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ALLAN McCOLLUM
INTERVIEWED BY THOMAS LAWSON

THIS INTERVIEW IS DRAWN FROM TWO CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN ALLAN McCOLLUM AND THOMAS LAWSON: ONE IN NEW YORK CITY ON JUNE 23, 1992, AND THE OTHER IN LOS ANGELES ON NOVEMBER 15, 1992.

Allan McCollum. ***Plaster Surrogates***, 1982/90. Enamel on Hydrostone. Installation: Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Muhka, Antwerp, Belgium.

Tom: In many of the interviews you've given you sound very angry about culture, about the way the idea of the museum operates, and what your feelings are when you go into a museum. You want to know who paid for this, who cares about that. There is a real sense of alienation. It seems to me there's a lot of anger in the way you talk about your work. And until recently, I would say that you have been concerned with developing abstract methods of drumming out that anger.

Allan: I don't know that I agree with you exactly. Maybe you're right. I know that in previous interviews I've expressed some anger at the way we always tend to define culture: in terms of the interests of some privileged group. But I don't know if you can always necessarily infer that that's what my *artwork* is about. I think that's wrong. Maybe I'm too chatty in interviews, or maybe I dwell too much on how I feel about things in general when I should be talking more specifically about the ideas related to my work.

Tom: So you want to keep your feelings as a person in the world separate from your thoughts as a working artist?

Allan: No, of course not. [laughs] My work is *always* about my feelings, but I also seem to always design my projects so that they invite wider cultural analyses. I do want my work to suggest a larger picture of the way we experience culture and participate in it. I like to ask questions about how society creates objects and what those objects mean. But when I speak of society and culture I'm obviously speaking from a personal, biased point of view. Back in the seventies, with the *Surrogate Paintings,* for instance, I was trying to make objects that made it easier for me to explore my own relationship with paintings in general. But I assumed that my relationship with paintings was similar to everybody else's. I think you could talk about each series that I've done in terms that would sound angry, but you could also use terms that would sound exuberant or playful, and so forth, or even humorous, or ironic, or *silly*. So I want to challenge your statement a bit. At the same time, there's something about what you're saying that is true. Lately I have

been trying to be more constructive than I used to be: to explore art making as something that might be *good* for something!

Tom: Well, what we're talking about, I think, is the critical perception of your work, not necessarily what you think of your work. One of the reasons to look at what you have been doing is to understand it in the context of a progressive, thinking through, abstract method of art making . . .

Allan: There's a reduction.

Tom: A reductionism and an antirepresentational position — for example, with the *Surrogates,* you use the blank center of the issue of representation. But the real difference with the more recent work — the cast *Dog from Pompei* and the dinosaur bones — is that they bring representation right up to the surface. A lot of the discussion of your earlier work has to do with framing; framing created by the pieces or by the institution, the context of exhibition, all that kind of thing. Pompeii still provides a framework of this sort, but there is a shift in emphasis. Pompeii was this wealthy resort town of a civilization now long gone, and the odd things that are left of it are bits and pieces of everyday life, not the fabulous treasures of a power elite. So what you are able to do with the dog is point to ordinary experience, but from this huge, extraordinary distance. You leapfrog over the historical and all that cultural baggage you dislike.

Allan: I think I understand what you're saying. But I need to say, in the first place, I don't necessarily see the *Surrogate Paintings* as nonrepresentational.

Tom: I know you don't. The *Surrogates* could just as easily be considered representational sculpture. I think the question has to do with whether the works *represent* something or are *about* representing something. But to me the installations of the *Plaster Surrogates* always seemed to be about taking a position against representation in art — against "pictures." In contrast the dogs and bones look like they might be pictures in three dimensions.

Allan McCollum, 1978. ***Surrogate Painting*** [No. 783]. 6 1/16 x 5 9/16 inches. Acrylic on wood and museum board.

Allan: That's not exactly the way I think. The motivation behind making the *Surrogate Paintings* was to represent something: to represent the way a painting "sits" in a system of objects. Look at installation shots, or pictures taken of art galleries — that was the picture I had in mind. I was trying to reproduce that picture of an art gallery in three dimensions, a tableau. So with the *Surrogate Paintings* the goal was to make them function as "props" so that the gallery itself would become *like* a picture of a gallery by re-creating an art gallery as a stage set. To me this was a clear representation of the way paintings looked in the world irrespective of whether there's a "representation" *within* the painting or not. Also there was a kind of theatrical motivation, maybe a Brechtian motivation, in which I wanted the viewer to be self-consciously caught up in the act of wanting to *see* a picture. So in a sense the emotional content of these "*Surrogate Paintings*" involved the *desire* to look at a picture. I was trying to trigger that desire by reproducing that entire tableau within which the viewer would be aroused to desire a picture, but at the same time not fulfilling that desire so that, again, the viewer would be caught in the act of experiencing this desire. There was something about what that emotion represents that I was trying to isolate. In that sense the *Surrogate Paintings* were representational to me: they attempted to mirror back the mind set of the person looking at the painting. I don't think it's reaching to call that representational. In order to make the *Surrogate Paintings* function as representations of paintings, I had to ultimately cast them in plaster so that the frame, the mat, and the picture were seamlessly joined by the same material. They were casts of paintings so that they became representations of a type of object that is placed on a wall.

Allan McCollum. ***Plaster Surrogates***, 1982/83. Enamel on Hydrostone. Installation: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York City, 1983.

Tom: They're most often talked about as "signs" of paintings, but to you they also represent a more generalized "type" of cultural object.

Allan: Exactly. But all representations are about choosing to reduce some *thing* to a "type," to some kind of abstraction. In 1978, when I first made notes to myself about what I thought I was doing, I remember inventing terms like, "the standard, occidental wall-mounted artifact." I know that I wasn't simply trying to represent *only* paintings. I remember thinking that I was just performing mimetically like most artists do. This is the way a gallery looks and feels, and I made an imitation of that. There's not so much difference between doing that and an artist deciding to paint a picture of a landscape. I was influenced by artists like Robert Ryman, Frank Stella, and Daniel Buren: people who seemed to reduce painting down to an extremely simple formula of some kind — some kind of *definition* of painting.

Tom: In one way Ryman could be seen to be making a claim to finishing off the project of painting. Reducing it down to a simple definition with this very aggressive stance of, "That's it — done with."

Allan: Yes, but at the time my perception was that if a painting were reduced far enough, down to its basic *identity* as a painting, the painting would become so self-referential that it would have nowhere to go except to implode and refer back to its position in a system of *other* kinds of objects that *aren't* paintings. That was how I began to want to produce a painting that functioned like a prop. To me this felt like the end-result of self-referential painting. The painting winds up only referring to what it is *not* — which is the rest of the world. The distinction between figurative and nonrepresentational art did not come to mind too often, I don't think.

Tom: To me the referent is the key to the *Surrogate Paintings* and to the *Perfect Vehicles*. The referent is just the abstract idea — the idealized idea of a painting or a sculpture. In the *Dog from Pompei* and *Lost Objects,* the referents are beings that once lived and breathed.

Allan: That's true. I guess you're right. But filling a rubber mold that's shaped like a painting with plaster is a very similar act to filling a rubber mold that's shaped like a dog. [laughs] Maybe I'm being obtuse here . . . Of course I favor idealizations and conceptualizations in my work, I guess that's obvious. And if I could have made something that was an abstract representation of time-gone-by I would have. But I couldn't think of any real alternatives so I chose things that already seemed to be representations, already utterly unmediated and anonymous — representations accidentally created by the world itself and not through artistic behavior.

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.

Tom: Yet there is a great difference between the generalized ideas embodied in your earlier works and the specific nature of the dog and the dinosaur bones.

Allan: There was something that appealed to me about the dogs and bones in this area of representation that you're talking about. I felt that in both these cases what I was working with were copies that were produced by *nature*. I think that part of the challenge we face in living with the copies we make ourselves is that we experiencing them as alienating because they always seem to represent something else, they're never the thing itself. So to the degree to which we're enmeshed in relationships with our own copies in the world, we are constantly in a state of *banishment,* from the imaginary "source" of things — from the more "authentic" things that these copies seem to replace. This is just the modern condition, you know? This is also inherent in language and in the way we internalize things as representations. We live in a physical world that's filled with copies and representations made from molds, printing processes, templates, dies, and so forth. We live in a world filled with substitutions for things that are absent because every copy, in a certain sense, only exists because the original is gone. So copies are always about something that's absent, and in that sense they carry a sense of mourning, death, or loss. This is one way to look at our environment — maybe a particularly psychoanalytic way.

Tom: Maybe, but there is also the mundane truth that copies are made so that more people can have them at a lower cost than the "original." I think it is too easy to get caught up in the melancholia of reproduction. Life goes on.

