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Allan McCollum. *The Kansas and Missouri Topographical Model Project*. 2004.

A Map of the Divide

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Currently on view at Grand Arts is *The Kansas and Missouri Topographical Model Project*, the latest solo exhibition by Allan McCollum. Arguably one of the most important practitioners of postmodern art over the last 20 years, McCollum was born in Los Angeles in 1944 and moved to New York in 1975. In the mid-1980s he gained widespread art world attention with his *Plaster Surrogates* – small, generic, cast plaster paintings, consisting of a black center, white mat, and painted frame. Never exactly identical but always hung in groups to emphasize their interchangeability, the *Plaster Surrogates* function as signs for paintings rather than paintings themselves. Among other things, they evoke the wealth and power that make possible the accumulation and display of art. McCollum explored similar concerns with his *Perfect Vehicles*, *Individual Works*, and *Drawings*. All these series presented generically similar yet individually unique works in small, large, or even immense groupings – the *Individual Works* were displayed

in sets of over 10,000 – that create an intriguing tension between the aura of the unique art object and the logics of mass production and mass display.

Since the early-1990s, McCollum has made a number of serial works that replicate naturally occurring objects such as fossilized dinosaur bones (*Lost Objects*, 1991), dinosaur footprints preserved as sandstone (*Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah*, 1994), and the glassy objects produced when lightning strikes sand or rock known as fulgurites (*THE EVENT: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (With Supplemental Didactics)*, 1998). Objects such as fossils and fulgurites, while rare and precious, are natural rather than cultural creations and therefore not considered art. Presented in profusion, McCollum's cast replicas are undeniably cultural creations, but their status as art is complicated by their insistent reference to the natural origins of the objects they replicate and to the non-art contexts (e.g. natural history museums) in which these objects are normally encountered.

Topographical maps of American states – the subject of McCollum's latest project – are human creations that record both visible, natural features (such as mountain ranges and bodies of water) and invisible, social ones (borders established through political means). They are thus shaped by both nature and culture, a duality that fascinates McCollum. Furthermore, both the shapes and topographical features of the individual states are very meaningful to the people who live in them. "Everyone has a profound emotional involvement with the shapes and topography of their own home territory," McCollum writes in a text describing his Grand Arts project, "and I think these feelings can be an interesting subject for artistic exploration."

For the Grand Arts exhibition, McCollum chose to work with maps of Kansas and Missouri in order to engage the feelings of the gallery's bi-state audience. The front gallery displays ten ceramic topographical models – five of Kansas followed by five of Missouri – lined up in a row on waist-high pedestals. This arrangement permits the viewer to survey the surfaces of the models from above, much as the satellites passing over the states did when they gathered the geographic data employed by a California company to computer-carve the prototype patterns used to cast the ceramic pieces. The Kansas ceramic pieces are approximately two feet wide and four inches thick, while the Missouri pieces are about two feet deep and three inches thick. Each ceramic work is glazed in a deep, rich color, and is for sale at \$3,500. Also on display are two sets of graphite-on-paper *Recognizable Image Drawings* – 105 on the north wall presenting each county of Kansas as a solid black shape, and 115 on the south wall similarly depicting the counties of Missouri – for sale at \$37,800 and \$41,400, respectively.

I mention the prices to highlight the commercial aspect of the front gallery display, which is thrown into relief at Grand Arts by McCollum's documentation, in the back gallery, of a second, essentially philanthropic part of the project, wherein the same prototype patterns of Kansas and Missouri were used to cast Hydrostone topographical models for free distribution to small historical societies and museums in the two states. The white Hydrostone models were primed and presented as ready to be painted or otherwise customized by each historical museum to suit its programming needs. "It can be very

expensive to create a topographical model,” McCollum’s wall text explains, “but once a rubber mold is made it can be relatively economical to produce them in quantity. I tried to ‘piggy-back’ a practical, educational project on top of an art gallery project, and thus extend the benefits of Grand Arts’ efforts into areas beyond the Kansas City art community.”



Cydney Millstein

A topological model of the state of Kansas being donated to the Historic Adobe Museum in the town of Ulysses, Grant County, Kansas, on August 3, 2003.

McCollum sent letters offering the donations to about 250 museums, and just over 120 accepted them. Accompanied by Cydney Millstein, a Kansas City architectural historian, McCollum personally delivered the models to most of the museums in the summer and fall of 2003. He then requested letters of acknowledgment from every museum, explaining in his

November 8 gallery talk at Grand Arts that he had been depressed and “wanted to know what it felt like to be thanked by a hundred people.” Lining three walls of the back gallery are 47 of these letters of acknowledgment. Also displayed are examples of the Hydrostone topographical models of Kansas and Missouri, each in front of a laminated map bearing numbered pins – 76 in Kansas and 44 in Missouri – marking the locations of the museums that received the models. On a table in the center of the gallery are scrapbooks with Cydney Millstein’s snapshots documenting most of McCollum’s deliveries.

