

## KRAKOW WITKIN GALLERY

### ALLAN MCCOLLUM *THE SHAPES PROJECT: PERFECT COUPLES*

**OCTOBER 20, 2012 - NOVEMBER 24, 2012**



Barbara Krakow Gallery is proud to announce our latest exhibition with Allan McCollum:  
“The Shapes Project: Perfect Couples”

Working over the past few years, McCollum has designed a system to produce unique “shapes.” This system allows him to make enough unique shapes for every person on the planet to have one of their own. It also allows him to keep track of the shapes, so as to insure that no two will ever be alike. While previous parts of the project have been monoprints, embroideries and rubber stamps, this time McCollum has made “perfect couples” of the shapes to exist in large collections that are reminiscent of the color combinations of Sol LeWitt and the relief forms of Jean/Hans Arp, yet somehow balancing between formal abstraction and the anthropomorphizing of pairs into couples.

McCollum’s reasoning for the quantity of shapes comes from following the present rate of birth. It is generally estimated that the world population will “peak” sometime during the middle of the present century, and then possibly begin to decline. How many people will be alive at this peak are estimated at between 8 billion and 20 billion people, depending upon what factors are considered and who is doing the considering. The most recent estimate published by the United Nations puts the figure at around 9.1 billion in the year 2050.

To make certain that his system will be able to accommodate everyone, McCollum has organized it to produce over 31,000,000,000 different shapes, which is more than the highest population estimates might require.

For the time being, a potential of around 214,000,000 shapes have been reserved within the system for creative experimentation. These can be used for many different purposes—not only for fine art and design projects, but also for various social practices: as gifts, awards, identity markers, emblems, insignias, logos, toys, souvenirs, educational tools, and so forth.

McCollum is presently using a home computer to construct Adobe Illustrator ‘vector’\* files that allow the shapes to be produced in many possible ways. The shapes can be printed graphically as silhouettes or outlines, in any size, color or texture, using all varieties of graphics software; or, the files can be used by rapid prototyping machines and computer-numerically-controlled (CNC) equipment—such as routers, laser and waterjet cutters—to build, carve, or cut the shapes from wood, plastic, metal, stone, and other materials. For this exhibition, all the shapes were cut by hand on a scroll saw by Horace and Noella Varnum, founders of Artasia, in Sedgwick, Maine and the colors were designed by Marcie Paper in Brooklyn, New York.

## CONTEXT ON ALLAN MCCOLLUM, *THE SHAPES PROJECT*

There are in fact no masses; only ways of seeing people as masses.  
— Raymond Williams<sup>1</sup>

When an artist decides to produce artworks in larger than expected quantities, he not only runs the risk of alienating the art audience, which seeks rarities above all else, he also risks losing his status as an artist altogether. Beyond a certain count, the mentality of the fine art community will downgrade a group of artworks to a lower rank, even if each object is unique: terms like “multiples,” “editions,” or even “souvenirs” are applied in order to diminish their significance. Allan McCollum has always decried the logic of this, and the damage it does to artists:

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<sup>1</sup> “The Masses” (1958), reprinted in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, Blackwell Publishers, London, 2002, p 46

... 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.<sup>2</sup>

McCollum has also said, "Maybe the meaning of an artwork is the sum of all meanings given to it by the sum of its viewers."<sup>3</sup> It follows, then, that in his imagination, and contrary to elitist art world opinion, meaning can be increased as the audience is increased. It is therefore no surprise that the devices of mass production and distribution always play a role in his work, both metaphorically and in practice.

In the mid-seventies, when he began making "stand-ins" or "surrogates" for artworks, he initiated a distinctive way of turning the spotlight onto the contexts of display and exchange that develop the meaning of the artwork. By creating often astonishingly large quantities of unique objects, his work argued that our concepts of the rare and the unique are ultimately defined by our concepts of the common and the copy, and that you can't have one quality without taking its opposite into account. His subsequent explorations from the mid-80s forward took the form of contextualizing "the artwork" within a scheme of other exalted collectibles (bibelot, fossils, archeological and geological treasures, heirlooms); and subsequently, through a series of collaborative, community projects in regional areas of North America and Europe, he demonstrated how in the process of defining certain local objects as having special significance, we not only develop value for ourselves as individuals, but also work to define the identities of our communities. With projects such as "Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah" (1994/95), "The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with supplemental didactics)" (1998), "Signs of the Imperial Valley: The Sand Spikes from Mount Signal" (2000) and "The Kansas and Missouri Topographical Model Donation Project" (2003), McCollum explored the roles that quantities of objects can play in a community's self awareness, and how understanding the way we nurture such physical emblems might inform our understanding of the role that artworks play as well.