Allan McCollum. ***Lost Objects***, 1991. Enamel on cast glass-fiber-reinforced concrete. Painted replicas made from molds taken from dinosaur bone fossils in the collection of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Produced in collaboration with the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Allan: I know. But there is still this very real side effect that we wind up surrounded not only by the presence of things that we wouldn't have otherwise but with the absences that these copies represent. So if I have a certain mass-produced coffee cup, for instance, and I know that thousands of other people have the same cup, that's great because I feel connected to all these thousands of other people. But at the same time the actual reality of any *particular* coffee cup seems to exist *nowhere*. So in a sense absence is everywhere. So sometimes I experience living in the world as a kind of mourning, or as a kind of longing for the things that are always absent. The presence of so many copies seems to amplify this feeling for me. Anyway, I found that the *Dog from Pompei* and the *Lost Objects* could convey this particular way of experiencing representation because they were *literally* copies of objects that were long gone, never to exist again. The only way you could have a relationship with them at all would be through the duplicates created by nature. I came up with the idea of using fossils because fossils are reproductions almost by definition. Dinosaur fossils, for instance, are created over a process of millions of years in which the bone is dissolved and replaced by silica or minerals of some kind. It's a slow process of development and, ultimately, what you get is an exact duplicate of the original bone. So I felt that if representation is a sort of alienating mechanism maybe these objects sort of corrected, or bridged, that gap, or *naturalized* the relationship between the copy and what the copy represents in some uncanny, symbolic way because they are *naturally* made copies. Whether or not this distinction makes any rational sense, I think emotionally it makes sense. So one of the meanings a naturally produced copy has for us is that it absolves us of the guilt for living in relation to our own copies all the time. It makes copying a natural thing.

Tom: Are you seeking salvation for the alienation of your old work by using naturally occurring representations?

Allan: Hmm. Maybe! It's about the way we mythologize nature. . . . I'm not offering any criticisms or solutions, I'm mostly describing what I think is a kind of fantasy, or a kind of *wish,* and the way these naturally made copies seem to *satisfy* this wish in some way. I'm not trying to make some distinction between nature and culture here, I'm just saying that as a culture we make these distinctions. We might name a flower after a certain animal because it looks like that animal. We're constantly looking for these correspondences, resemblances. Why is it pleasurable to do that? I think that it's pleasurable because it makes our own copying seem like a natural process whereas if we didn't find it in nature we would find our own copying, our own inner representing, to be alienating or inauthentic.

In fact a lot of "antirepresentational" artists from the recent past do view representations as alienating and delusional — encouraging illusions and fantasies and aloofness from reality. Sometimes I agree with these views.

When I first designed the *Surrogates* it was very difficult to convey to people that I considered the frame to be part of the work itself. People would generally look into the window of the mat and think *that* was what they were supposed to look at. So I think I was considered a monochrome painter by many people. That became a preoccupation of mine — how troublesome it was to convey the idea that the entire framed artwork was meant to be experienced as a whole object in itself.

Tom: It is interesting that people used to think that you were a monochrome painter. In thinking that, they were thinking you were taking a position against representation.

Allan: I think that I had thought these issues through a long, long time before I began the *Surrogate Paintings.* As I said, I had already looked at Frank Stella's paintings, Robert Ryman's and Roy Lichtenstein's paintings, and even On Kawara's paintings, as *signs* for paintings. And I think there's lots of ways to argue that that's exactly what they are, and perhaps intentionally so. But I don't think other people saw them exactly that way. I saw these paintings as caricatures of paintings, and therefore the work seemed to self-consciously refer to their context in the world at large in ways that other paintings don't. I'd been going through that train of thought for so many years that it took me by surprise that even in 1978 people didn't know how to look at the frame and see it as part of the work. The *Plaster Surrogates* came out of a sort of step-by-step logic from painting in the late sixties. It wasn't as if I one day gave up painting and simply became a sculptor.

Allan McCollum. ***Surrogate Paintings***, 1979-81. Acrylic paint on wood and museum board. Installation: Chase Manhattan Bank waiting area, New York City, 1981.

Tom: The *Surrogates* are all in portrait form.

Allan: Well, yes, and I made that decision when I decided I also wanted to make a direct reference to domestic objects. A *Surrogate Painting* was meant to represent a painting in a museum, but at the same time it was meant to represent a photograph of your grandchild, or something like that. It was meant to represent a kind of standard type of cultural object that we make, save, and value — an object *in use*. Anyway, I think I have to give you a little history of the decisions I made when I decided to do the dogs and bones in order to answer your earlier question.

Tom: Do you think of them as "dogs and bones?"

Allan: I try not to say "dogs" and "bones" together in the same sentence if I can help it! [laughs] When I thought of the idea of using the fossils (and they're both kinds of fossils, really) I was looking for a different type of object that functions as a kind of valued *thing* to the culture. Just as the *Plaster Surrogates* could represent the Mona Lisa or a graduation photo, I was also trying to come up with some sort of project that could represent a connection with the past, or our *desire* to be connected to the past. If you look at my work from around 1975 to now, I think you can separate the work into categories of objects. And usually these categories can be defined by some kind of attempt on my part to do a type of object which already exists in the culture, something which is collected and saved and satisfies or appeals to certain emotional needs or desires. I was thinking, What do we have in our homes? What do we have in museums? Well, you have certain types of objects which we value because they seem to be more than what they are. Religious objects would fall into this category and fine art objects, of course. So with the fossils I was thinking of a category of object that we save to remind us that the past exists, both on a cultural level and on a personal level. It's funny because you can make a sign for a painting and duplicate it but you can't make a sign for an old object and duplicate that aura that comes from age. You can't synthesize or invent that; you can pretend. You can buy copies of Nefertiti, or something, but you will always know it's a copy even if it's made from a mold made from the original. It doesn't give you what you would want from a really ancient object.

Tom: I wonder. I recently got this phone call at school [California Institute of the Arts] from a woman who said she had some Egyptian artifacts that her husband had collected and loved. She wanted to get rid of them because he had died recently. I went to visit her and what she had, in fact, were a number of souvenirs her husband had bought at the King Tut exhibit when it was at the Coliseum in Los Angeles: a couple of bookends, a little cast of Nefertiti . . . They were objects with no value as artifacts, and they were of no value to *her* because she hadn't shared in his interest in Egyptian souvenirs. But they did refer to some desire of her husband.

Allan: But they did have value to her *because* they had value to her husband. So much value that she wanted to do something significant with them rather than just throw them out.

Tom: Exactly. She wanted art students to use them for drawing exercises, a step above throwing them out. Yet there was a reluctance to toss them completely, which was her real impulse. We were talking about the satisfaction with the copy, I think her husband was completely satisfied with them.

Allan: I don't know . . .

Tom: The one original item he had in the collection was a little pyramid filled with sand that his friend made for him with sand from Egypt. This man's only encounter with Egypt was through the exhibition, but his friend managed to go to Egypt and brought him some sand and made this little, tiny pyramid.

Allan: My grandmother's grandfather was a ventriloquist and performed around the country in the late 1800s. She lived in southeast Texas when she was a little girl, and he once brought her a little present of seashells from San Francisco. She saved them, and just before she died she divided them up. She got a kit from the craft store for making little plastic paperweights and made one for each grandchild so that each one of us could have a little souvenir from her grandfather: seashells encased in polyester resin. I still have mine.

Tom: You have so many stories from your family's history that sort of prefigure your current interests.

Allan: What you were describing reminds me of another story: My grandmother died in 1977, around the time I first started the *Surrogate Paintings,* and I was sort of trying to determine the final form they would

take. When she died she left behind things that nobody knew about, they were essentially souvenirs of events that had nothing to do with anyone still around. It's an extremely strange feeling to have an object that meant something to somebody who's gone. You don't know what it meant, but because it had meant something to someone you loved it now means something to you. It's hard to say how much the objects mean because they only seem to *almost* mean something, but they mean enough to you that you save some of them. I remember feeling that it was this kind of imminent meaningfulness that I wanted the *Surrogate Paintings* to have. I wanted them to refer to things that we value without necessarily knowing all the reasons why.

Tom: Like old family photographs that you find where you don't know who any of the people are, except you know that one of them might be your great-grandparent or something?

Allan: Yes, exactly. And that doesn't only happen with heirlooms. I'm forty-eight now, and I have objects I've kept whose significance has been lost to me. I know they meant something to me once — related to some friend or some event — but I honestly don't remember. I'm afraid if I throw them away I'll lose these meanings forever, but, then again, I'll probably never remember what they were anyway. But these objects have an aura of meaningfulness that's unknowable and nonspecific.

Allan McCollum. ***Perfect Vehicles***, 1985/88. Acrylic paint on solid cast Hydrocal. Installation: Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris, France, 1988.