In his gallery talk, McCollum introduced *The Kansas and Missouri Topographical Model Project* and thanked Grand Arts co-founder Margaret Hall Silva for the financial support that made it possible. Emphasizing the collaborative nature of the work and likening his role to that of a movie director, McCollum credited Grand Arts assistant director April Calahan-McDonald for her coordination of the model donations; Nathan Shay, Garrett Hayes, and Alexi High for producing the ceramic and Hydrostone pieces; and Seth Johnson and Brian Frame for creating the *Recognizable Image Drawings*. Following his gallery talk, McCollum elaborated on his ideas in an interview, an edited version of which follows.

David Cateforis: How did you come up with the idea of taking the shapes of Kansas and Missouri as the subject matter for this project?

Allan McCollum: Well, I was invited by Grand Arts to propose a project, and Grand Arts is in Kansas City, which suggested to me both Kansas and Missouri, and that's why I picked those two states. It wasn't the other way around, where I thought, 'Gee, I'd like to do Kansas and Missouri, so let me call all the galleries in Kansas City and see who will offer me something.' It was my response to the invitation to create a proposal.

DC: And you know this area, having shown in Kansas City, Kansas in the past and having an uncle from Kansas, but you mentioned in your gallery talk that a lot of people from outside this region are confused about whether Kansas City is in Missouri or Kansas; of course it's in both, so it makes sense for you to do both states.

AM: When you're invited to do a show in a town that's not your own there's often a kind of self-consciousness about how what you're doing will be accepted or understood. And because for the past few years I've been doing projects that involve meanings brought to the objects by the audience, I have become interested in considering the community itself when I decide what kinds of objects to make. But the odd part is that you're often just a tourist when you're in a town that you're not from, and there's a certain presumptuousness to thinking you might understand the needs or desires of the community. So I guess in worrying about that I chose to be very clear in my choices that I was a tourist, but also to choose a way of exploring the community that is very general and could be applied to any community, and that is one of the reasons that went into my choosing the shapes of the states and the counties, because I could literally go to any town and do that, and follow all the same procedures and the same trains of thought.

Early on, Kansas City was important to me, because my first one-person show outside of Los Angeles was in Kansas City, with the Douglas Drake Gallery, and I've had a couple of shows since then here, and, as you mentioned, my uncle, **Jon Gnagy**, is from Kansas. But, I'm from L.A. and I live in New York, so the middle of the country is something towards which I have a very touristic attitude.

DC: For people from the coasts, it's fly-over country.

AM: Exactly, and I've been wanting to do a topological map of a state for some time, but the idea that it was right in the middle of the country really appealed to me, and that's one of the reasons I chose to do this project at this moment, because I was offered a show smack in the middle of the country.

DC: When I first learned that you were working with topographical models, which are maps, I thought about Jasper Johns and his North American map images of the 1960s. Like Johns, you often seem to be interested in finding, rather than inventing, your subject matter – in working with what Johns called “things the mind already knows.” Has the example of Johns been important to you?

AM: I've never heard that phrase before – “things the mind already knows” – that's beautiful. In Johns' ironic way of speaking, you could say that all art is about things the mind already knows. Did Johns influence me? Not in my choice of maps in a direct way, but maybe there was a certain permission granted. I don't know, it's so long ago that he did those that probably there's no one who makes objects of any kind who hasn't been influenced by Jasper Johns, or Duchamp.

DC: Right, but I'm talking about that idea of taking a familiar shape – in this case the shape of a state – and making that the subject of your work. Although I'm not sure “subject” is even the right word; is that the subject of your art, is it the shape of the state and its topography?

AM: Well, if you want to give a subject to the project, you have to look at the whole thing, the story. Even in my early years as an artist I was always interested in the story that went along with the objects. I think that more recently, the story has become more highly important.

DC: Not just the product, but the process as well.

AM: Yes, when I say story I mean the process that went into making it all happen. In this case, it's the offer made by Grand Arts to do something, all the difficulties in producing the work, all the delivery trips we made. In other words, to discuss this project, people would have to tell the story. And I think there's a certain mythology that some objects are above storytelling, and that they have a certain value that floats above storytelling and it doesn't matter what the critics say, it doesn't matter about the artist's biography, the object itself in some ideal, pure space is beautiful in a pure aesthetic way – and I'm just not one of those people who thinks that way.

