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Allan McCollum. *Lost Objects*. 1991. Enamel on glass-fiber-reinforced concrete. Installed at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

## Paleoart [excerpt]<sup>1</sup>

W. T. J. MITCHELL

To this point I have been assuming that the image of the dinosaur circulates primarily among the spheres of commerce, mass culture, and science. To the extent that it penetrates the art world, it does so as “scientific illustration,” and it is not generally seen as serious art, the sort of thing that could make it into the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>2</sup> That doesn’t mean that dinosaur painters or sculptors lack skill or imagination. Waterhouse Hawkins, Charles Knight, Rudolf Zallinger, and many contemporary dinosaur artists are absolutely first-rate in their fields. But they would understand without a moment’s hesitation why the peculiar status of their subject matter and their realistic style of representation prevents them from being taken seriously in the world of fine art.



Allan McCollum. *Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah*. Enamel on polymer-reinforced gypsum.

The exclusion of dinosaurs from the spaces of the art world—from the studio, the gallery, and the fine arts museum—exemplifies one of the central principals of high modernism. It illustrates perfectly the difference between modernity (of which the dinosaur is the totem animal) and modernism (an aesthetic of purity that rigorously excludes kitsch subject matter). This sort of purist modernism is mainly associated with the rise of abstract expressionism in American art after World War II, and with the art criticism of Clement Greenberg.<sup>3</sup>

Many common prejudices about the dinosaur clash with this sort of modernism. If modernism insists that the artist “make it new,” creating an object that is forever fresh and self-renewing, the dinosaur is unimaginably old, a symbol of failure, obsolescence, and petrified stasis. If modernism demands the original, unique, authentic object created by the artistic imagination, the dinosaur is a mere copy of a fragment of a corpse or skeleton, a fossil imprint produced by natural accident, not by human artifice. If modernism demands the elite, refined, purified objet d’art, the dinosaur is contaminated by its status as a commercial attraction, its function as a mass cultural icon and an object of childish fascination.



Allan McCollum. *Plaster Surrogates*, 1982/84. Enamel on cast Hydrostone.

The emergence of postmodernism since the 1960s had made it possible for dinosaurs to “cross the park” from the museum of natural history to the museum of fine art, from the space of mass culture to the world of elite, cutting-edge art-making. Mark Dion’s multi-media art installation *When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth (Toys R U.S.)* reconstructs the dinotopia that is now available to children in the United States (and in Japan and other “developed” countries around the world). In Dion’s installation, the dinosaur is both figure and background, a multitude of objects and images in a space and the wallpapered environment in which those objects are placed. The title of the installation suggests that the time when dinosaurs ruled the earth is not just the paleontological past, but also the immediate present, when its global circulation has reached epidemic proportions. The parenthetical qualifier of the title, “Toys R U.S.,” suggests that this global epidemic has its center in the United States, and in “us.” The installation may be viewed retrospectively as well, as an already archaic site (like the tomb of King Tut, filled with the toys and effigies of his attendants), as if Dion were leaving a message in a time capsule for future generations to follow.

A rather different variation on the postmodern strategy of “paleoart” is offered by Allan McCollum, an artist who is perhaps best known for his *Surrogate Paintings* and *Plaster Surrogates*, cast objects that look like blank pictures in sleek modern frames, hung in clusters like an array of paintings in a Victorian



Allan McCollum. *The Dog From Pompei*, 1991. Cast polymer-enhanced Hydrocal.

study gallery. Like Dion, McCollum is not really asking us to look at the individual objects, especially the blank spaces inside the frames, but to look at the entire space or environment as a representation of the way we display pictures in our culture. Every picture is unique—or at least the frame is—but at the same time they are all exactly the same, epitomizing the kind of serial repetition that is characteristic of images as species or genera of artifacts. You've seen one McCollum surrogate and you've seen them all, yet none is exactly like any other. It is as if McCollum were imagining a future world in which all the pictures had gone blank, could no longer be seen or deciphered, but all remained in their positions on the walls. They hint at a world in which pictures would be fossils, traces of vanished, obsolete species. Perhaps this would be a world of the blind, in which pictures would function as sculptural pieces, and we would grope along the walls to be reassured by touch that they were still in their places. Or perhaps it would be a world in which people were so imaginative that they could treat any blank space as a projection screen to recall any memory or fantasy they desired. We might even see here a premonition of the virtual galleries Bill Gates is installing in his electronic Xanadu in Seattle, galleries in which images from a global database can be retrieved with the click of a remote control. In any event, McCollum's surrogates invite us to reframe the entire convention of pictorial display, to see a gallery the way an archaeologist might see an excavated treasure room, as a