Tom: So that's what's crucial with the *Perfect Vehicles*?

Allan: Well, with the *Surrogates,* yes. But I guess with the *Perfect Vehicles* that aura of imminent meaningfulness became more and more amplified and more refined.

Tom: Because you made them look somewhat more like family heirlooms in some abstract way?

Allan: No, not exactly. I wanted the *Surrogates* to represent both an object that the culture at large values and an object that an individual might value within his/her own lifetime. For the *Perfect Vehicles* I chose the vase as an object that seemed to have that same spread of potential meanings. If you go to the Victoria and Albert or the Metropolitan Museum you can see vases that have similar shapes to the vases you can buy at Woolworth's. So since I intended to make a reductive sculpture all I thought about were the *shapes*. I tried to find one that could function at either end of the continuum of meaning, of value, and of enhancement.

Tom: Why are they grouped — is it in fives? — together?

Allan: I group them in all kinds of different ways — this is very hard to explain exactly. I think there's something very poignant about the mentality of Modern Man . . .

Tom: Man as in *mankind,* or *male?*

Allan: No, I mean "modern" human individuals. This is a very American thing: the individual's desire to seek out "needs," to define them, simplify them, and try to satisfy them. You see this especially in the production of consumer goods and in modern science as well as in the arts. I think it's a modern desire. I don't exactly know why that's the case but I think it's an interesting area to explore. So sometimes when I'm functioning as an artist I'm functioning as an individual in terms of my own feelings and wishes and so forth. At other times I sort of try to inhabit that part of me that is a modern person that has this impulse. So there sometimes is that kind of self-conscious conceit going on with me. When I made the *Perfect Vehicles* I was purposely functioning in a voice that sort of naively (maybe) and optimistically felt that a religious object could be reduced down to some kind of simple thing that one could then reproduce, that would

represent all transcendent feelings at once. It's a preposterous goal but it's the kind of thinking that people who design national symbols must have to go through. So in order to amplify that posture I decided that if this modern person wanted to create a highly overdetermined symbol how much better it would be to make a *lot* of them . . . speaking as this modern person who would think like this — and modern people do think like this. So I had this conceit that you could create something like a power station, that was the reason to put a number of *Perfect Vehicles* together. The aura of value and significance would increase exponentially with the number of objects you put together. But the *Vehicles* are more than "religious" objects — they are also representations of "fine art" objects. There was something else I intended to do with the *Perfect Vehicles,* which was to depict that particular dramatic process of an object made to convey some charged meaning that is required of it by culture. As a kid growing up in Los Angeles I remember that "Perfect Vehicles" was a common phrase: a film director or an actor was always searching for the *Perfect Vehicles* that would draw on his own particular, unique talent. So this idea that one could come up with a "vehicle" that was perfectly suited to expressing who you were seemed to me to be a principal, "mythic quest" of the artist or poet. Everyone's looking for that "perfect" form, and the viewer is also looking for the art vehicle that somehow captures and expresses his or her own feelings. Through identification the viewer finds his own inner truths objectified somehow. So I was interested in the mythology and how it is mediated through objects that artists make. In a sense it's essentially what artists do for a living, and it's also the critical basis for judging the success or failure of an artwork. Everyone's looking for this means of conveyance, and the art object occupies the center of this search. Maybe this quest had religious significance before it became artistic: that an object might have symbolic significance that far outweighs its day-to-day usefulness.

Tom: This all sounds very Walter Benjamin/Frankfurt School, which is not as interesting as your take on the Hollywood idea of the "*Perfect Vehicle*." I'd like to hear more on the film actor's search for acceptance and the mass circulation of religious objects.

Allan: The fact that they exist in such immense quantities reinvents a whole new kind of aura — is that what you mean? I guess that's why I brought up the example of a religious object in the first place because I wasn't talking about an object that's enshrined, that's a one-of-a-kind, piece-of-the-cross type of object. I was thinking about the plaster Madonna that no matter how many times it's reproduced, how many homes it exists in, it still has significance and meaning and aura to the person who believes.

Tom: Doesn't the plaster Madonna represent aura? The Church and religion, etc.? Do the *Vehicles* represent the "aura of art?"

Allan: I think to me they do. Maybe that sounds too simple. I was trying to come up with an object that represented all of those mechanisms of looking at a thing and being caught up in some transcendent feeling that wasn't in the thing itself, but the thing itself acted as a catalyst for these other feelings and in *that* sense functioned like a vehicle. And I think I was trying to represent this kind of object as part of my work. But like you said, by doing them in quantity I was also contradicting the idea of the unique, singular . . .

Tom: Is it the quantity that creates the idea of absurdity?

Allan: Or intensity.

Tom: There's a *funny* kind of intensity.

Allan: Faced with large quantities of the same object maybe you come to realize that what you're feeling couldn't be real because it's absurd to think that the "Holy Spirit" is more present in ten thousand plaster Madonnas than in one. But in fact if you saw ten thousand Madonnas and you believed, you probably would feel that. There's that discrepancy about what makes sense and what doesn't make sense, especially in the context of religious feeling. So a deeply religious person in the presence of ten thousand Madonnas

might even consider it to be slightly absurd. But at the same time they might realize that the power of belief exists within themselves and not in the bits of plaster. I'm not sure.

Tom: But laughter *is* one response to your work.

Allan: I understand what you're saying. There have been times when you go into somebody's home — a mother of a friend or something — and see the objects that they find so valuable, like this pyramid you were talking about, or the pencil that says, "I like Pussy" — was that your story?

Tom: That was Richard Baim's story. [laughs] They didn't know the American slang. He saw this pencil at an Italian friend's parents' home in Tuscany. They had many pet cats and cat knick-knacks including this pencil their son had innocently (or not so innocently) brought back from America.

Allan: You go into somebody's home and you see something funny in the objects that they value, and it makes you uneasy. . . . Let me say that I don't think the *Perfect Vehicles* are as funny as other people do. I do understand that they're funny, but I don't think they're as funny or ironic as other people seem to think they are. And while I don't necessarily look at them and have what you'd call a religious experience, I do look at them and think that I *might,* maybe, if you know what I mean. I don't make them with the kind of irony that people seem to project onto them because I'm actually very suggestible. If I see an object that someone else values to the extreme, I'm moved by that. As I said before, I would have a hard time throwing something away that someone else valued even though I didn't understand why it was valued. So I suppose the *Perfect Vehicles* can be seen as comedic to some, and I recognize that they do. But this always hurts me a little bit. To an outsider the over-valued object seems silly and made even sillier by the owner's emotional investment in it. But I want my work to amplify the poignancy of that kind of estrangement from belief that we suffer in the face of the unfamiliar values of others.

Tom: No, I think that is where the poignancy is: that they're absurd and funny but you know that they also refer to an idea of value.

Allan McCollum. ***Perfect Vehicles***, 1988. Acrylic paint on glass fiber reinforced concrete. Installation: Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery, Los Angeles, California, 1988.

Allan: Maybe what you think of as "funny" I tend to think of as "poignant." I must feel that the poignancy increases as the sense of the comedic increases.

Tom: I can't bear to watch situation comedies because you can always see the jokes coming. At a certain point I can't take it any longer . . . Is that poignant?

Allan: Well, look at the tragedy of being an alcoholic and the number of jokes ridiculing alcoholics. It's funny and it's not funny because it's tragic, and maybe there's a difference between the way you and I look at things, too — you favor the comedic over the poignant. There's something tragic and poignant, it seems to me, about looking to an object to have meaning when obviously the object is just functioning as a symbol. There's something sad about that because it means that what you want you don't have, all you have is the substitute, and that can be seen as basically sad. I once read a book by a famous clairvoyant who claimed that he could see people walking around who had died but couldn't leave the "earth-plane." And the reason they couldn't was that they were addicted to something. He said he once saw the spirit of an alcoholic curled up in a barrel of wine. And he claimed that people addicted to nicotine have a hard time leaving this earth-plane because they're constantly looking for cigarettes and recreating what he called "dream-cigars." So that would be horrible if it were true, but it's also funny.

Tom: That's ridiculous.

Allan: Well, if a man puts flowers on his wife's grave would that strike you as funny?

Tom: No. Grieving for a lost love or honoring a memory — these are genuine human acts. But claiming you can see lost souls in empty wine glasses and dirty ashtrays is just nonsense.

