



Allan McCollum, *Shapes from Maine*, 2005/2009. Installation: Friedrich Petzel Gallery, 2009.

A Conversation with Allan McCollum: Mass-Producing Individual Works

JADE DELLINGER

Born in Los Angeles, Allan McCollum has lived and worked in New York City since 1975. He has spent more than four decades exploring how objects accrue meaning through their manufacture (the handmade versus mass-produced), modes of display, and means of exchange. From his seminal *Surrogate Paintings* (1978-82) and *Plaster Surrogates* (begun in 1982) to his *Perfect Vehicles* (since 1986), *Individual Works* (1987-89), *Visible Markers* (1997-2002), and ongoing *Shapes Project* (an artist-designed system to produce “a completely unique shape for every person on the planet, without repeating”), McCollum has been an impressively prolific object-maker. Since his first one-person show in 1971 and New York debut a year later at the Sidney Janis Gallery, he has had more than 100 solo exhibitions, including retrospectives at the Musée d’Art Moderne, Villeneuve d’Ascq, Lille, France (1998); the Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany (1995-96); the Serpentine Gallery, London (1990); and IVAM Centre del Carne, Valencia, Spain (1990). His works are held in more than 70 museum collections worldwide, and he has produced numerous public art projects in the U.S. and Europe. *One Thousand and Eight Shapes*, a project for the Elmhurst branch of the Queens Library, New York, will be installed this year.

Jade Dellinger: You have been making objects for more than 40 years. It seems like each project or series has informed and prompted questions for the next.

Allan McCollum: When I first decided to be an artist, I was interested in exploring self-referential angles on how our culture defines a “painting.” I quickly realized that a painting is ultimately defined by its context. And all contexts are within other contexts within other contexts, so I’m always drawn into an ever-expanding idea of contexts.

JD: Weren’t the *Surrogate Paintings* and *Plaster Surrogates* meant to represent pictures or imitate paintings?

AM: Yes, that became my intention. I grew into making paintings that “stood for” paintings, like “signs for paintings,” which would turn a viewer’s experience toward the context of a painting. I wanted to turn the gallery into a sort of stage set, with props that stood for paintings. When I became an artist, I thought that meant being a painter. I didn’t go to college or art school, so no one ever taught me any different. My parents were deeply involved in local theater, so the idea of a prop came naturally to me. I realized that the *Surrogates* could also stand for other framed objects—like family photographs, a certificate of merit, or whatever else might be on one’s wall. This is one way to look at the context of a painting.

JD: The *Perfect Vehicles* were also surrogates, stand-ins for sculpture?

AM: The *Perfect Vehicles* were simply a move toward an equivalent sculptural form. But they also expanded the context of an artwork, as a “collectible” within the context of “collectibles.” These ginger-jar-type shapes are all over the place, symbolizing identification with Asia, travel, history, the “spiritual,” and having “taste.” They can symbolize death, as in cremation urns, or birth, as stand-ins for wombs. Jars and vases are hugely cross-cultural, and hugely cross-culturally symbolic as collectibles. I decided to use this shape as a symbol of symbols, of the things that we save and collect. It shows how a “useful” object can transmute over time into something of elevated meaning.

JD: You had some interesting jobs early on. Did any of them influence your work?

AM: Certainly. *Individual Works* (which now consists of more than 35,000 unique little objects) evolved from the opportunity to handle Fabergé eggs while I was working as a registration technician at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum. I was responsible for doing condition reports on those elaborately jeweled, Czarist-era eggs. I just couldn’t figure them out. They were, by definition, decorative objects, but they seemed to function almost exclusively as an expression of wealth and status. I started to think about what families with money collect, what poor people collect, what governments and institutions collect and began to identify a language of collectibles that reflected the language of social status, social function, and so forth. I found that you could point to certain kinds of objects and say, “That’s for a king,” “This belongs to a priest,” or “That’s for a common person.”

JD: It sounds almost oxymoronic when your work is rather appropriately described as “hand-made mass-production.”



*Collection of Fifty Perfect Vehicles, 1989. Enamel on solid-cast Hydrocal, 50.2 x 20.3 cm. each.
Photo courtesy Galerie Thomas Schulte.*

AM: “Mass-produced” is a dehumanizing term, invented, I think, by people who think of themselves on some higher level, while the rest of us are just a nameless mob. There is a hierarchy of objects involved, and a tradition that maintains that hierarchy, and “fine art” is a symptom. These distinctions are the ugly residues of an autocratic, hierarchical culture—they represent a class system that I thought worthy of exploration. I wanted to juggle the distinctions, to question and comment on them.

