

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Allan McCollum

The Shapes Project

November 3 - December 23, 2006

Friedrich Petzel Gallery is pleased to announce the opening of a solo exhibition of new work by Allan McCollum.

Working over the past few years, McCollum has designed a new system to produce unique two-dimensional "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.

For the time being, around 214,000,000 of the shapes have been set aside 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. The shapes can be printed graphically as silhouettes or outlines, in any size, color or texture, using all varieties of graphics software to build, carve, or cut the shapes from wood, plastic, metal, stone, and other materials.

The basic system for making the shapes is now complete, but the project of actually constructing all of them is much too large for McCollum to finish by himself, or in his own lifetime. For this reason he is organizing it in such a way that others may continue completing them in my absence. He is also making shapes available to others, with the hope that people will come up with many interesting ways to use them.

Allan McCollum was born in California in 1944, and lives and works in New York. He has spent over thirty years exploring how objects achieve public and personal meaning in a world constituted in mass production, focusing most recently on collaborations with small community historical society museums in different parts of the world.

McCollum has had over 100 solo exhibitions, including retrospectives at the Musée d'Art Moderne, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Lille, France (1998); the Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany (1995-96); the Serpentine Gallery, London (1990); the Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö, Sweden (1990); IVAM Centre del Carne, Valencia, Spain (1990); Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands (1989), and Portikus, Frankfurt, Germany (1988). He has produced public art projects in the United States and Europe, and his works are held in nearly seventy major art museum collections worldwide.

To introduce his project in New York, McCollum will be exhibiting over 5000 unique monoprints along with a series of wooden sculptures produced in collaboration with Graphicstudio and The Institute for Research in Art.

The exhibition will open on November 3, with an opening reception from 6-8 p.m., and will be on view through December 23, 2006. Friedrich Petzel Gallery is located at 537 West 22nd Street, New York, NY 10011. For more information, please contact the gallery at 212.680.9467 or info@petzel.com.

Allan McCollum, *The Shapes Project*

There are in fact no masses; only ways of seeing people as masses.
— Raymond Williams¹

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:

... 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.²

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.”³ 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://home.att.net/~allanmcnyc>

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

² “Interview with Allan McCollum,” by Thomas Lawson. *Allan McCollum*, A.R.T. Press, 1996, p 25

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