Allan: These are all similar kinds of concepts to me. I think that each series that I do tends to explore a different kind of valuation or kind of meaning, or significance, that we look for, that we value in an object. We tend to separate our valuations into categories, but they all blend into one another. The *Perfect Vehicles* are similar in many ways to the *Plaster Surrogates* — sort of a three-dimensional version of them. On the other hand, the *Perfect Vehicles* have that reference to transcendence that is much more obvious, as you pointed out. That aspect overlaps into my other projects. They all form a project as a whole, I suppose, which in the end might form a certain picture of my own emotional life. I suffer some estrangement from tradition and that sometimes makes me really unhappy. I hope I'm depicting some kind of more universal condition, especially with regard to the objects we value. I tried to make the *Perfect Vehicles* look like they were made with a great deal of care, which they were. They take a long time to make in the studio.

Tom: Why is that?

Allan: Well, you think that it's easy to make something look *perfect* but it isn't. [laughs] We use rubber molds and make them out of plaster and it takes hours and hours of sanding and shaping even though the mold is as perfect as we can make it every mold warps. And then there are coats and coats of paint.

Tom: Are they usually one color?

Allan: They usually are.

Tom: Sometimes they have stripes, don't they? That must make them more difficult — to get the stripes perfect?

Allan: You're not being sarcastic are you? [laughs]

Tom: Me? [laughs] Do you still call them *Perfect Vehicles* when they're large?

Allan: Yes, they're just the same only bigger!

Tom: But they're not just the same because they *are* bigger. I remember being at your opening when you first showed them and standing around talking to somebody. As I moved my head in conversation I glimpsed one out of the corner of my eye and for that moment thought there was someone standing besides me. It was a little startling.

Allan: Of course they're going to have a different kind of presence. In designing the *Perfect Vehicles* I was trying to make some objects that were highly overdetermined and that were maybe even inexhaustible in their potential as symbols. I chose a particular kind of vase to copy that had a lot of masculine characteristics as well as feminine, and which had certain references to machines as well as to the organic. I tried to elaborate upon the typical kinds of things people say about vases representing femaleness: wombs, breasts . . . at the same time giving them an almost military, phallic presence. Anyway, I was aware that they also had an ambiguous anthropomorphic presence that just didn't work as dramatically on a small scale.

Tom: So the big ones are *more* perfect?

Allan: Yes! And also because they don't reference the mass-produced consumer object so readily. At the moment when I started showing the *Perfect Vehicles* — because of what some popular, younger artists were doing at the time — I didn't quite anticipate that that reference to mass consumption was going to be favored so strongly in people's perceptions of the work, especially by younger art critics. They were being perceived in a way that I thought was out of balance. The large ones sort of solved that dilemma, I think. The larger ones are necessarily more singular. And also a lot heavier.

Tom: They're different materials?

Allan: They are, but that's a technical thing.

Tom: You think? The big ones are concrete, aren't they? Concrete have a different connotation from plaster? You don't have a material content? One of the funny things about them is either way they're closed off. But critics have tended to make an issue of the fact that the small ones are solid and the big ones are hollow. Which is obviously . . .

Allan: Of course they also have material content. Of course concrete has a different connotation from plaster. I chose plaster for the smaller ones because it runs the cultural gamut from its common use in simple child's crafts to its sophisticated use in commercial reproductions and artists' studios. Gypsum has been in use for thousands of years, so to me it has a feeling of being a very primary material. If I felt I could have made the larger *Perfect Vehicles* solid I would have. It's just that you'd need a crane every time you move them. That was an important point with the smaller ones, that they be solid. I was looking for an object that would grow in meaning and value through projection. That meaning would be projected onto it, or *into* it. I felt that if they were hollow that hollowness would be confused with whatever meaning we might feel was inherent in the vehicle itself. In other words, if you can't *physically* put anything in it then you're only going to put *meaning* into it — you can't put flowers in it, or ashes. Even though the large ones are hollow the lids are part of the form as a whole, and they don't come off!

Tom: I had a teacher in primary school who would tell off noisy kids with the phrase, "Empty vessels make the most noise." [laughs]

Allan: I've heard that expression. But "empty vessels" is different from *Perfect Vehicles*. [laughs] This reminds me of an article I read in a magazine about a wealthy nineteenth-century American who was constantly going back and forth by ship between England and Boston, and he owned these two oriental vases, each about six feet tall. He loved them so much that when he traveled back and forth he took the vases with him. This image of somebody carting around these cumbersome exteriorizations of some quality of great inner significance is an image that reoccurs in my thinking about most of the objects I make. I *always* picture people carrying my objects around before I make them . . . especially the bones. To carry around a dinosaur bone would be particularly poignant and cumbersome. To me the dinosaur bones, being so huge, seemed like the perfect metaphor for the way that a copy embodies an absence because dinosaur bones only come to us as copies in the first place. They represent this enormous, monumentally sad absence of a whole world we'll never retrieve again. Making copies from a mold feels like constantly trying to *bring something back* that used to be there but isn't. You take a cavity that's made of rubber and you fill it with plaster and you pop it out and it looks just like the original, but it isn't quite. So you do it again and again and again. With the fossils, I was trying to further extend this picture of the dramatic role objects play in emotional life. What I felt was missing from the picture was a kind of connectedness to history — to Time, to the past. So, as I've said before, I was looking for an object that would really do that and not simply be a *copy* of something else that did that, or an arbitrary sign of something that did that. But there are very few kinds of objects that I could possibly imagine that might give you that sense while at the same time be infinitely reproducible. Instead of focusing on historical relics or heirlooms or certain types of things that we could easily find, I found myself having to choose something that was quite atypical. My feeling was, since the fossil was already a duplicate there wouldn't be any loss of authenticity by

reduplicating it; I would simply be extending a series which was already begun, in a way. It's funny that certain kinds of museum objects can be enhanced through copying, but museum people don't always realize this. I'd like to start putting these kinds of museum objects to use in a new way. Even more to the point, the Pompeii relic was a *cavity,* not a solid thing. The dog was killed in A.D. 79; it was smothered, and then deteriorated within its own cavity. But the cavity itself wasn't discovered until 1874, and it was only at that point that it was filled with plaster. The Vesuvius Museum made the mold for me in 1991. It's an object that's difficult to date. I was tempted to date it A.D. 79 because that's when the original cavity was made. So it's a problematic object in that it's a *copy* — a copy of an object that only existed as a copy to begin with without having had a "real" existence during any prior point in history.

Tom: Or existed as this empty space that once was a dog: it's a representation of a moment in time.

Allan: In the title of the piece, *Dog from Pompei,* I chose to give *Pompei* the present-day spelling because that's where I obtained the cast dog, in present-day Pompei. But it was *Pompeii* — double i — at the moment in time when the dog died. Copyeditors are always changing my title back to the ancient spelling because they think that it's more correct. So everyone seems to be confused about how to date it. I determined that I wanted to make an object that offered a connectedness to the deep past. I also decided that it had to be something that wasn't connected to any specific culture. Usually if we go to a history museum we don't see things like the Pompeiian dog, for example, we see things that belonged to a particular king or era or battle, and you know they're artifacts or relics that have to do with some individual or culture. Obviously the dog did come from Pompeii and refers to a specific geological event. But in the end it's only a dog: it's not made of gold, it's not carved, it doesn't reflect any style or any culture. At least that's the way it seemed to me. I was originally looking for the famous loaves of bread when I went to Pompeii. It turned out that those loaves of bread are real — the original bread.

Tom: The bread is preserved?

Allan: Yes, and I was so disappointed because I remembered as a child reading that the Pompeiian loaves of bread were cast in plaster, but I remembered wrong. So that narrowed down the choices. There was also a chest with doors and hinges which they also had cast. They had found a three-dimensional rectangular cavity and they plastered the sides with concrete and excavated it, and it turned out to be a chest with molding and everything. They wouldn't let me do it. It looked very much more like an art object of a more abstract type. It would have had a whole different slew of references.

Tom: What kind of issues did the curators and conservators at Pompei raise?

Allan: I was very lucky because they didn't get all that involved in the end, but early on there were issues. There were certain things that had been very well documented and other things that had not been documented. The chests were discovered more recently and that seemed to be a big issue.

Tom: It was infringing on their potential commerce, in a way.

Allan: My dealer in Naples and I wound up getting the dog from a museum that was a little to the side of the site called the Vesuvius Museum. And what they had was a secondary cast of the dog as there had only been two or three copies made. And the reason that they were able to get their copy had to do with somebody who was related to somebody the museum people knew who had worked on the site and was allowed to make a copy for them. It wasn't the actual first cast dog that came out of the ground. I kind of wish it had been, but ultimately it doesn't really matter because since then I've made three additional molds. It doesn't matter because they all have the same relationship to the original cavity, which no longer exists. A young man who was working on the site at Herculaneum, who was an archaeology student and friends with the site's restorer, knew the director of the Vesuvius Museum, and they let us do it. So I didn't have to go through Rome, I only had to go through Pompei. That made it much easier. We applied to Rome

for permission to use the other objects, and they refused us. I ultimately chose the dog. At first I was afraid of the drama of the thing. It seemed so incredibly overdramatic, dramatic beyond any necessity. But in the end I think I chose it because it is so poignant, so evocative. I mean, people have actually cried when they've seen it — when they see my *copy* of it. When I had the show in Madrid somebody cried. It has nothing to do with a what a wonderful artist I am.

