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Allan McCollum & Allen Ruppertsberg

Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Moderator: Alex Klein

ALEX KLEIN: I'm so pleased to welcome Allan McCollum and Allen Ruppertsberg to LACMA. This has been a long time in the making, and I'm thrilled that we're actually here tonight. It feels fitting to have this conversation here in Los Angeles, where the two artists met and began their careers. Allen Ruppertsberg and Allan McCollum share more than a first name and a birth year, they also share a relationship to Los Angeles that has contributed to their practices in very different ways. And although I know that the artists do not want to dwell too much on this point, I'd like to retain Los Angeles as a backdrop for the conversation tonight, and I hope that their relationship to our city will be one of the many topics that they'll be addressing this evening.

In Allan McCollum's essay on Allen Ruppertsberg, "What One Loves About Life Are the Things That Fade," [*Allen Ruppertsberg: Books, Inc.*, France: Fond Regional D'Art Contemporain du Limousin, 2001] McCollum describes how "Through our reciprocal discourse between the makers and the consumers of culture a model of the world can emerge." In the essay, he goes on to discuss how the mass-produced products of capitalist consumption and popular media can be as meaningful or personal as any private experience. This seems to me to be a productive way to begin to think about the practices of both artists tonight, through their own words and their reflections on each other's work. As both artists were invited here to LACMA under the auspices of the Photography Department, I hope you will join me in thinking about issues in both of the artists' works relating to photographic practice that might not always be directly related to the lens.

Before Allan and Allen begin, I would just briefly like to direct your attention to the image behind me on the screen. It's from their first collaboration, which took place in Milan this past spring, and it was also part of the occasion of bringing them together tonight. The installation, entitled *Sets and Situations* [2008], joins aspects of both McCollum's and Ruppertsberg's practices – the *Shapes Project* by McCollum and the props, which Ruppertsberg has used in a variety of other installations. I think that this project particularly underscores the generosity that is imbued in both of their practices, and I look forward to hearing more about it in the discussion tonight.

ALLEN RUPPERSBERG: There are many ways to start. I think I'll start with a little personal reason why we might be here together. Yes, we did this collaboration, but we've also known each other for 40 years. The fact that this is our first collaboration says something about us, and also about the processes that it took to get to this point where both of our works came together. Even though it was kind of a coincidence that it happened, the other side of the coin is that we've known each other all this time, and I don't think that there's another person alive today that I've exchanged more words with than Allan. If you've talked to somebody all of these years about art and, of course, your personal lives and professional lives have run parallel, you don't really know where to start.

I'm sure that we could start anywhere, and it might be interesting to us, but I don't know if it's interesting to everybody else. So, we'll try and stick to something that might make sense. I'll start with a little introduction on this project here. It just so happened that Allan's last show in New York was seen by the gallery director that I've worked with for years in Milan, Claudio Guenzani, and he loved Allan's show. Because we've worked together, Guenzani came to me and said, "Why don't you and Allan do a collaboration because then I could show it." Allan had done collaborations before with other people, but I'd only done maybe one or two. It was a different kind of thing for me, but I said, "That sounds fantastic."

I sat down with Allan and we started to talk about it. It just so happened that with the *Shapes Project*, which you see sitting on top of what I call the *Props/Furniture* (which I was using in a number of installations previous to Allan's *Shapes* projects), we both found that we were interested in the idea of props. We might have known this before, from all the years of conversation, but it pinpointed it. It was a very easy transition to superimpose one body of work on top of another. That's literally what you have here. When I say "prop/furniture," I'll show you some more slides of where this comes from. I think that you can see that there's a variety of colored shapes – tables, stairs, platforms.

There are a number of names for these objects that Allan's *Shapes* projects are sitting on top of. I had begun to use this prop/furniture idea as kind of a base for many different projects. When Allan and I started to talk about what we could do, it seemed like one could easily overlay on top of the other. Except that it wasn't quite as easy as that because Allan has set numbers of shapes that form a group that have to go together. It has to be played out over the different sizes and shapes of the furniture to see how many can go in a group. It's not quite as simple as I'm making it, but at any rate that's how it started.

Here is a previous incarnation of the prop/furniture, which is a piece that I showed in Basel at Art Unlimited a couple of years ago. It's called *The Never Ending Book: Part One*. You can see now a little more clearly the different kinds of shapes and props. In a way, they're vacant sculpture bases, and then something is incorporated on top. They provide me with a structure that I can use in many different ways, much like the posters and other things that I've done. It's like finding an empty structure that I can

set my own content on top of, if you will, at least in this case. Or, I incorporate my content somehow into these kinds of commercial structures. In this case, what are inside of these bases on top of the platforms are the images that you see in back there, which I've taped to the walls. The signs for collectors only say, "Every Artist Is an Artist." And then there's another one, which comes up later: "Everything is collected. Nothing is saved." It's a whole installation of about a hundred different pages of this *Never Ending Book*, which are in all of these boxes and are free for the taking. So, the audience can make their own book out of all of these pages, which I've Xeroxed and put inside of the boxes. Over the course of the installation, the boxes would be filled every day with colored Xeroxes from this particular subject. Over on the left of this image is the exact title, "The Old Poems (For My Mother)." And then it talks about how you can take these pages. So, in this case "The Old Poems" are all taken from a collection of vanity press books that I've been assembling over a number of years. They basically run from the early turn of the century through the '60s. And the Xeroxes all come from this collection of, I don't know, 300-500 of these books, which have a unique content because they are vanity press books. The majority of them are poetry. They portray a particular part of America that's long gone. That happens to be the general idea of *The Never Ending Book*.