JD: As *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* makes apparent, you consider quantities carefully.

AM: The concept of producing more than 10,000 objects originates from a memorable experience early in my career, when I was working for another artist. We were doing a complicated installation of objects on a granite wall. We drilled into the stone, planning to insert wooden plugs that would allow us to use woodscrews. I couldn’t find the necessary plugs anywhere, and we needed 1,200 for the installation, so I gave the Yellow Pages a try. I found a local company that manufactured knobs for drawers and other wooden things. They advertised, “We do short runs—no job too small.” So, I called and took them a sample to get a quote. It was just a simple dowel that had to be cut into one-inch pieces. The guy asked, “How many do you want?” When I told him 1,200, he looked at me like I was nuts and said, “That’s really not enough for a—we don’t do—we wouldn’t do an order of that size.” So, I said, “Well, your Yellow Pages advertisement says ‘no job too small.’” Then I asked, “So, what’s a short run?” To which he replied, “Our minimum is 10,000.”



Allan McCollum, *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* (detail), 1987/89. Enamel on cast Hydrocal, each unique. Sizes variable, all 2 inches in diameter.

JD: The pieces in *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* are hard to take in all at once. It is difficult to wrap our brains around 10,000 or more of anything, and all the more challenging to comprehend that many similar yet unique things.

AM: Yes, that is totally intentional, and that reaction is a very human response. There is a reason that we need to think of things as being alike. There is a reason that we stereotype. There is a dark side, too; but, in terms of our thinking, it a perfectly normal thing to do.

JD: As the '80s band Devo surmised from the German sociologist Erich Fromm's *Escape From Freedom* (1941): "Freedom of Choice is what you got; Freedom from Choice is what you want." Obviously, there are practical reasons for mass-producing, but also social and psychological implications from making everything the same.



Allan McCollum, *Collection of One Hundred Plaster Surrogates*, 1982/89. Enamel on cast Hydrostone, dimensions variable. Installation: MuHKA Museum, Antwerp, Holland.

AM: Those sorts of things ran through my mind, but what especially struck me was how all this feeds into a class system. That really bothered me, because I come from a poor family. We never owned art or the types of objects that would end up in a museum if we died, and this is true for most people. I never thought to hang around with rich people. It may sound cynical, but when you choose to be an artist—whether you know it or not—you are choosing to please wealthy collectors and patrons. Supporting the arts and accumulating art objects make the rich feel important, allowing them to provide entertainment for their friends. When I made the first *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works*, I did most of my model parts in my kitchen with kindergarten math. I was using plaster—one of the oldest materials in the world for making things. It's simple

and it's natural; you just add water. It really struck me: Why don't people do this all the time and make everything different? After making the first 10,000, I came to the conclusion that the *Individual Works* cost a little over \$2.50 each to produce, after all the models and molds were made. Of course, they got more expensive as time went by.

JD: Why did you call the group *Individual Works*?

AM: They were each unique, but presented as a single, large-scale installation—more than 10,000 on one table. The title was also something of an inside joke. When I exhibited a room full of the *Plaster Surrogates*, somebody asked, “Is this all one piece or are they individual works?” So, I knew then that my next series would have that title.

JD: There is a relationship between the *Individual Works* and the *Drawings*. What was the impetus to begin the *Drawings* when making unique objects was so cost-effective?

AM: Up to that point, I had never shown an artwork made entirely with standard “art materials,” and I thought it was time. The pieces in *Individual Works* had been cast from found objects (everything from container caps to broken toys and auto parts) that I collected and systematically assembled. This was connected to my early experience in L.A., where everybody used non-art supplies to make their work. So, I wanted to do a project that involved something very standard—paper and pencil. And, at the same time, I had become interested (from a distance) in heraldry. I had shown in Europe a few times and noticed how heraldic symbols were used to identify towns or neighborhoods. Of course, I knew that in the U.K. there were coats of arms for many different clans and that even my name—McCollum—was represented by some sort of heraldic symbol. I once bought the McCollum family coat of arms on a coffee cup, at Disneyworld.

JD: The *Drawings* also resemble silhouettes of the forms in *Individual Works*.

AM: For some reason that I still have not been able to fathom, I wanted to make them all bisymmetrical, a heraldic tradition of sorts. The *Individual Works* are relatively bisymmetrical, too. The artist and poet Kenny Goldsmith, who was assisting me in fabricating the *Surrogates*, *Perfect Vehicles*, and *Individual Works*, just laughed at the *Drawings* when he first saw them because he noticed that there were no “undercuts.” I had been so involved in casting works from the other series that without even realizing it, I had designed all of the *Drawings* as if they were three-dimensional forms to be made in a two-part mold.