Tom: Oh, I don't know, you shouldn't downplay your role. It is the way that you draw attention to the object that makes it seem so moving.

Allan: Whenever I see it my initial feeling is to feel sorry for the dog — to feel empathy for the dog. But how empathetic can you really feel for a dog that died nineteen hundred years ago? It's almost a preposterous emotion. I think, in a really interesting way, it introduces a feeling about time that is very familiar and intimate . . . How can I say this, it seems to me if we didn't have artifacts to remind us about the past everything would disappear, we would be living in the continual present all the time. The only way we have any sense of the past is through artifacts, or memories — if memories can be called artifacts. So we either have inner representations or outer representations but we don't have any actual *experience* of the past. We can have wonderful representations of the past, and voluptuous and emotionally charged representations of the past, but they're always going to be just representations and stories. So I think I came to feel that the dog seemed to exemplify this drama and was a dramatic object of some kind that embodied that feeling of estrangement from the past even as it invoked the past.

Tom: Does the dog encourage a narrative? Or does the repetition of the dog prevent that from happening? Last time we talked you said something about the dinosaurs and that the fact of their existence is so strangely threatening because they represent an environment that would have been hostile to humans, and in a way the dog does the same thing because it is a record of a moment when the earth was hostile to humanity.

Allan: When I originally wanted to use the loaf of bread, I wanted to use an object that had utterly no significance: that was mundane, that was domestic and ephemeral, that was only accidentally preserved, and that was unsettling exactly because it was so common. Because to look at the ghost of a common, everyday object that's nineteen hundred years old is unsettling, or is provocative not because it belonged to anyone in particular but simply because it's still *here,* and we recognize it. Here's an example: When I was a truck driver in the sixties I worked for an art-handling company in Los Angeles, and I once delivered something to a collector in San Francisco. He tipped me: he put a Trilobite fossil in my hand. And I said, "What is this?" And he said, "It's a Trilobite, this is 300 million years old." I looked at it and thought, My God, Holy Cow! But on the way out the door, I thought, Yes, but *any* rock I pick up might be 300 million years old! So I don't know how to explain it very well, but I wonder why is it that we don't perceive every rock that way? It isn't uncommon to find a 300 million-year-old rock. They're probably in your garden. Why doesn't that amaze us as much as an imprint of the Trilobite amazes us? It amazes us because there's more of a story there, more of a drama.

Tom: There's the evidence of life.

Allan: And death — that's a story. To a geologist any stone is a story, but not to most of us. So I'm interested in how that is suppressed: how we walk around not only not thinking about death but not thinking about time; not thinking about how much time has passed on this planet. To me this daily amnesia is a good symbol of unconscious repression in general. It's something that is so obvious to all of us and we all know it , especially if the object is a *bone,* because it's obviously an allegorical thing, too, a reminder of death. The planet's been here — I don't know how long — four billion years or so, and life has been around nearly that long and we don't dwell on the significance of this on a daily basis. The awareness of time falls into that category of other things that we push out of our consciousnesses like sexuality, violence, death, and so forth. And we save objects which seem to me to allow us to dwell on this only when we feel

like it. Or we create archives where we visit to look at these things on special occasions. I'm personally surprised that everybody doesn't collect fossils. Why wouldn't everyone want three or four fossils? They have a significance that goes beyond any artwork. Yet people are generally more apt to have artworks than fossils.

Tom: I know I keep trying to beat this dead horse, but I'm just trying to get something clear. You have this great interest and respect for fossils, for example, because they work as souvenirs of long ago — it makes you think of the fragility of life. It seems to me that before you started working on the fossils, your work was generated out of your disappointment with cultural artifacts. They represented a cultural memory that was an alien one to you — it was the memory of a power elite rather than the memory of the ordinary person. So by leapfrogging over history, so to speak, you have found a way of getting at the issue of time and memory that avoids the issue of culture . . .

Allan: Yes, you're right, I see what you mean better now. It was a conscious choice similar to the way that I avoided making "pictures" when I did the *Plaster Surrogates*. When I decided to do the *Surrogates* I had two ways to go: I could have done either every image or no image. I opted for no image. I guess in the same sense I wanted to produce an object that carries with it that deeper scope of time — the scope of time which obliterates or relativises history. It would have seemed overly limiting to choose a particular historical period. Pompeii, of course, existed during a certain period. So you can't say that the plaster dog works perfectly on that level, but you can say that it's very problematic to date the thing. But the dinosaur fossils do leapfrog over the problem, like you say, and I was surprised to find how satisfied I was to produce the *Lost Objects*. They satisfied a lot of my visual needs in terms of their forms as well as my intellectual interests in what they were capable of signifying. And they're so monumentally *sad*. Sometimes I almost self-consciously functioned as an American when I plotted out the dinosaur project. I went out to Utah to see Dinosaur National Monument, where a lot of those fossils came from that I borrowed from the Carnegie Museum of Natural History to make my molds from. I enjoyed the discovery that people in Utah, especially the people that I talked to who work in museums there, think of dinosaur bones as their *heritage*. It might seem peculiar to you as a European, but responding to that as an American I totally understood what they meant. I think that from a European perspective one might think, It's not *your* heritage. If anything it's the earth's heritage. So I think what you're perceiving is true, that there is an element in my work of a kind of wanting to neutralize all of the complicated factors when it comes to cumulative culture. There are so many other different ways that beautiful objects can come into existence! This is probably very American of me. In a sense culture is too much to have to think about. It's too much to have to know. This is probably not only an American impulse, it's probably more generally a modern impulse to want to reduce things into some simpler form. I'm not trying to tell you that I think this is just an observation of yours because it's there in the work, but I just want to contextualize it. I didn't think that you could get at that feeling of "past-ness" without leapfrogging over cultural artifacts. What was I going to choose, something Sumerian? or Mayan? It would always be something from somewhere. Then it would be like, why choose that and not the other? So I narrowed it down to a very rare, almost curiosity-type-of-object more than a historical-type-of-object. And really, now I can't think of any other object that satisfies those criteria that I have just described and is something that comes to us as a copy but still has that direct, indexical relationship to the past — can you? Fossils are the ideal thing since they are by definition traces or imprints.

Tom: I didn't see the Carnegie installation. I just saw a photograph which was shot from the balcony looking down. In thinking about the piece had you been thinking about the exhibition's context and how your work would look with European art? It's quite striking. You could start to make all sorts of associations about these limbless classical sculptures looking down on broken bones . . .

Allan: I think I liked the room mainly because it was big and it was very grand and maybe it would lend a little drama to the piece. I don't know. More significantly, if you walked through the door in back you walked right into the Natural History Museum. It was the only part of the art museum that connected to it. I

didn't mind the classical sculpture surrounding the room, but I didn't mean to make too big of a drama between nature and culture. It was as much happenstance as anything else. One of the things that I think is unique about my work (and it's a big problem that I have) is that it doesn't have any site, really. I mean the *Plaster Surrogates* and the *Perpetual Photos* have to go on a wall — that's about it. I design the objects before I really know what I'm going to do with them — that's the case with the bones. I'd been wanting to do cast dinosaur fossils for years but I had no access to any. I happened to be invited to be in the show at the Carnegie Institute, so I was finally able to get help getting access to fossilized bones. As I said before, I pictured people carrying them around but I didn't really know what I was going to do with them. It was the same with the *Individual Works*. I didn't know what I was going to do with them and I still have a problem with not knowing what to do with them.

Tom: That's connected to the whole idea of identifying a need, fulfilling it, simplifying it, and culling it, because it is all done in a vacuum.

Allan: Yes, I guess so. It's appropriate that I find myself in this dilemma, and it's appropriate that I find myself with so many objects that I don't know what to do with.

Tom: Storage is so predominant in your studio. Your studio is itself becoming a kind of museum archive. With your method of production you're always *in* production, aren't you?

Allan: I tend to keep producing. I usually keep going on with a project until it completely exhausts me. I'm interested in the quality an object has when you know there will likely be more of them. But any one of my artworks may be made up of hundreds of smaller artworks. I produce works in collections. So if I'm doing an exhibition I may have a single collection on exhibit, but there may be hundreds of objects in that single collection to look at. So I have to produce them one at a time.

Tom: *Collections* sounds like a marketing device of some sort — the fashion industry presents new "collections" . . .

Allan: Doesn't it also sound like the Museum of Modern Art, or any museum or patron? It's not my fault that the fashion industry imitates the language of the cultural elite. [laughs]

Tom: What's behind the idea of a collection?

