate the status of the object become sign (delivered up in all its minor difference for our consumption), so too it may be unclear whether the [Louise] Lawler gambits subvert the mechanisms of art exhibition, circulation and consumption or play them to the hilt. ... Like a dye in the bloodstream, the work of these artists does delineate the circulation system of art, but it also operates within its terms. If artists like Buren and Asher may become guardians of the demystified myths of the art museum, then artists like Lawler and McCollum may indeed serve as 'ironic collaborators' of its market apparatus."



*Allan McCollum. Surrogate Paintings. 1979/82*

McCollum's surrogates—signs for paintings and ginger-jar sculptures—may well have been a feint, a substitution for a substitution that, like a double negative, end up functioning in the art market system just like any other work of art, asserting and abetting what they are supposed to deny. But when the concern is nature, and the status of human action rather than the quality of human actions, there is no issue of aiding and abetting. One may only rail at the void, or refuse to—or fail to. And, in the end, McCollum simply fails to. His replicas of the natural replica of lightning just lie there, like corpses waiting for dissection, each one a deadpan and uninflected facing of the situation, without attitude, without judgment, without action. Nothing is done, no actor confronts the impossibility of his own action. There is no tragedy here, in the face of the ultimate nihilism. There is only a dull stare.

For what McCollum has missed in his art is the art of the thing. It is not the business of art to reflect or express the nature of the human soul. It is the business of art to create the human soul. It is up to us to infuse the lifelessness of signs with the vibrancy of living perception and imagination. It is up to us to organize the chaos of our urges and revulsions and apprehensions into the coherence of a dreaming, desiring, and actively effective personality. There is no point to complaining about the failure of cultural symbols to breath life if we breath no life into them, and a critique is nothing whatsoever. The appropriate action in the face of the void is to fill it, with passion. And McCollum's fulgurites, merely lying about, speak of nothing other than a failure to take action, even in the face of the possibility of the impossibility of action, which is the only moment when action truly counts. His artifacts out of nature speak only of a failure of strength, of passion, of commitment. In the end it is all up to us, most particularly when we begin to perceive that nothing may be up to us. And we have no one but ourselves to blame if life becomes meaningless.

There is, in the end, a certain piquancy to McCollum's display of the 10,000 things of lightning, there is a certain pang to so broad a display of nullity, something like a dull throb, but that is all there is. This artist has focused attention on the essential doubt of existence, but he has left the art to be made in the face of the doubt to someone else.