But to go back to the images here, the first use of the props came from this exhibition in Slovenia – the 25th International Biennial of Graphic Arts in Lubiana [2003]. The cover image that you're seeing from the catalogue is from the book from which I got the idea for the props. It was a flea-market find, a small-press book that was written for local theater groups about making generic props and furniture that could be mixed between all kinds of plays and made very cheaply. It's a "how to" book on making generic props. That's where the props come from in the first place. The main element of the Biennial was an assemblage of every artist-book publisher in the world. There were maybe 300 publishers. This included newspapers, magazines, and every publisher who published anything to do with artists' books over the years. That was all assembled, and then they invited me to figure out a way to present these things. The furniture props were very much user-friendly. Even though now I'd prefer people not to sit on them, in this case it was part of the exhibition. You could sit and read all these artists' books and be comfortable doing it in this theatrical manner with fireplaces, chairs, stairs, etc.

I'm rushing through all of this really quickly. Allan and I talked about how we were going to talk about this and I decided that maybe I would like to go from the present to the past and Allan thought he would go from the past to the present.

This is the newest piece; it's from the Camden Arts Centre in London just a couple of months ago. One of the things that Allan and I have talked about is how both of us are influenced by commercial processes and commercial methods, and how we both come to that in different ways. This has been a staple of my work since I don't know when, but it comes from a very specific place in the fact that I came out of Chouinard Art Institute. When I enrolled, I thought that I was going to be a commercial artist. Part of the program at Chouinard at the time was that for the first two years you took

classes in all subjects. Then you were evaluated and you made up your mind what you would do for the remaining two years. Along the line I got introduced to painting and discovered that I did not want to be a commercial artist after all, and I switched to fine arts.

Later on, when I was forgetting about art school and making my own work, I began to think about all the things that I learned about commercial art and that maybe those might be methods and tools that I could use as a fine artist. A lot of the work from then until now has been about the daily world of objects, commercial methods, printing, and all the things that were not designated as fine arts.

In the case of the Camden Arts Centre exhibition, there were two works installed together. One was a carousel of books, which holds small, xeroxed books that are laminated. My new tools of choice are a brand-new, giant, Canon color xerox machine and a laminator. A series of artist books, for lack of a better word, hangs above a tile floor, which has to do with the idea of reading standing up, thinking on your feet [*Reading Standing Up*]. Those are two of the ideas that are written into the floor. A series of choices indicate the "choosy business of art," which is another phrase in the floor. You stand there and read the books; there are 18 different ones.

This goes back to the early '90s. Another aspect that Allan and I have both explored is working within a specific community and either doing historical research, as in the case of this work, or working with people in the community in different ways. The time is up. Maybe we can save this for later.

ALLAN MCCOLLUM: I've known Al since 1969, maybe 1968; I can't remember exactly when. And it's extremely difficult for me to explain what an influence he has been over me. I decided to be an artist on my own. I didn't go to art school. It was 1967. I said, "I want to be an artist." Al was practically already well-known in 1967. Meeting him in 1968, I was basically a freshman student in my mind, although I wasn't in school. Because Al wanted to go backwards, you haven't seen the early work of his that influenced me. So, it's going to be hard for me to explain it. Maybe we'll get to that in the conversation.

I'm from Los Angeles; I grew up here and didn't leave until I was about 31 years old. So, I had a whole career and life here. I'm going to start back then and try to rush forward and use my 15 minutes to cover 40 years, if I can. I want to start with a series of works that I showed at the Jack Glenn Gallery in Corona del Mar. During that period in 1969-71, I thought of myself as a painter. Now, it seemed to me that when you decided to be an artist you were a painter. I don't know why I didn't think beyond that. I hadn't been to school to learn about too much beyond that. I was wrestling with this idea of being a painter, but what bothered me most about painting during those years was that you started out with a canvas, which then became the background of what you did on the canvas.

And I didn't like that. I felt that you were creating a secondary background because the real background was the gallery and the real background was the social and anthropological condition that was there for you to go in and look at the paintings. So, I had a problem creating a secondary background. As a result, I did a series of works very early on in which there was no background. I just started with little pieces and glued them together or sewed them together. This was at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1972. It was made up of hundreds of little squares – like little, tiny paintings – that I would then glue together to make a large painting. So there was never an issue of there being a background upon which I would then paint something. This was a moral issue with me. Who decides what the background is? I was really more interested in creating an object that referred only to itself without there being a background that you were supposed to ignore. This was a series done in '74-'75 in which I created a kind of kit. These were little paper pieces that I would paint and then tear out and glue together. I could make paintings. I could make watercolors. I could make drawings. It was like a standardized art object.