Allan: People collect objects as a way of defining themselves and their relations with others, I guess. It would be hard to explore this by making singular works, so I like to make lots of objects. It's contradictory in a business sense because it makes my life really complicated, and my art dealers don't like it. I just did a drawing show at a gallery in London last year, and since they had all the framing done over there, I naturally expected them to attach labels to the backs of all 2,070 drawings the way galleries generally do. Well, they labeled a hundred or so, but then they got bored and frustrated and just sort of stopped doing them. I'm kind of irritated by that, but they're thinking that I've got to be nuts expecting them to label 2,070 drawings. So I had my assistant sent to London to help them. It's paradoxical that I produce objects that have to be individually registered and individually signed and considered, but the artwork itself as a whole becomes a collection of maybe 400 or more of these individually considered objects.

Tom: Even in a hypothetically limitless market you will have a storage problem.

Allan: I'm just that kind of person. I tend to want to fill a space when I see it. If I have an extra corner in my studio I say to myself, I can store such and such there, so I make some more. Working in extremely large quantities is crucial to my thinking because in trying to construct this picture of art objects and emotions in interaction, I want to take into account not only the relationships that the art objects have to one another but also the relationships they have to all the other kinds of objects in the world that are *not* art

objects. It seems to me that one of the determining features of an art object is that it's a unique object almost by definition. I don't think that the meaning of *uniqueness* can really be understood without recognizing it in relation to objects that are not unique, which are largely mass-produced objects. When I began to think most about this particular issue — about uniqueness as a quality which is only defined by its opposite — I guess I got involved in mass production in a minor way.

Tom: With the *Surrogates?*

Allan: With the *Surrogates,* yes. I originally began using mass production in the late sixties as a kind of dramatic device. But then I began to realize that this was an interesting dilemma in the way that I just described it. I don't know how to say it. It's that our conception of what artworks are, and should be, and how we expect them to function . . . we expect them to be rare, and we expect them to be emotional, passionate, and we expect them to be spiritual (maybe) and spontaneous. We expect art objects to symbolize what it means to be human — qualities that a machine cannot reproduce. I began to recognize that the issue isn't simply how we define what an art object is, but how we define what it means to be human. And for whatever reason, when we say something is *human* we are usually referring to all the qualities that are *not mechanical*. So how are we to understand what it means to be human if we don't also understand what we consider to be nonhuman and mechanical? In a similar way art objects are expected to be about passion, spirituality, expressivity, spontaneity, and the recording of special, magic moments, and so forth: the kinds of things we find in a typical expressionist painting. How can we understand what that means if we don't realize that the artists who produce these artworks exist in a culture that is saturated with copies and mass-produced objects that are often all essentially the same? In a hypothetical world where everything is "unique" the concept of "uniqueness" would have no significance. To me this contrast became more interesting than either the works of art themselves or the mass-produced objects. This is what I became interested in at the end of the seventies. I grew interested in how that dichotomy itself describes a picture of who we are at this historical moment. So then I began to consider that there was a kind of group denial of what mass production was expressing. If it was a general expression of who we were, then it must be expressive of *something*. We think we know what we're expressing with works of art — and you've written about this particular aspect of expressionism — how interesting it is that all this expressionism looks alike, and so on. It's peculiar that we burden the artist with all this expectation of being expressive and relieve commerce and industry from this same expectation. I feel that if you look for human values only in artworks and pretend that human values are not relevant in industry, then you're creating a situation where people feel no moral responsibility for what's being mass produced.

Allan McCollum. ***Over Ten Thousand Individual Works***, (detail) 1987/88. Enamel paint on Hydrocal.

And so I felt compelled to think about these things and explore these issues to try to produce a kind of artwork that also depicted what I felt industry might not want to express and produce a kind of object that was at the same time a mass-produced thing as well as an art object. To make something that was kind of a reconciliation at a higher level — that was my conceit, not some artwork that was *referring* to mass production, or vice versa, but something that reconciled both forms of expression into a single form. And I began to think about how many ways industrial production seeks to imitate nature, for instance, in its repetition and in its fecundity.

There is something so sensual and almost mind boggling about the *Individual Works*. They are designed to appeal directly to a sense of touch with all of those little shapes that are so eroticized. There seems to be so much reference to the body. When I looked at the table filled with over ten thousand works I felt like there was an extension or a projection of the human body, in a sense, my own body — not only because I'd touched each one and made each one but because the little

shapes often resembled little penises or little nipples or other little bodily passages. I borrowed from industrial design all those little tricks that make you want to touch something, that appeal to your sensuality and your desire. I chose to make shapes that, in a similar way to the *Perfect Vehicles,* could appear both biomorphic and mechanical.

When I made those salmon-colored *Individual Works* I expected that they might have the effect of synthetic intestines. I was looking for a color that would resemble synthetic flesh so the table would almost look like an operating table, a mechanized depiction of a dissection table that had kind of gotten out of control. In the same sense that I chose green for other ones so they'd refer to vegetation and growth.

Tom: Like scenarios in a horror film?

Allan: Well, I suppose.

Tom: That they might hatch or something?

Allan: Well, that could be. To me that's the way the world looks, that's the way industrial production seems — kind of maniacally proliferate. At the same time it seems almost to want to reach for the sublime, to represent our wishes for abundance: to heal the sick and feed the hungry *and* to produce a more egalitarian society. All these feelings go hand in hand with our horror of technology and weaponry. So industrial production certainly isn't without its emotive qualities. It is clearly a reflection of our dreams being made real in some way, and our nightmares.

Tom: There's the argument that art is useless whereas the industrial object is useful. You work with industrial techniques — from a kind of mechanical drawing to assembly-line production — to make objects that are designed to have no use.

Allan: Well, I think that's a particular way of looking at use. There is, of course, already such a thing as the mass production of art objects. If that's someone's definition of industrial mass production, then it shouldn't seem possible to industrially produce art objects. But people do this all the time. They produce souvenirs and tchochkes and religious symbols, and so forth. It's very common that we produce objects that are for symbolic and aesthetic use. I make a special point with the *Individual Works* to make sure that they are not useful. They don't even have bottoms, so they can't even be used as paper weights. That's something that I had to figure out, and it was much harder making them without bottoms because they needed a two-part mold, and they'd roll off the table during production. In many ways I really like this work because these objects are an attempt to come up with your "basic treasured object." I had this continuum in my mind: I had the feces of the toddler at one end of the spectrum (which might be the first valued object) and the Fabergé egg at the other end. And in making all these design choices there was that intestinal quality . . .

Tom: From the chicken's point of view?

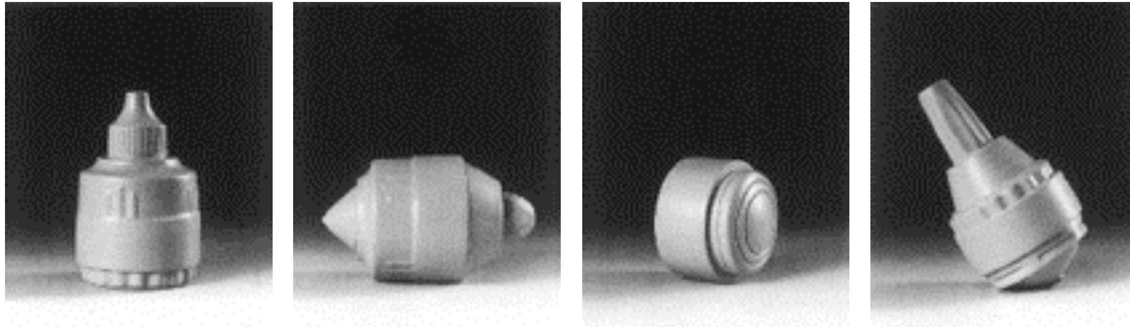
Allan: A Fabergé egg is essentially an object of pure value, maybe even to the chicken. [laughs] The process of producing the *Individual Works* in quantity becomes part of the drama of experiencing the work, I think. It certainly does for me. And I produced those *Individual Works,* of course, without ever seeing them on display because I don't have room to display them. So they're made on a table and then put into boxes.

Tom: In your studio, where they're made on trays like cookies . . . That gives you one sense of what they might be, yet the end result is different.

Allan: To this day, I honestly don't know what to do with them. Two different museums bought groups of over ten thousand. I've made over thirty thousand so far. Ten thousand seems to be the low end of what they call a short-run in industry.

Tom: In a funny way it seems like an excess but it's really not at all.