JD: You say that you employed standard art materials and that they were done by hand, but you created templates for the *Drawings*.

AM: The shapes were hand-drawn in pencil on archival museum board. I designed the plastic templates and had them custom cut. I remember having to go out to Tucson to a place that cut templates for architects. I met with a technician who digitized my designs so their computer could plot and cut the templates. Of course, I had 100 or so designs to do the “first run,” but ended up buying fewer templates than I wanted; ironically, the template maker had a minimum—I only needed one of each, but they forced me to order 25.



Allan McCollum, *The SHAPES Project*, 2005/06. 7,056 *SHAPES Monoprints*, each unique. Framed digital prints, 4.25 x 5.5 inches each. Installation: Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, 2006.

JD: Were there other limitations?

AM: Yes. I was interested in how people identify themselves as part of a group, and how often that depends on looking up to someone or some “thing.” They follow leaders, are governed or represented by a king or a president. I was playing with the idea that a single symbol (a corporate logo, a flag, or a coat of arms) might have meaning for thousands, even millions, of people, but also thinking about how these structures can become autocratic. It was an experiment, and my solution was to imagine a heraldic symbol for every person on the planet. It had been in my head for years and years, but these sorts of signs and symbols (like my *Drawings*) were always bisymmetrical. The number of possible variations will always be half that of asymmetrical shapes because the left side has to be exactly like the right side. Therefore, the potential for really large quantities was limited, and I always fantasized about making millions and millions.

JD: This is a problem you seem to have solved with *The Shapes Project*.

AM: *The Shapes Project* really helped me to resolve those limitations that I had, for whatever reason, self-imposed when making the *Drawings*. And, honestly, I think that the work of the late Provincetown painter Myron Stout had a bit to do with it, too. If you look closely at his paintings, you’ll see that they aren’t really bisymmetrical at all. They seem so at first—but there are tiny

differences between the left and right sides. That's why I love these paintings—an illusion of mechanical perfection, but with really small “human-touch” variations, barely noticeable at first.

JD: The works in *The Shapes Project* aren't bisymmetrical either, so you have now managed to create a system to produce billions. The *Shapes* have already taken many forms—from 7,000 monoprints and wooden ornaments to rubber stamps and copper cookie cutters.

AM: When I was thinking about how many to make, I learned that the United Nations estimates that there will be 9.5 billion people on the planet in 2050. That would be the peak, and then the numbers would begin to decrease. I thought, “OK, nine billion,” but then I realized that people die and people are born, people die and people are born—so, that's not really one for everybody. I went on Google and looked up reincarnation. I began to wonder just how many souls hadn't been reincarnated yet, but will—and I just couldn't believe it. There are people who think they know the answer. There are an estimated 60 billion souls in all, and only a small fraction incarnated at any one time. It sounds ridiculous, but, regardless of my own beliefs, I thought it could be interesting to take other beliefs into account if I wanted to make something for everybody. So, I designed the system with the capacity to create 60 billion unique *Shapes*.

JD: You didn't write a computer program or application to do this; you did it manually by drawing the component parts in Illustrator and working out all the possible combinations. It must have been rather labor intensive.



Allan McCollum, *Laminated Birch Plywood Shape No. a058.b105.c060.d107*, 2005/06. Approximate size: 5 1/2" x 12" x 18". Photo courtesy Graphicstudio, Tampa, Florida.



Allan McCollum, *Shapes from Maine: Ornaments*, 2005/2009. Installation: Friedrich Petzel Gallery, 2009.

AM: It was. I was months into it and suddenly realized that the system included mirror reversals. If you flipped a certain 30 billion of them over, they would be exactly the same as the remaining 30 billion. I hadn't really thought that far ahead in terms of making sculptures, so when I realized, "Oh, I would like to have the opportunity to make sculptures or to turn them over if I cut them out of wood"—I had to start all over again. I had to cut the whole system down to having the capacity for making 30 billion one-of-a-kind shapes—all of which would remain unique (from both sides) if realized in three dimensions.

JD: Since all of these series and projects are ongoing, I wonder if your perception of your work has changed over the years?

AM: I would say that I pretty much think the same about these projects as I always have. For me, my whole life's work is a single project. I think of it like a book. I keep adding chapters, but it's all the same book.

Jade Dellinger is a Tampa-based writer and curator.