My background was working class. I had spent five months in restaurant management school learning industrial kitchen work and I worked in many restaurants. I had a lot of affection for mass production, people working together, talking, chatting, and making things. That background formed a lot of what I did. I began thinking more and more about the identity of a painting and what it was. I moved to New York during this period, in 1975. I ultimately decided that what I really wanted to do was to create a prop that stood for a painting, rather than try to come up with some kind of painting that had meaning within the history or conventions of painting. I decided I wanted to create a prop that stood for a painting and obtained its meaning by representing a kind of a social tradition. Once I created these prop paintings, which I called *Surrogate Paintings*, and put them in a gallery, the gallery became a kind of stage set, a stage set of a gallery. When you walked into the gallery looking at *Surrogate Paintings*, you would feel a sense of taking a look at yourself walking into a gallery.

Looking at yourself looking at art: that's what I had in mind. It was influenced a little bit by Bertolt Brecht's idea of when you watch a play you should be aware you're watching a play at every minute and not get lost in the drama of it. Another way of trying to develop an anthropological distance to viewing was taking photographs of my *Surrogate Paintings*. I re-photographed them until they started to diminish in resolution to where they almost became like UFOs of paintings. I also frequently took pictures when I would find newspaper photographs that had paintings in the background that were out of focus. I would study them. I would show them with my *Surrogate Paintings*, but they really weren't artworks.

Another series I did in 1982 was a kind of an imitation photograph [*Glossies*]. Now these look like they're snapshots, but they're not. They're made of art paper that I would draw a rectangle on and paint it black with ink and then put – What's it called, AI?

RUPPERSBERG: Laminate?

MCCOLLUM: Put laminate on it and then trim them out and they would be shiny and they would look just like snapshots. But what I was interested in with this series was the feeling of looking through photographs without there being a photograph. What was that about? What made you want to pick up a photograph, or go through a stack of photos?

During this same period I took a lot of pictures off of television when paintings in the background appeared to look like surrogate paintings. These are not retouched, by the way. That's just the way they look. If you watch TV, you'll see hundreds of these things, and I collected these images. Often, when I would do art exhibits, I would put them in the office, you see, because I was interested in the way a photograph influences the way you look at an object. Because once you saw them as props in these photos, then you might look at the actual *Surrogate Paintings* as props, which is what I was hoping for. Then, I got tired of making *Surrogate Paintings*. It took so long to make them out of wood with 50 coats of paint. I started casting them in plaster at a certain point, and I made molds. Then the titles became *Plaster Surrogates*. So, with these I could reproduce that effect in many, many ways and much faster.

Very quickly, there was a series called *Perpetual Photographs*. They were similar to those other photographs I was telling you about, but what happened was I would watch TV. (And by the way, I only had a black-and-white TV. I didn't have a color TV. That's why they're all black and white.) When I would see a painting in the background, I would take a picture off the television, blow it up and put it in a frame. Now, in my mind these works were really about the desire to look at a picture. What makes you walk across the room and look into a frame to see a picture? I was interested in creating self-consciousness about wanting to see a picture.

My interest in the gallery as a social space or a space of exchange became especially accented in this piece, which was a collaboration with Louise Lawler where we created a whole set of little, tiny sculpture bases, but we didn't call them that. We called them *Ideal Settings*, which was a reference to the gallery itself. We put the sculpture bases on other sculpture bases and put the price on the wall, too, with a slide projector so that the aspect of exchange and the idea of the gallery as a place of sale were highlighted.

I can't show everything here, but I went on to start thinking not only about art objects, but other objects that had elevated value in the same way that art objects had value. They were things that were not quite contemporary art objects, but more like what you might call "fine art objects," things you might see in an antiques museum, or a design museum, or something like that. I designed this project [*Perfect Vehicles*], which was really about emblems, symbols. "Symbols" is the way I thought of it. I decided on a symbol and then made symbols of that symbol in a way. This was the first one I made, but they became the *Perfect Vehicles* after I noticed on television how often you would see ginger jars in the background as emblems of "I'm rich," or "I've been to Europe," or "I've been to China," or "I'm a collector," or whatever. That project came out of those jars.

My interest in mass production developed more and more. This is a photography project I did with Laurie Simmons [*Actual Photos*]. Laurie and I bought all these tiny dolls in a train store where you would buy objects that go with model trains, and we took pictures of them through a microscope. My interest was that when you look at a mass produced object closely enough, each one is different. This is how small they were, sitting on a nickel.

A project where I really got into mass-producing was called *Individual Works*, which is a kind of a pun on the idea of the singular art object. I made 35,000 of these things. They're all unique. Just like artwork is supposed to be. They were made from little parts of things that I would find on the street and in peoples' homes. I'd make molds. I had a system. This was before I had a computer or anything. Then we would paint them and they were all unique. A similar project was called the *Drawings Project*, which consisted of unique drawings. I made about 6,000 of these. Now, I didn't sell them one at a time; I would sell them in collections.