DC: Well, I don't think that way either, and as an art historian, my job is to tell those stories about any art object. So I'm trying to think, what will it be like when, in a hundred years, someone encounters one of your beautiful, colorful ceramic topographical maps of Missouri or Kansas in a collection somewhere, and doesn't know the story? Is the story the missing piece? Should an account of the process be displayed with the ceramic piece to sort of complete the experience?

AM: Well, that's the dilemma, and I think that dilemma is what I'm enjoying in this project, because I'm saying ‘Yes, you have to understand that story if you do buy this ceramic piece that's designed to be beautiful and sensual.’ You know, Cary Esser [chair of ceramics at the Kansas City Art Institute] said “I'd like to shrink ‘em and suck ‘em.”

DC: Yes, they do look like giant pieces of candy – eye candy.

AM: And of course I self-consciously wanted to create something that was beautiful in a sensual, immediate way, but that's just one aspect. The shape of a state is a cross between a political shape and a geological shape, especially if there's a border on the river, like

the whole east side of Missouri. And if you make it a topographical map, a relief map, you've really got a funny confabulation of nature and culture, and it not only can function symbolically that way, but it also invites deep, heartfelt emotional projection on the part of a person from that territory. My grandmother – and I think this was influential on me for some reason – was a Texan, and she had this souvenir in the shape of Texas over her bed until the day she died. And, you know, we lived in Los Angeles, but even I have a deep involvement with the shape of Texas, just because my mother and grandmother were from there, and I've only been through Texas twice. And I have a response to California that's beyond explaining. It's fascinating to me that these political, geological constructs can be so strangely internalized.



Allan McCollum. Topographical models of Kansas (4 x 11 x 27 inches) and Missouri (3 x 23 x 17 inches), 2003. Cast Hydrostone, with white primer.

DC: We see these shapes, they come off the map, they stand for the state, and they end up standing for all the feelings we have about the state and our life in it. So as a Kansas resident, I come into the gallery and I respond more emotionally to the Kansas shape than to the Missouri one. And I think this is natural, because, as you said, we have this emotional connection to the shape of the state we inhabit.

AM: And also, when you give it the topographical relief dimension, it becomes a skin, and I thought 'What if you took that kind of meaning about identity, emotional investment in a shape, and political boundaries combined with natural boundaries, and add something that

you want to touch, like a skin, to that, and then the eye candy aspect' – to me, it's like a synthesizing of an art object using synthetic means to invite a complex emotional response. There's not necessarily anything phony about it, all art is in some way synthetic. You do something with your hands to create a set of symbols, an array of gestures that somehow functions to make you feel something. So it's always synthetic, but like a cubist, like Johns, I like to see the devices isolated – I like to see them bared – so I guess you'd have to say that I'm very rooted in Johns, Rauschenberg, Fluxus.

DC: Now let's talk about the very important fact that this is a dual project. On the one hand, you have here in the gallery at Grand Arts these beautiful ceramic pieces, but then the other half of the project involves the Hydrostone topographical models that you distributed to the historical societies in Kansas and Missouri. You've talked about how

that was a way of “piggy-backing” on the fine art project to make these models that would be of use to these historical societies, and have a kind of educational or didactic function. When I first met you this past summer and heard about these Hydrostone models, I asked you whether you considered those works of art too, and you said no. And I responded that since you are a recognized artist, anyone within the art world who sees them is going to think ‘Oh, that’s an Allan McCollum – that’s a work of art.’ And it seems to me that you are trying to break out of that situation by distributing them, and not denying authorship so much as saying, “This is for you, do with it what you want, I don’t consider this a work of art.”

AM: For me, the question never came up. I made so many it’s not going to be an issue, because they’ll never be that valuable.

DC: Well, you only made 120; that’s a fairly limited edition, isn’t it?

AM: Yeah, but still, that’s a lot.

DC: They will escape association with you exclusively if and when they are painted over by the historical societies.

AM: I think so; you can’t control everything. I had this idea that a gallery show might be able to finance a philanthropic project. Well, that isn’t in fact what’s going on here; I was given the money in advance. It wasn’t like I’m selling that work and taking the money and making other ones and giving them away. But in a symbolic way, the model could be thought of that way. Every project I’ve ever done explores mass production in a way that explores how artwork gains meaning, and also each time I attempt to use the techniques of mass production as an expressive device. In this case, it has to do with philanthropy and small community involvement.

DC: Let’s talk about the *Recognizable Image Drawings* you had made based on the shapes of every county in Kansas and Missouri.