strange space filled with shapes and signs that may have lost their meaning, or may never have had any meaning in the first place. The effect is a curious combination of irony and melancholy, what Fredric Jameson has aptly termed “nostalgia for the present” endemic to postmodernism.

If the surrogate pieces seem archaeological, representing cultural artifacts as if they were the unreadable relics of a past generation, McCollum’s more recent work has moved into the realm of paleontology and natural history. These copies or surrogates are not of artificial objects, but of what McCollum calls “copies produced by nature.” In *The Dog from Pompei* (series begun 1990) and *Lost Objects* (series begun 1991), McCollum simply inserts himself into the process of reproduction or replication inherent in the natural formation of fossils. The dog is an indefinitely reproducible series of polymer-enhanced Hydrocal casts, taken from a mold that was made from a cast based on a “natural mold” left by the body of a dog that was smothered in the Vesuvius explosion of 79 A.D. The *Lost Objects* “are cast in glass-fiber-reinforced concrete from rubber molds taken of fossil dinosaur bones in the vertebrate paleontology section of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh.” Fifteen different molds have been painted in fifty different colors, making “750 unique *Lost Objects* to date.”

Traditional notions of the relation of copy and original, not to mention the status of the artistic “authorial” function, are clearly under considerable pressure in these works, and their effect is very difficult to pin down. In some ways, these works seem to fulfill Walter Benjamin’s prediction that the age of mechanical reproduction would mean that the endless series of identical replicas would replace the unique art object with its “aura” of authorial expressiveness and tradition. McCollum makes “mass produced” objects in a kind of art factory, like an automobile manufacturer. Yet the objects do seem to have a kind of melancholy aura, one that is increased rather than diminished by their mass gathering in the space of display. It is as if they were occasions for a double mourning, first for the deaths of the remote creatures whose traces are retraced here, and second for loss of auratic uniqueness itself, as if we were grieving over the loss of the ability to feel certain kinds of emotions. Certainly these works don’t tend to provoke laughter the way the surrogates do. They are too literal in their evocation of death, disaster, and mass extinction. The dog, as the favorite domestic animal of the Romans, evokes the sphere of privacy and the everyday in the proximity of catastrophe. The bones, on the other hand, evoke the larger public spheres of the nation and the world—the dinosaur as giant “ruler of the earth,” a symbol of the American nation or of the human race more generally. Taken together, McCollum’s “dog and bone” series suggest a kind of symbiotic completeness in the postmodern rendering of nature.

McCollum’s own remarks on the bones makes it clear that a specifically national feeling was central to the production of this work:



Allan McCollum. *Lost Objects*, 1991. Enamel on glass-fiber-reinforced concrete.

Sometimes I almost self-consciously functioned as an American when I was plotting out the dinosaur project. I went out to Utah to see Dinosaur National Monument, where a lot of those fossils were found that I borrowed . . . to make my molds. I enjoyed the discovery that people in Utah . . . claim 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 from a European perspective one might think, It's not *your* heritage; if anything, it's the earth's heritage.<sup>4</sup>

The installation of these bones in the neoclassical atrium of the Carnegie Museum is for me (also an American) an uncanny resurrection of Thomas Jefferson's lost "bone room" in the east Room of the White House, as if we were privileged to go back in time and see the mastodon bones replaced by their cultural descendents, the dinosaurs.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter, reproduced here in excerpted form only, in its complete version also discusses the artwork of Robert Smithson.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Greenberg's famous essay, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," and my essay on the modernist concept of the purified artwork, "*Ut Pictura Theoria*: Abstract painting and the Repression of Language," chapter 7 in *Picture Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> *Allan McCollum: Interview by Thomas Lawson*, (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1996. I'm grateful to Anthony Elms for bringing McCollum's work to my attention.

<sup>4</sup> Lawson, *ibid.*