Because time is running out, I'm going to go to this project. I became interested in the way communities developed an identity with an object that became an emblem of the community. I discovered in Price, Utah, this museum. Many parts of Utah use dinosaurs as a symbol because so many dinosaur bones are found in Utah. This particular museum in Price, which was a coal-mining town, would find dinosaur tracks in the coal in the roofs of the coalmines, and collect them. They chopped them down from the top of the roof. So, I made a deal with the curators. I made molds of 44 of their collection of dinosaur tracks and showed them around the world in different places [*Lost Objects*]. I also created 21 different *Reprints*, which, of course, was a pun on dinosaur tracks. This was when I first started making supplements that could be used by others for educational purposes so that the art world wasn't the only audience. You can download these PDF files from a Web page. They're all about the history of dinosaur tracks, of finding them in coalmines.

A similar project that involved booklets that you could read was about "fulgurites" [*THE EVENT: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with supplemental didactics)*]. Fulgurites are created by lightning. Where lightning hits the ground, it goes into the ground, melts the glass, and produces an object. At the International Center for Lightning and Research and Testing, part of the University of Florida, they send up rockets to trigger lightning. I did a collaboration with these people where I sent up my own rocket. It created a lightning bolt, which went into a bucket of sand.

I created my own fulgurite. Made 10,000 of them and then something like 13,000 booklets, which you can download. They were all about fulgurites. It's the biggest collection of writings on fulgurites anywhere in the world. We put up a show at the local science museum.

But the point is that I wanted to do a project that could be seen as having different meanings for different people from different positions—scientists, artists, local residents. Another project that I did was in California down at Mount Signal, which is

basically in Mexico [*Mount Signal and Its Sand Spikes: A Project for the Imperial Valley*]. Mount Signal has become a symbol to the people in Imperial County, down by El Centro. What's interesting to me is that you could find these little objects called "sand spikes" at the base of the mountain. So, I got involved in studying the way concretions had developed meaning and how this mountain had developed meaning in this small community of Imperial Valley. The mountain is used over and over again in their emblems that represent the town as well as postcards, and so forth. I did a show with some 60 different artists who did paintings and drawings and photographs of Mount Signal. We made a giant model of the mountain. We made a souvenir of the mountain. We showed them all. I did a show of local sand spikes that people had collected. I made my own models of sand spikes, which are for sale now in the museum gift store, and we made a giant one that can be seen from along the highway.

I also did a series of give-away projects where I created models of Kansas and Missouri from molds [*The Kansas and Missouri Topographical Model Donation Project*]. I did a show of them, but I also made about 120 additional ones. I wrote letters to around 250 little historical museums in both states. I rented a car, drove around, and delivered them for free, donating them to all these different museums. It was probably the most fun I've ever had in my life, actually.

I guess if I only have five minutes left, I have to skip to the *Shapes Project*, which brings us to Al. Now what I want to show is the exhibition that Al and Claudio had seen where I did 7,000 unique shapes. This is a project designed to produce shapes that can be used in hundreds of different ways, I hope. These are some of the books that keep track of how I do it. They're made from tops, tops left, tops right, tops bottoms or bottoms. You can combine them to create a shape. You can make billions of unique shapes with the system. If you add two more parts, which I call "Necks," you can make more billions. The idea was to have enough shapes that theoretically everyone in the world could have one. I'm still working on it. This is a project I do with children at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where they cut out their own little parts and make their own shapes, following my system. Then they get to be on the wall for two weeks. This is how the Shapes look on Al's prop/furniture.

I haven't shown these yet; you're the first people to see them. It's another regional project [*Shapes From Maine*]. I'm collaborating with people who have home-based businesses in Maine. I've never met them [in person]. I only meet them over the Internet. I ask them to collaborate with me making shapes. These are copper cookie cutters made by Holly and Larry Little, a husband and wife, at their "Aunt Holly's Copper Cookie Cutters" business in Trescott, Maine. These are ornaments made in Maine by Horace and Noella Varnum, another husband and wife team, in the town of Sedgwick. These are rubber stamps made by Wendy Wyman and Bill Welsh, a married couple in Freeport, Maine. There's also a silhouette cutter, Ruth Monsell, in Damarascotta; she's cut 144 shapes. My show will be a promotion for them as well as a promotion for myself in some way. All of this material will be available to the people who come in to the show. I'm hoping that one day somebody will approach me with a

huge budget and says, "I want you to make a million shapes so that we can give them away to everybody" in some certain town or something. We'll see if that ever happens.

KLEIN: Thank you both for rushing through so many decades of work in 15 minutes. I'm going to try to speak as little as possible. I'm really just here for moral support as far as I see it. But while we're getting things set up, I thought it would be really nice if Allan, you would talk about how you first met Allen.

MCCOLLUM: I don't know if Al remembers how we first met, but I remember meeting him. I worked at a trucking company called Cart & Crate. We had a mutual friend who worked in the office, Margaret Nielson, who has a show up right now, by the way. She introduced us. I remember standing on the loading dock while Al was below the loading dock, and being introduced to him. It was just a "How do you do?" Then Al did a show at Eugenia Butler's. What was the name of that show?

RUPPERSBERG: *The Location Piece*.