AM: People recognize the shape of their state, which is the more general reference like you mentioned, but also I think it’s interesting to get more specific with that, to go further than one might expect, to get more ‘personal’ and zoom in on the counties. There’s a significance to the term “recognizable.” Number one, most people don’t recognize their own counties, and I like that paradox, because you probably should, but we don’t. I don’t know what the county I grew up in looks like.

DC: Right. I didn’t know what Douglas County looked like, and I found it on the map and found the drawing that you made of it, and said ‘Oh, so that’s what it looks like,’ and now I’ll remember.

AM: Great! That was a gift.

DC: Yes, thank you.



Allan McCollum. *Recognizable Image Drawings*, 2003. Pencil on paper

AM: I've been thinking about what recognizability is. I've done a lot of works like the *Perpetual Photos* series, which are about things that are not recognizable – trying to elicit that desire to recognize something, knowing that it can't be fulfilled. What part of human yearning does that draw out? There've been a few projects that have involved things that are out of focus, or blurry, and I think that the county drawings are a little bit related to

that, and that's why I chose the word "recognizable," because to me, it suggests that border between recognizability and unrecognizability.

DC: One of the fascinating things to me is how many of those counties are basically in the shape of a rectangle.

AM: Well, there's your reference to art history.

DC: I look at those and I think of Malevich's *Black Square*.

AM: Of course, or an Allan McCollum. I have to say that both of those references appealed to me.

DC: As a way of concluding this, let me ask: which do you consider more important, the distribution of the models to the historical societies or the exhibition at Grand Arts? Or, to put in another way, which of these was more important to you personally?

AM: Well, if you put it that way, I'd have to say the distribution, because that was the part that involved the fun, and the learning, and the experience, and the human contact, and 120 people saying thank you. Driving around with Cydney Millstein, who's an historian, and having her help me understand things about the area that I might not have

otherwise known. And part of my impulse to do this myself was to see the Midwest, to see these states that I've heard about my whole life. I've had many shows, so obviously the new thing is going to be more interesting to me – the new thing being this distribution part of the project. I never did anything quite like this before. I also enjoyed being able to go back to New York and tell my friends, "I'm now in 120 more museum collections."

DC: Of course the whole project is meaningful, and to try and pick out one part of it as being more important than another is really impossible to do, because it's all interconnected.

AM: Well for me, yes, and so when you asked me which was the most important part, it's a bit of a trick question. I do, of course, enjoy driving around the countryside more than I enjoy standing at an opening with a drink in my hand, which I do all the time. Driving around, meeting people, every historical society has some special object they want to show you and tell you about, and it's not predictable what it will be – from a bullet that killed a well-known local criminal, to scale models made by someone who invented an airplane that didn't work, to a stuffed buffalo, to somebody who did paintings out of seashells – everyone has one or two stories they tell the quick visitor, which I was because we tried to make six or seven deliveries a day. So considering we had to drive from town to town, you can imagine how little time we had.



Documentation of *The Kansas and Missouri Topographical Model Project*, in the back gallery, Grand Arts, Kansas City, Missouri, 2003

DC: And these are big states, as you discovered. What really is the crux here is that there are two projects, the one that created the art works on display in the front gallery and the distribution project documented in the back gallery. They're really different, and it seems to me that they really represent two different worlds: the art world and the real world.

One of the things you are perhaps exposing here is the artificiality of the art world, and making us actually long for more contact with the real world – the world of a rented van on a highway and the county historical society with a stuffed buffalo and dinner at a local restaurant with the local people, and seeing the countryside. That's something that no work of art, however wonderful, can really capture, or convey.

AM: Thanks for saying that, because that's the way I feel about it, too. Which isn't to say that the artificial art world isn't a wonderful place. I mean, all worlds can be thought of as artificial, depending on your viewpoint.

DC: But there's real experience and there's vicarious experience. And the poignant part of this project for me is knowing that, no matter how much documentation I read, no matter how long I contemplate those models, you're the one, Allan, who got out there and hit the road.

AM: It has a significance to you because I personally did it?

DC: The essential part of this project is an experience that you, and Cydney, and April, and the other people at Grand Arts had – what you learned and the connections that you made with these people and places. We have residues of that down in the gallery. We do have these precious objects that collectors can buy and they can buy that story along with it, but the real charge I get out of this work is thinking about how wonderful it is that you were able to do that, and to make your mark by enriching these historical societies. And in some ways, no matter how beautiful those ceramic pieces and wall drawings are, they are lacking that kind of connection to that real experience.

AM: Which is part of the poignancy of all art – and I do love art – but there's always a sadness to isolating any one single area of life as special, because it tends to leave other areas out.

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Installation photos by E. G. Schempf