With *The Shapes Project*, McCollum has expanded the scale of his interest in the complexity of our social relationships to our objects by initiating an excursion into picturing tens of billions of unique shapes, and imagining the task of creating singular unique objects that could be distributed to each person on the planet. In discussing this project he said, "We intellectually recognize that each of us is only one person among over six billion – but at every opportunity we avoid both the emotional and practical implications of this. Our ability to imagine the entire world is seriously underdeveloped, and this damages our abilities to make wise choices. We invent thousands of ways to imagine smaller and smaller worlds, to divide others into types and categories, and to exclude people from our own universes; but in spite of our constant misuse of words like "everyone" and "everybody," we are utterly incompetent at imagining all people at once. I think it's important to acknowledge our failures in this area, without pretending otherwise, and to face the sadness and poignancy of this; and we should expand our imaginations in this area as much as possible."

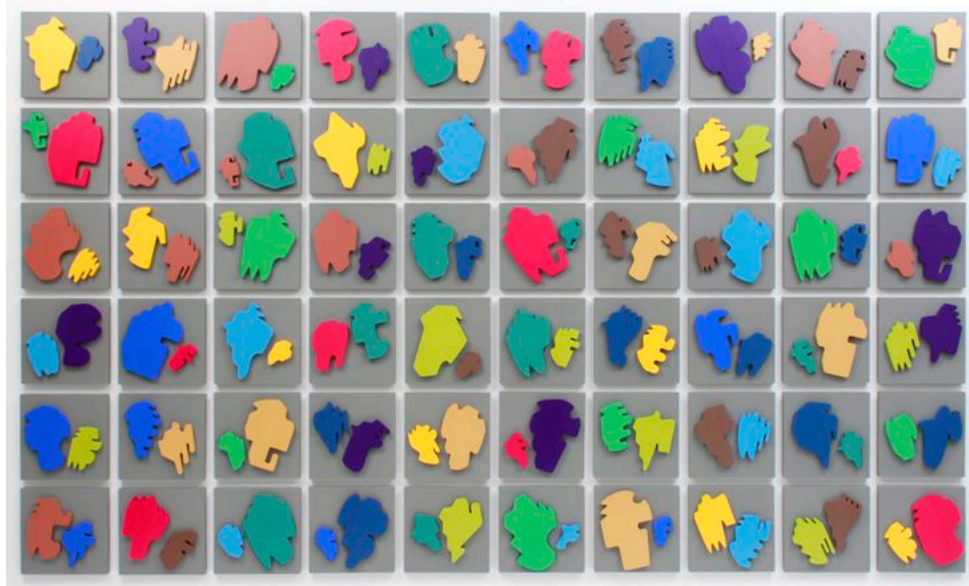
A website with information about Allan McCollum's work is at: <http://allanmccollum.net>

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<sup>2</sup> "Interview with Allan McCollum," by Thomas Lawson. Allan McCollum, A.R.T. Press, 1996, p 25

<sup>3</sup> "Where Does the Meaning Come From?" (2000), Artists Introduction, "Signs of the Imperial Valley: The Sandspikes from Mount Signal." See: <http://allanmccollum.net/amcimages/introduction.html>

## Twos of a kind, frayed knots, and double takes



“Out of many, one,” which in Latin is emblazoned over the eagle on the seal of the United States, is especially tough to parse during election season, when we slice and dice the electorate, and pit red state against blue. It’s at the core of conceptual artist Allan McCollum’s “The Shapes Project,” a clever and challenging subset of which, “Perfect Couples,” is on view at Barbara Krakow Gallery.

McCollum has for years thumbed his nose at the art market’s tendency to value unique works over multiples by creating huge numbers of related individual objects. For “The Shapes Project,” which he’s been working on since 2005, he has set out to design a single shape for every person on the planet — these days, that tops out over 7 billion. Anticipating population growth, he has created a system that has the potential to produce up to 31 billion unique shapes, outfitted with a variety of swellings, corners, and cockscombs.

Shapes, of course, are not ideological, emotional, or afraid. It’s easy to conceive of them as one large group, which seems to be McCollum’s point — if we weren’t so prone to taking sides in order to define ourselves, we might be able to think differently about the human race and its prospects.

“Perfect Couples” comprises grids of his paired, painted wooden forms, arrayed according to color value. There’s a pastel grid, a dark one, a bright one, and more. Arranging them this way inevitably triggers comparisons. The pastel ones seem friendly; the bright ones shine like extroverts, commanding attention. The dark ones are moody and deep.

Look more closely, and each couple displays its own tension. How will that small, green, rounded cross stand up to the much bigger mauve shape that evokes a cartoon of a big-nosed guy with a comb-over, with which it shares a panel? Even as McCollum summons the idea of

every person on equal footing, he demonstrates how easily we default to “us versus them” stories.

Suppose McCollum could distribute his shapes to everyone, worldwide, and each form became a personal avatar. Would people build alliances according to the likeness of their shapes? It’s what we do. It would be hard to break us of it.

By Cate McQuaid  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

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**Allan McCollum**  
**The Shapes Project:**  
**Perfect Couples**

Barbara Krakow Gallery,  
10 Newbury St.,  
Through November 24<sup>th</sup>.  
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