MCCOLLUM: *The Location Piece*, which was an amazing show because you'd go into the gallery and there were these samples that you looked at, but you had to go down the street and see the real show, which was in some building on Sunset Blvd. It was a site work, but not like a site work where you go out into the desert. It was a site work where you went over to Sunset Blvd. I was one of the people who picked up the piece in the truck. We went and packed the work and put it on the truck. Al will have no memory of this, but what impressed me was that after we picked it all up and locked the truck, he locked the door to the studio. We went out to drive away, and he went out into the street to hitchhike somewhere. I don't know where he was going.

There's that famous artist who's hitchhiking.

RUPPERSBERG: Those were the days.

MCCOLLUM: Yeah, those were the days. And with no shirt.

KLEIN: Wasn't there some story about Allen swinging on a rope at a performance?

RUPPERSBERG: Well, he wrote that in the article.

MCCOLLUM: I didn't meet him then. That was the first time I saw him. It was a Living Theater performance of their famous production, *Paradise Now*. The one where everybody is invited to take their clothes off in the theater. It was at USC. All of a sudden everything explodes and people go crazy and the rope is hurled down from the ceiling and people jump on the rope and slide down it from the balcony. And it was Al who made the first leap and grabbed the rope and slid down it. I remember

noticing that. That was in 1969. I thought it was very brave. He didn't take his clothes off though.

RUPPERSBERG: No, I did not.

KLEIN: Shall we fast forward to the present and talk about what this experience was like for you to finally collaborate?

RUPPERSBERG: Well, I think it was like I mentioned before that it took all of these years of knowing and following each other's work and the influences going back and forth and talking about it. Then this opportunity arose where we both arrived with two bodies of work that overlapped each other. Allan mentioned the word "props" earlier. As we've talked about before, I maybe didn't use the word "props" in the same way that Allan did but, looking back at all the work, there are a lot of uses of what could be termed "props." Allan calls these *Shapes*, where the picture frame that they're in and the object become for him a prop. So, we have these two props and by coincidence we wound up at the same place at the same time.

MCCOLLUM: Yeah, it goes back to Al's work in the '60s, when he did *Al's Café* and *Al's Hotel*. I don't know if you all remember this work, but he created essentially what in my mind were the equivalents of stage sets. One was a restaurant in which you actually could order things. One was a hotel that you could actually sleep in. But each room was a setting, like a stage set. And one of the things that I loved about Al's work in those days was the affection that he had for not simply everyday objects, but the way people valued everyday objects. You can see the way we all do this, in our own ways. You have, say, a fireplace with a mantelpiece, a table, a piano, or a shelf, and you put the little special things that people have given you on there, family heirlooms, or other things like that.

From the very beginning, Al had this kind of mentality in what he did that was extremely rare. Andy Warhol and many other artists have used common objects, but there is always a kind of irony or "blankness." Al had affection for common objects that people loved and would use them in his work. I have to say that my decision to make the little frames that have the flap [stand] on the back that you can set on a table as opposed to hanging on the wall was clearly connected to Al's affection for those types of objects. And, of course, there was the work with Louise Lawler with the sculptured bases and the settings being part of the work-as opposed to ignoring the settings, creating settings for things. Al really got into that with the prop / furniture.

RUPPERSBERG: I'm going to go back to something that Allan said in his 15 minutes that made me think of something I hadn't thought of before. He spoke about the fact that I went to art school and he did not. And yet when you go back and look at what you began to create and the reasons that you began to create them, they were very close to the zeitgeist in the air that I was breathing, even though I had come out of art school. They were ideas of creating something that has nothing to do with the traditional history of looking at objects or paintings in galleries that were being tossed

out at that time. We were both picking up on the same thing even though Allan was coming from a nonacademic background, if you can call art school academic at that time. Now you do, but in those days it was a little different.

You came out of art school and you immediately began to disassociate yourself from everything that you learned in art school. That's the difference between then and now. I was in the process of trying to figure out what to do because I was not going to be a painter. You were taught two things-to be a sculptor or a painter. When I decided that's not what I thought art was about and started to eliminate everything that I had learned, then I picked up on the period and the ideas that were floating in the air, not just in L.A., but all over the world at that point. Allan, I began to see from listening to your introduction how you decided to not make this and not make that, and not do this, and not do that. That's exactly where I started, too. So, in a way, we were starting at the same point.

MCCOLLUM: I suppose, but I had a harder time shaking that off. I had to create things that stood for paintings. I had to make a commentary on paintings. I had to make a commentary on sculpture. I had to include it in my thinking. I didn't want to make that leap that you could so easily make. I wasn't able to do that because I wanted to track the steps away from the idea of a standardized art object. I still think I have to do that. In the back of my mind, it's one thing to make a leap into something where you pay no attention to any rules and you just make things up. It's another to say, how do you get from there to there to there? That's something I guess I value in addition to that.

