

PROJECTS - 28TH SÃO PAULO BIENAL



DRAWINGS, 1988/93. Graphite pencil on museum board. Sizes variable, each unique.
General view: Centre d' Art Contemporain, Geneva, 1993.

Allan McCollum

Interview by Lilian Tone

Lilian Tone: Like the rest of your work, the *1,800 Drawings* beautifully encompass uniqueness and sameness, paradoxically employing mass production as an expressive tool. Can you describe the process that went into their production?

Allan McCollum: For the *Drawings*, I created a system that allowed me to make a potentially infinite quantity of unique, emblem-like “shapes,” no two alike. I designed three “curves” by hand — I had no computer in those days — and then certain variations and distortions of these curves. Then I started combining the curves to create a vocabulary of parts that would function as

“tops” and a vocabulary of parts that would function as “bottoms.” Once I had drawn a few hundred tops and bottoms, I went to a factory that cut plastic templates, or stencils, the kind used by architects and designers for tracing curves into their technical diagrams. Today this kind of thing is done in computers, but this was 1988, and plastic templates were the norm. I had about 200 cut, a very small fraction of the possibilities, and I gave each template an identification number, and organized them in a way that allowed me to make *Drawings* in



DRAWINGS (TEMPLATES), 1988. Worksheet notebooks, templates.
(Photo by Eric Baum)

nine different sizes. Then I created a series of notebooks, outlining a specific protocol for combining the templates in ways that never repeated. After that I hired a lot of assistants and students to follow the protocols and use the templates to combine the tops and bottoms, outline the shapes on museum boards, and fill them in, by hand, with graphite pencil. Then I signed and numbered each one, and we had them framed.

Lilian Tone: Your *Drawings* are so much about seductive shape and human touch, but I also know that you think a lot about the categorizations and hierarchies we use to sort out objects in general, on how they reflect the organization of our society. What is the symbolic value of the *1,800 Drawings*?

Allan McCollum: There are lots of ways that different people come to consider themselves as belonging to a common group. People can come together under ideas of nationality or religion; people can unite themselves in sharing common interests, or hobbies; people of opposing beliefs can share feelings of unity when they live in the same apartment building, or neighborhood. The very names of places can carry a kind of poetry that brings people together.

It's a beautiful process, this establishing of family names, clans, neighborhoods, towns, cities, provinces, states, territories, countries, nations, continents, and worlds. What interests me are the ways an “image” can invite



DRAWINGS, 1988/93. Graphite pencil on museum board. Sizes variable, each unique (detail). *28th Sao Paulo Biennial Brazil 2008*

a variety of people to consider themselves within a group, such as can happen with family crests, heraldry, logos, flags, banners, and the like. We unite ourselves with images and symbols, as well as with ideas.

This is all wonderful. But I often wish there were more ways to use symbols to help us identify ourselves as individuals. We always seek to belong to a large group and at the same time to define ourselves as one of a kind. It's an eternal paradox. And we also use these same symbols that unite us to divide ourselves from each other. Couldn't a set of symbols be devised that might represent our dreams of unity and our love of diversity, both at the same time?

It's a simple idea, creating a system for producing a unique emblematic "shape" for each person on the planet. Of course, it is complicated, and impractical. But since we often think about art as "impossible dreaming," I figured it was okay to try. I hope this installation for the *28th Bienal de São Paulo* can help me imagine a larger world than I normally imagine, and maybe help others to do the same.