Allan: That's true. Once I had a job working for somebody else, and I had to come up with twelve hundred wooden pegs of an odd size. I didn't want to make them myself so I looked in the yellow pages for people who did woodturning and found a company who claimed that there was no job too small. They said they did short runs. So I went all the way over there and told them I wanted twelve hundred pegs made, and they said, "We won't do twelve hundred objects." And I said, "You said, 'No quantity too small.'" They said, "Yeah, but twelve hundred?" I asked, "What's a short run?" And he said, "It would have to be at least ten thousand." But the effect of the *Individual Works* is peculiar because they create something like a moral problem. I created a system that produced them all to be unique, which is all very intellectual, arithmetic. Once they're all out on the table, then they're an experience that I find unsettling. Sometimes I find it really thrilling, and sometimes I find it makes me a little queasy, especially when, for instance, I've started to look to see if I can find *the one* that I'm looking for. There's just so many discriminations that have to be made that I start feeling disoriented.



Allan McCollum. ***Over Ten Thousand Individual Works***, details. 1987/88.

Tom: Can you remember each one?

Allan: I remember the molds. I've made only about three hundred molds. Each mold creates half an object. They go together in over forty-five thousand ways. When and if I produce more molds the yield will rise exponentially. I certainly could say to myself that I would like to find the one that has such and such a top and such and such a bottom, I could do that. A lot of the objects, the little shapes and parts that I use, have personal significance to me. They come from very specific moments, like the one you have. One of the shapes came from a friend's childhood toy, and another shape came from my flashlight. I've used the shapes of objects found on friend's front yards, or in friends' houses, on trips abroad, vacations . . . hardware stores in Europe . . . So that when I look at that vast array of unique objects — *Individual Works* — I'm also experiencing a flood of memories as well. I find the work to replicate a kind of day-to-day drama. It's a kind of moral drama. It's making decisions about what's important and what isn't: what people are important, what people aren't important; what things are important, what things you throw away, what things you keep; what person you want to talk to and who you don't; who your friends are . . . These kinds of constant choices we make in a field of billions of people is probably essentially experienced on some level as a kind of moral pain, like the pain suffered by a military officer when he decides to send soldiers into battle knowing that a certain percentage of them are going to be killed.

And I think that, in a sense, this moral pain is what the *Individual Works* are a "picture" of. I also think it's the same moral pain represented by the whole continuum of objects from the mass produced to the unique,

from the common to the rare, and so forth, because I think this continuum obviously (maybe not obviously) represents the way we construct a class-society. The way *this* society is organized. The way we organize objects reflects the way we are organized by society.

I have to say, there's a kind of effect that I try to achieve with my work. Have you read *Jealousy* by Robbe-Grillet? I don't believe the word "jealousy" is ever used in the book, even in spite of the title. All you experience as a reader is the narrator's description of what he is looking at. He's looking at the trees and he's looking at the veranda and he's looking at the letter in his wife's handwriting that he sees in his friend's pocket. He thinks, Maybe . . . And there's this obsession with looking that's described over and over again as his eyes go back to certain things and to his memories of seeing certain things. He's jealous, he's frightened, he's angry . . . You intuit those emotions, you're not told he feels this way. The feeling grows in you as you're reading, as the character increasingly "looks" at things in a way that's conditioned by his feelings. I was hugely influenced by Robbe-Grillet in the sixties. And I think it's that kind of way of developing emotional self-consciousness that I try to accomplish. That it isn't located in the objects, it's a kind of halo effect that emerges in the experience of the objects. It's a recognition of something unconscious that slowly emerges. So that the pain of social inequity is replicated in the way we organize objects. One of the things I'm doing with the *Individual Works* is trying to re-create that drama. This is the kind of effect that I try to achieve with my work: how I described looking at ten thousand objects as nausea or moral pain.

Tom: Do the *Drawings* refer to moral pain as well?

Allan: The *Drawings* and the *Individual Works* were born out of each other, they were similar projects. The *Individual Works* came first. I wanted to speak about the impulse to do these projects in the terms you brought up earlier, about representation versus antirepresentation. The *Perfect Vehicles,* in a sense, represented a very specific type of symbol which you could define as a single object which might represent "eternal truths." That's a common type of symbol — a single thing that represents a lot.

Allan McCollum. ***Drawings***, 1989/93. Graphite on board. Installation: Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland, 1993.

I think I wanted to question or explore this particular structure: one thing representing everything. We look at the American flag and it represents all Americans or the "Spirit of America," or whatever. What if instead we had 300 million individual symbols that somehow represented the multiplicity of the country? I wondered if there wasn't some kind of hierarchical thinking or aristocratic model that we follow in the way we make objects and organize them when we create symbols. It almost seems to be our primary definition of a symbol, that it represents something larger than itself — otherwise you wouldn't need the symbol, you'd just have the thing itself.

So I was thinking about how difficult it is for us to conceive of the quantity of people on the planet and how before we knew how to conduct demographic studies, and so on, no one knew how many people were on the planet, and this was a mysterious concept. But with communications as they are now it's a serious emotional challenge, dealing with the knowledge of how many people are on the planet and what it means when we hear that twenty thousand people died in an earthquake. It's difficult; it's a moral problem.

I began to wonder if maybe part of that problem is that it's exacerbated by the structure of our symbols, where one object represents many things. Maybe an alternative or additional kind of symbol making could exist where thousands of things were represented by thousands of things. I wondered what that would look like. I was thinking about people when I designed the *Individual Works*: what people must mean when they talk about the human soul, individual souls, and how you would depict that. With the *Drawings* I chose this kind of heraldic image that might even suggest a clan or family symbol, but carried that idea through into a

slightly more complex system that could produce millions and billions of separate images — potentially one for every human soul on the planet. In a sense I was creating a heraldic system for individuals rather than for families or nations. With both of these projects I'm dealing with huge quantities. I mean, the *Individual Works* are being shown in lots of over ten thousand, and the drawings are shown with as many as twenty-five hundred in one exhibit. I hoped to create a picture of what it might look like if we thought differently about making symbols in the first place.

Tom: How did you go about making the drawings?

Allan: I designed five curves and a system of formats or little matrixes. I inscribe these curves into the matrixes and use a numerical system to make sure that I don't repeat myself. Then I draw these five curves in every combination on paper. So far I haven't made a drawing with more than four of these curves.

Tom: Do the curves have personal references for you the way the forms making up the *Individual Works* do?

Allan: No, they're just geometric. Well, they're meant to be a little biomorphic so that we could maybe identify with them in some way. I had templates made at a factory where they make architectural templates out of that green plastic. But, no, they don't have any of that kind of significance for me.

Tom: The piece is more diagrammatic, in a sense. The *Individual Works* seem to spin off from all these other associations, but the *Drawings* focus in on the idea in a more abstract way.

Allan: There was so much hyperextended sensuality in all those multiple references in the *Individual Works*. I think that with the *Drawings* I was looking for something that was balanced and stable, so I chose symmetrical shapes and a traditional art medium. It was the only series I've ever done using a traditional art form: pencil on paper. That's why they're simply called *Drawings*. In a sense it was about the desire to look for social stability through identification, hence the reference to heraldry — about making a stable symbolic system to accommodate the chaos of huge numbers.

Tom: The drawings are much more austere in appearance than the colored plaster works.

Allan: When I walk into exhibits of my drawings, I almost feel like I'm walking into an ancient archive. There's a kind of spiritual stability in them for me, whereas the *Individual Works* are transgressive in all different kinds of ways.

Tom: The drawings are harder to gain access to, they're just there. With the objects it's obvious that you have a real desire to tell stories, to insert a narrative content in the work. And while looking at these objects people have these realizations about different kinds of moral situations or realizations about the passage of time. I think making narrative, representational paintings is no longer feasible or reliable or doable. It seems that now we need to make movies, or get into some kind of elaborate installation type of work, or some kind of time-based work if we want to tell a story. But you've been able to do it in this perverse way by holding on to "traditional" cultural objects like the vase. You've been able to get this poignant effect from a group of things that on the face of it shouldn't produce that effect.