RUPPERSBERG: Well, it also makes me wonder because we were in a very specific environment, which was L.A. in the late '60s and '70s where the art world was very small. You got to know very quickly what a small group of people were doing. You have the situation in L.A. where what's really unique about it-or at least was unique about it then-was that everybody was an individual. There were no schools of people. You know, there was no school of Ed Ruscha. There was no school of Chris Burden or whomever you want to talk about. You got to know individually these people who were doing their own thing, as opposed to when you're in New York or in the rest of the world where history plays a bigger part. I'm just wondering if that had an effect on how you decided to make what you make, the fact that you could so quickly see what people were doing and assimilate it. Does that make any sense?

MCCOLLUM: I'm not sure what you're asking me, but I know in those days I got everything mixed up. Like when I showed that piece of all those hundreds of little paintings that I made into a big painting. When I look back at that period when I was doing those, I didn't know the difference. In my head, I'm the guy mixing up stain painting with Richard Serra and Robert Morris. There was nobody telling me, "No, no, no, you can't do it. You have to reject painting and accept 'making' in the Robert Morris sense," or whatever. Nobody was telling me that. I think in school you probably had people saying, "Oh, that's a bunch of crap and this is what's good," and then there's the conceptual work. You were in school way before I even knew about art.

But, I was hugely influenced by L.A. artists, with the first painting I did.

RUPPERSBERG: That's what I mean. How much were you influenced by the knowledge that was specific to L.A., that being your starting point?

MCCOLLUM: Well, the person I met that taught me about contemporary art, the very person that introduced me to what art was, worked as a model for John Altoon. Her name was Judy Houston; we were in trade school together, at L.A. Trade Tech. She was studying fashion design and I was studying restaurant management. She taught me about [Robert] Rauschenberg, John Cage, Wallace Berman, Tony Berlant, John Altoon, and Vija Celmins, who was a huge influence (and whom I later met and just fell in love with, in terms of how she approached her work). If you put those artists together, including Billy Al Bengston, Craig Kauffman, John McCracken, and so forth, you get me and my mind. Now what was going on in New York you'd read about in Artforum. That was in the background and it was influencing me also. But they weren't people; they were just these things you'd read about. But the people [in L.A.] were very influential. Also, the L.A. artists so embraced industrial craft techniques in what they did. It's sometimes referred to as – what's it called?

RUPPERSBERG: "Finish Fetish?"

MCCOLLUM: The so-called "Finish Fetish" artists, right. Craig Kauffman would use vacuum forming. That polyester resin casting that DeWain Valentine was using, things that you expect boat makers to use, or surfboard makers. They specifically avoided art materials. Most of these artists have gone back to art materials at this point, but in those days avoiding art materials was really important to me because I felt that I didn't have an education in art materials. I had no foundational studies. So, I wasn't going to pretend that I knew what I was doing. I was going to leap over that and go buy my stuff at the hardware store, or the supermarket, or wherever.

RUPPERSBERG: We started that in art school. We went through that phase in art school about the influence of those people using extraordinarily different materials.

MCCOLLUM: But how did you get from that–? It's one thing to use industrial materials and to use found objects like Duchamp or the Fluxus artists. But how did you get into using placemats from Denny's and things about which most people would say, "That doesn't belong in art. Those things are way too commercial." And you're not even making fun of it. I mean Warhol made fun. There was an irony when he would use a Coke bottle. He would silkscreen the Coke bottle, but he'd also make it a little sloppy so that you could tell there was a hand involved. But you would just go to the flea market and buy stuff. How did you get to where you didn't feel you had to fool with it?

RUPPERSBERG: It's quite a process. If you begin at the introduction of using foreign materials for art making – plastic or whatever – then you work through that.

MCCOLLUM: Right.

RUPPERSBERG: It was, of course, also influenced by Minimalism. I worked my way through what I knew from school, which was Minimalist sculpture and abstract painting – either Morris Louis or any kind of stain painting, or what you saw in *Artforum* at that time, which is '65-'67. I worked through the ideas of Minimalism, incorporating these ideas from L.A. of the different materials. Then I wound up at a place that other people had wound up with either a Minimalist object or a shaped painting or something. I realized that that made no sense to me, and started over again. Then the introduction of things that I was familiar with from my commercial schooling and/or my background began to appear in the work and grew into what became a much more flatfooted presentation like you're speaking about.

MCCOLLUM: But I wonder what that magic moment was when you decided it was okay to just take some middle-American poster, or booklet, or something that was completely average, that had nothing special about it. How did you make that leap? During those days you didn't see people taking a commercial product and showing it with affection. They were showing them with irony. Do you know what I mean?

RUPPERSBERG: No, I know what you mean. A lot of it comes from The Living Theater. Those ideas are slowly introduced in different things that influence you. You could go back to The Living Theater since we mentioned it and the influence of people here in L.A. like Ed Kienholz and Wallace Berman, where these kinds of objects appear that had some kind of poetic aura to them that I really responded to. The more conceptual world was coming into focus at that time, *When Attitudes Became Form* (1969). Those kinds of things around 1970 distanced it even further from the poetry of assemblage to make it even flatter, like a commercial art product. I don't know if there's a moment. The only moment that I can think about is when I decided that the painted object or the kind of work that I was making wasn't art to me anymore, and it was time to do something else. That really crystallized in the exhibition of Frank Stella's *Protractor* series at the old Pasadena Museum of Art.

MCCOLLUM: It was a great show.

