



Allan McCollum. *THE EVENT: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with supplemental didactics)*, 1998. Installation: University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, Tampa, Florida, 1998. Over 10,000 casts of an actual fulgurite produced by lightning triggered by the artist at the International Center for Lightning Research at Camp Blanding, Florida.

THE EVENT:
Petrified Lightning from Central Florida
(with Supplemental Didactics)

“It’s hard to imagine how memory and meaning could exist without language — both are always only available through some sort of representation. I imagine that objects having meaning — artworks, keepsakes, people, stones — could not exist for us without their “literature.” How could a bolt of lightning, lasting only for the tiniest fraction of a second, be understood otherwise? Events this brief will always evade our synapses — and their existence will always only exist after the fact, amongst one’s representations. Perhaps a true picture of how an artwork has meaning could be constructed if the literature supporting the artwork was put on display at the same time, along with it. The *Petrified Lightning* project was created to explore this idea — an exhibition to enact the “event” as always already absent, with the residue and the meaning always already appearing in its place.”

— Allan McCollum



Allan McCollum. *THE EVENT: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with supplemental didactics)*, 1998. Installation: University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, Tampa, Florida, 1998. Allan McCollum. Over 13,000 copies of 66 different booklets on fulgurites, lightning, the people involved in the project, and related topics. Edited and designed by the artist.

above, being “struck” with an idea like a “bolt from the blue”, etc.), by following these imaginings back to natural, real events, and to exploring the way we all like to imagine human agency interacting with natural processes in general.

To produce the Petrified Lightning project, Allan McCollum collaborated with a geologist and an electrical engineer from the University of Florida’s International Lightning Research Facility at Camp Blanding, near the small town of Starke, Florida. With the help of the team at the center, McCollum spent the summer of 1997 triggering lightning strikes by launching small rockets with hair-thin copper wires trailing

In this large-scale project artist Allan McCollum explores the ways in which treasured objects are created “in nature” and “in culture,” and how their meanings are constructed within the communities that give them value. Here he specifically explores the natural creation of certain relatively unknown types of geological oddities known as fulgurites. A fulgurite is a sandy glass tube that often forms when lightning strikes dry sand, and McCollum has chosen to tell the story of fulgurite formation by insinuating parallels to many of our culture’s fantasies about the “instant” production of objects, as these fantasies reveal themselves in myth, and are enacted through art-making and industrial production. He hopes to “reverse-engineer” some of the popular metaphors we use to describe the processes of “creativity,” (as with our fantasies of receiving “illumination” from



Allan McCollum at the International Facility for Lightning research, preparing rocket used to trigger lightning, at Camp Blanding, Florida. 1997.

behind them directly into storm clouds as they passed overhead. The triggered lightning bolts were directed down the wires into various containers prepared by the artist that were filled with minerals from a local sand mining operation. The lightning instantly liquefied columns of sand with temperatures up to 50,000 degrees Fahrenheit, which immediately re-congealed into columns of naturally created glass (fulgurites) that exactly duplicated the paths of the lightning bolts. These were then dug out by the artist in a manner similar to the way a paleontologist might remove a fragile fossil from its matrix.

A local souvenir manufacturer then cast over 10,000 replicas of McCollum's selected fulgurite using a mixture of epoxy and zircon sand from the exact area where McCollum created the original.

As a second element of the project the artist designed and produced a series of over 13,000 small booklets with 66 titles, each elaborating upon different subjects related to fulgurites, lightning, and the project itself. A display of all these booklets is presented alongside the fulgurite replicas when the project is exhibited.



Lightning strike that formed the fulgurite, at the University of Florida's International Lightning Research Facility at Camp Blanding, Florida. Sixteen millimeter frame, shot at 500 frames per second.

THE EVENT: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with Supplemental Didactics) was developed in Tampa, Florida for the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum and the Museum of Science and Industry. In producing the fulgurites McCollum collaborated with Dr. Martin Uman, well-known expert on lightning, author, and chair of the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department at the University of Florida; Dan Cordier, geologist; Russel McCarty, paleontological preparator at the Florida Museum of Natural History; I. E. Dupont Mining, Starke, Florida; and Sand Creations Manufacturing, Sanford, Florida. The project was coordinated by Jade Dellinger, independent curator; Margaret Miller, director of the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum; and Wit Ostrenko, Executive Director of the Museum of Science and Industry of Tampa and Hillsborough County. This project was partially funded by Hillsborough County; Rooms To Go; Florida Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs; The Arts Council of Hillsborough County; WUSF Television; I. E. Dupont; The Tampa Tribune; and the artist.