Allan: Before I was an artist, in the early sixties, I thought that maybe I wanted to go into theater and had gotten a bit interested in writing plays. There was one play I never saw produced but I read it — *The Kitchen* (1959) by Arnold Wesker. Do you remember it? It was a one-act play structured on the rising tension and stress that takes place in a restaurant kitchen as the demand for producing food and getting it out there during a rush takes place. I'd worked in a lot of restaurants and knew this structure, so I was intrigued by this play. It depicted the increasing tension between the employees: increasing anger, increasing arguments . . . In the end it calms down, back to normal, and you get the sense that this happens

every four hours. That was the play, sort of "found theater." It was an allegory for the way working people are caught up in the drama of economic demand and endless production. All the characters were cooks and waitresses. It was a wonderful play. I know this particular drama had such an influence on me. I began reading John Cage, and I noticed how he would substitute other sequences of events for traditional musical structure. I was attracted to that as well. After learning about the wide variety of fluxus performances based on the substitution of non-narrative "events" for traditional storytelling, I quickly fell into kind of imitating the task-oriented performance in my studio. So the objects that I produce are always the result of some kind of multiple sets of applications of simple tasks. One performance that has stayed in my mind was by Yvonne Rainer. She and a group of dancers carried furniture and carpeting from the lobby of the theater to the stage, and that was it. She did many other kinds of performances that challenged preconceived ideas about narrative. Carrying furniture from one place to another can be a narrative if you think of it as a narrative. In fact, there may be no other way for us to perceive any sequence of events, really. I think the question for me was where does that narrative structure exist? Does it exist in the event? in the script? in your head? In the sixties this was a very crucial question. Many people were interested in the nature of what we universalized as *in-the-world* as opposed to *invented* cultural structures. Is the narrative scenario something that is universal? or is this in the event itself? or is this something that we bring to events? These were the kinds of questions that a lot of people were asking. I was also especially influenced by a group of radical performance artists in San Francisco who called themselves The Diggers. I never met these people, I just remember anecdotes, but they invented the *Free Store*. Do you remember that?

Tom: No, that is too much a part of American history for me.

Allan: These actors were interested in artistic social intervention. I believe they were actors who had studied Brechtian strategies. They were interested in economics, in how we perceive one another in the economic world that we live in, and in how we function there. They came up with this series of quasi-theatrical interventions that invited, or forced, you to consider economic exchange as a possible site of creative awareness and change. That was one of their strategies — just to use the word free and attach it to things. Especially a thing such as "free love" that was already free, so there was an obvious and paradoxical irony. Or the Free Store: it was a real store that opened in a storefront where everything was free. They spent a lot of time going around to bakeries and meat markets in the middle of the night and finding things that people didn't want, soliciting donations from all over the city, and so forth.

Tom: *Real* things were free?

Allan: Real things. You'd go in there and get food or clothes or whatever they were able to come up with. I guess the idea of a store where you get something for free is only appreciable in terms of knowing about the enormous amount of trouble it was to keep the store functioning. And that's what I mean by a story. It's that sense of a drama that only becomes radically moving if you know what it took to make it happen. Getting up at three in the morning every day and going out to all the bakeries . . .

Tom: So this is different from Oldenberg's store?

Allan: It was very different, although it could have been influenced by that. It seemed to be an attempt to question what certain forms of economic exchange signify. Our traditional economic concepts limit our ideas about what's possible. The Free Store suggested a more creative way to look at what a store might be and to generate all kinds of implications as to other kinds of "valuation." I was struck by this experiment.

Tom: Did you know about Oldenberg's store at that time? I ask since he made plaster objects. Did you know about that wedding-cake piece he did in L.A. in 1966 — plaster cake-slice souvenirs for a curator's wedding party?

Allan: I didn't know the whole story until I read it in your essay! [in *Claes Oldenberg: Multiples in Retrospect 1964-1990* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1991)]

Tom: That was one of Oldenberg's best multiples. I especially like that the guests at the wedding party took away their slices as party favors.

Allan: Me, too. In my own work the way art circulates among people is really primary in my thinking. Artworks sometimes seem to be just like tokens, or coins . . . circulating from person to person, or from gallery to museum to auction house, and so on. They accrue meaning and value at every step. Circulating like coins but much more slowly, of course, and on an entirely different historical scale. But they're always *moving*. They always have a kind of trajectory, and this trajectory develops the meaning of the work and one's experience of it. Also in the sixties, around 1967 or '68, I remember reading about an event staged by the BMPT [Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni] group in Paris. Each of the four members of the group had their own particular abstract painting that was reproduced over and over again as a group. The paintings themselves were indefinitely reproducible depending on the circumstances they were shown in. In this particular event they displayed one each of their four paintings — each the same size — on a theater stage, and invited an audience to view them. The curtain went up for one hour, and then it came down. That was it. They isolated the event of looking at a painting as a single dramatic moment. Reading about this event had an effect early on my thinking. I was interested in ways to isolate the act of looking-at-a-painting from the actual painting itself. This thinking really culminated when I began doing the *Surrogate Paintings*. The painting as a token, a sign of itself, or a prop, around which meanings and desires play out some kind of drama.

Tom: But it has always seemed to me that the positions staked out by Buren and Mosset and the others are always just that — positions taken, poses struck. I have always found it difficult to accept the political content of their work. You, at least, have the desire to reach out to the common person, the uninitiated person who's not an art lover. The very particular decisions that you've made all along have been much broader in their implications.

Allan: Well, these artists have always been really important to me. I'm sure my mentality and my background are different, and maybe I do imagine a different kind of audience when I'm working, I don't really know. But their work means a lot to me. I'm glad you think that, though. In other words, you don't think that a person needs to have followed art closely to feel like there are issues they can relate to in what I'm doing?

Tom: I think that the *Surrogates* still operate in that space where they look a little like abstract paintings. Big installations of them, where you had five hundred or so on the wall, probably transcended that. It is such an obsessive and absurd experience that there is a good chance that someone who doesn't know the particular crevices of the argument might get a sense of what is going on. I think with the *Perfect Vehicles* it becomes clearer because they're not art objects per se; they refer to these vast cultural and emotional constructs that most people are likely to have a memory of, or a knowledge of, than about painting or art history. In the *Individual Works* the objects are recognizable in a way, but you don't know what they are, or you can't pin them down as art. They're not recognizably art. They're recognizably something else.

Allan: I agree.

Tom: Because the *Individual Works* don't have bases they're not sculptures. They don't have hooks on the backs, so they're not paintings. They're homeless. The more recent pieces, the *Dog from Pompei* and the *Lost Objects,* are very direct.

Allan: It's back to what you said at the very beginning. The works seem to want to leapfrog over art history in their effect. Is that what you said?

Tom: I think they do manage to get past the complexity that modernist avant-garde activity has created: the reliance on a complex barrier to understanding as part of its method of working. Starting from a very valid premise — questioning an issue of culture — such work has created a situation that's possibly worse than what it sought to fix. Oddly, there lies the place for re-inscribing recognizable objects into the discourse, a strategy which obviously plays into the difficulties of being retrograde. So the question is, are you advancing or retreating when you start making work that can be described as figurative?

Allan: I don't think that's the issue! Especially at this point in time. I don't know that it makes sense anymore to say that the main barrier separating avant-garde artwork from the majority of people is mainly that these works lack imagery, or that they're unrecognizable, or anything like that. I think that the key to this separation lies more in the quantity, or the *lack* of quantity of these artworks. I mean, artists seem to have just accepted without question that it's their calling to produce *rare* objects — objects for exclusive use. This seems to me to be the reason that avant-garde activity is isolated from the people at large. These days it's possible to learn about the philosophical complexity of all these "issues" on your own from reading, visiting museums, and so forth. People aren't stupid. But what really is a barrier, I think, is this focus on making rare artworks that preclude participation by the majority of people through any real ownership and (worst of all) by censoring objects that might be created in larger quantities before they're even made. We always seem to reinvent a class system of objects to accommodate the already existing class system, and I think this artificially limits what we're able to express, as artists. It's so funny the way people think. What might be considered to be beautiful in a small quantity of one or two is supposed to become less beautiful in larger quantities. And in *mass* quantities things can even begin to seem hideous to some people, especially to esthetes and connoisseurs, and "common" clearly becomes a negative not a positive quality. So when artists try to be progressive and at the same time produce rare objects or "limited editions," I think they're often working against their own stated intentions whether they mean to or not. It seems to me they operate out of a blind spot.

Tom: I tend to agree. Susan [Morgan] and I have a friend, Claudia, who trades in craft items from Central and South America — beautiful things and silly things, well made and improvised. She is fond of saying that while she admires quality, she loves quantity. I think that this — Claudia's dictum — expresses a kind of joyfulness, an acceptance of difference that has to be at the heart of any progressive idea of art making.

Allan: It's a shame the way artists are always letting themselves be maneuvered into making these objects, objects which are meant to function in this kind of role It doesn't even necessarily make sense, this idea that beautiful things should only be made available in small numbers. Yet in the art world we seem to accept this limitation without much question.

In the everyday world we all know that a large quantity of things can be regarded as beautiful. Everyone loves to watch the clouds, for instance, which are always unique and constantly plentiful. And we all seem to agree that trees are beautiful, and flowers and grains of sand and all the other millions of unique biological and geological formations around us irrespective of their abundance. So in everyday experience there just doesn't necessarily seem to be any conflict between what's common and plentiful and what's unique and irreplaceable when it comes to designating beauty.

So I think that we all lose out when we all ask our artists to eliminate their feelings about large quantities from their vocabulary of expression just to please a certain exclusive group. And for this reason it's really important that as artists we should feel free to take a stand on this point by making as many artworks as we want.