RUPPERSBERG: It was a fantastic show. I've mentioned this before in some interviews and things, but looking at that was a kind of epiphany moment – here is the best it's ever going to get. So, what are you fooling around for? Just forget about it and start over again. Do your own work. This had nothing to do with me; my work was about these other things that were out there waiting to be appropriated.

KLEIN: Do you think that the particular environment that you're both painting a picture of is specific to Los Angeles or Southern California? Because I think particularly in the moment that we're in there's a re-historicization of Conceptual practice in Los Angeles, and a real effort to try to codify what California Conceptualism is. I'm curious what your reflections might be on that. Allan, you're someone who is from Los Angeles but is often associated more with New York. And you, Allen, have an identity

that's attached to Los Angeles, yet you've also done a lot of work in New York. I believe I read something of yours in which you talked about bringing a California sensibility to other scenarios.

RUPPERSBERG: Well, I think the whole idea of California Conceptualism was something that was made up later; it's not something that we were conscious of. All I can do is speak about my own influences in relationship to New York. I went to New York for the first time in 1970 to stay for a while. Every year after that I was connected [to New York], not only from a physical presence of being there, but also because Conceptualism was being shown [there]. The California people were being shown with New York people, people from Europe, or whomever. The shows were all-inclusive. It was a general approach.

It was only later when first of all New York Conceptualism was defined. Then once that was defined they started to look and see differences between people, what their influences were. Being in L.A., you were going to have different historical influences than you did in New York. I happened to be kind of a hybrid because of my relationship to New York. When I went in 1970, all the other Conceptual artists that I had either met out here or knew about, they were all there [in New York], and we were just working. I don't know. I didn't even think about it.

KLEIN: It's kind of an unfair question.

RUPPERSBERG: No, but it's become a "thing." But that thing was invented later. And yes, you can see differences, but it takes a while.

KLEIN: I guess it's also about how that Los Angeles scene might have contributed to the seeds of your practice as well.

MCCOLLUM: Well, Conceptualism is sort of a journalistic term in my mind. What I think influenced me in L.A. was when an artist brilliantly reduced something to such a simple moment, like a Zen master, that your whole sense of everything changed. There were a few times when that happened. One of the times was at Ed Kienholz's watercolor show at Eugenia Butler where there were a hundred watercolors on the wall and written on each one was what you could trade it for. One would say "For \$1.00," or "For \$10,000," or "For Two Pack Mules," or "For A Refrigerator." And then you had to go out and buy a refrigerator because he was moving. He was moving to Idaho. He needed all that stuff. This was 1968. I don't know. Is that Conceptualism? Or, of course, there was Michael Asher. I'll never forget the way he had two galleries, back in 1977. It was Claire Copley's Gallery and Morgan Thomas's was the other one?

RUPPERSBERG: Thomas and Connie Lewallen.

MCCOLLUM: Oh, they had the gallery together, okay.

RUPPERSBERG: Yes.

MCCOLLUM: For Michael Asher's show, he had them change spaces. So, the staff from one gallery worked at Claire's. You'd go into the gallery and see the staff from the other gallery.

RUPPERSBERG: Showing the other gallery's artists.

MCCOLLUM: Connie would show Laddie John Dill.

RUPPERSBERG: But at Claire's gallery. . . .

MCCOLLUM: They switched stables. I remember Laddie saying, "Wow, it's so great. Now I can put Claire Copley on my resume." I can't remember whom Claire showed.

RUPPERSBERG: I think it was a group show.

MCCOLLUM: Little moments like that just changed my whole view of things. I guess that's conceptual but to me it's also kind of Buddhist, like how the Zen master does the exact thing you don't expect him to do when you're enlightened.

RUPPERSBERG: It is the West Coast after all.

MCCOLLUM: Yeah, that's definitely the West Coast.

KLEIN: For the sake of time maybe we should move forward to the present. One of the things that I'm interested in hearing a little bit about is that you're both collectors, but you're both collectors in really different senses, it seems. Or maybe you wouldn't consider yourself a collector, but you have collections.

MCCOLLUM: No, basically I don't know how to throw things away. I don't know if that qualifies me as a collector. I'm kind of a neurotic, compulsive. Al actually collects books.

RUPPERSBERG: Stuff.

MCCOLLUM: And movies and posters.

KLEIN: But you also make collections.

MCCOLLUM: Yes, I make collections. I'm not sure what I need to say about it. Well, it has to do with quantity. One of the points I like to make – one of the points I dwell on and obsess about – is how we grow up in a culture of mass production where we're surrounded by things that were produced in mass quantities. But as artists, traditionally we're not supposed to produce things in mass quantity. We're asked to produce unique, individual things that have special values where special people can

collect them and say this is my special, unique object that nobody else has. What if an artist wants to mass-produce? What if all my feelings are tied up in the idea of entrepreneurial mass production and that really thrills me and excites me, and I'm not allowed to do it? Artists are supposed to be free to do what they want.

So, that's one of the compromises I've had to make. When I first did those over 30,000 *Individual Works* that I showed you, my idea was to sell them one at a time for \$20. And the dealer, of course, said, "Are you kidding? It takes just as long to write an invoice for \$20 as it does to write one for \$10,000. And we're not going to sit there and sell [10,000 of them]." So I said okay, we'll sell them by the gross, by 144. And he said, "Oh, all right."

Then we did the installation and he said, "Wait a minute. This has to be one piece. If you sell 144, then you won't have that piece to show at a museum," and all that. There's always this dilemma. I've never been able to resolve it. So, I sell things in collections. I say, okay, you have to buy a collection. Like these are in collections of 144. And I produced them that way. You can't buy one of those little shapes. You have to buy 144. Maybe that's what you're referring to, that the titles of my works are *Collection of Two Hundred and Forty-four Plaster Surrogates*, or *Collection of . . .* But Al is a real collector. He comes from a family of collectors as I recollect. No? Didn't your father collect?

RUPPERSBERG: Not necessarily.

MCCOLLUM: I don't mean art collectors.

RUPPERSBERG: No, not really. Records. Records would be the only things, but that's just from a love of music. Not from the need to hoard things.

MCCOLLUM: To me it was a compromise. It's a critique in a way. The art world as it exists will not let me make mass quantities of things and sell them one at a time. Because if I were to do that they'd say, "Oh, you're not an artist. You're something else. You're making souvenirs." So I think, well, I want to do that, but I probably couldn't make a living doing it. And I wouldn't be called an artist, which would make it even worse. So, I have to come up with some kind of compromised way.

RUPPERSBERG: Which you did.

MCCOLLUM: So, I did, which works sometimes.

RUPPERSBERG: And now you're all of those things.

MCCOLLUM: And there are still people out there that think I'm not an artist because I'm making souvenirs.

KLEIN: The objects that you make also, if I'm not mistaken, have some personal

references to them, like a flashlight, or other everyday objects.

MCCOLLUM: Oh, you mean with the *Individual Works*. Using molds taken from my girlfriend's contact lens case, and some of those things taken from toys of my friends' children and things like that. Is that what you mean?

KLEIN: Yes, that's exactly what I mean. I think there's an interesting correspondence with some of the works that you do, Allen, which are also looking at a certain kind of mass-produced object and transferring or reclaiming it into a personal realm like your re-drawings.

RUPPERSBERG: That's true. The things that have wound up being collections of mine are just bought because they're going to be used at some point. Sometimes it takes 20 years to find the exact use for some object or drawing or something that attracted me in some way. The most common denominator is that it's where my eye goes. It goes to those kinds of things because I've investigated my own background and my own ideas about art and stuff. And then these collections build up to the point where they'll never all be used. I'd have to live to be 200 years old to use all of this stuff. But that doesn't matter because there's just one thing in there that eventually will get used.

MCCOLLUM: I remember when I was thinking about your work for that article I wrote and I came up with the conclusion that you think we are collections. Each individual is a collection. Part of what I get from your work is that we are all collaged collections of everything we've done, seen, thought about, and read.

RUPPERSBERG: And have.

MCCOLLUM: And have and –

RUPPERSBERG: Keep. Think about.

MCCOLLUM: It includes banal, stupid objects and brilliant objects, objects we share with others, and objects that are ours personally.

RUPPERSBERG: When I see peoples' collections of things, I think of your work, too. There's a particular apartment that I used to walk by where the person collected ships, ceramic ships or all kinds of ships. They're all in the windows of the whole front of the apartment that this person owns. It's a lot like that. There are these collections of objects that then together make this impression on you. They make this thing similar to your 10,000 objects.

MCCOLLUM: That makes me think of one of the first thoughts that triggered me to do these, the idea of how come an art object is always a single, solid thing. Why couldn't it be granular? It would take the shape of what you put it in, like if you had a box or a jar that you fill with corn. Some objects you think of as taking on the shape of their

container. I don't know why I'm telling you this.

RUPPERSBERG: Well, that's similar to a lot of Marcel Broodthaers's work. The thing takes the shape of its container. There's nothing inside or there is something.

MCCOLLUM: You mean like all those mussel shells in the pot?

RUPPERSBERG: And the pots and a whole range of objects of his. Suitcases.

MCCOLLUM: Yes. But convention suggests that you make a singular object. It's almost like a monument or something that is supposed to be so singular. My response to that is clearly to make things that do not have to have a specific shape, but still could be called art.

RUPPERSBERG: Well, my response is fairly similar. It only is that I find it impossible to make the same thing more than once. You're supposed to have a form. You have a theory. You have something that you then refine.

MCCOLLUM: It's your signature object.

RUPPERSBERG: Your signature object. Well, I always thought that was crap. I find that it's genetically impossible for me to make the same thing more than once.

MCCOLLUM: Does that bother you?

RUPPERSBERG: No, because I think it's important in the dialogue that you don't have to make the same thing.

MCCOLLUM: Correct.

RUPPERSBERG: You can use any method, any material, any idea and it becomes part of the whole in the same way that your objects become part of a whole. You don't do the same thing either. You do all kinds of different things.

MCCOLLUM: I do all kinds of things in which I do all the same things.

RUPPERSBERG: That's the difference.

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