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## *Individual Works: Allan McCollum*

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*The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it,  
– Sigmund Freud<sup>1</sup>*



Allan McCollum's *Individual Works* may, at first, seem to invite us to indulge in the pleasures of an infinite discovery of the same or of the almost same; of the not quite same. The Works themselves are intimate and immediately toy-like, each of the approximately 10,000 exhibited at John Weber Gallery consisting of a different combination of up to eight of almost 150 formal elements originally cast from bottle caps and drawer pulls, cat toys and candy molds – fragments of consumer goods. They are made as if to be picked up, cradled, thrown, put in a pocket, then lost under a bed or in a closet full of like objects once enjoyed and now forgotten each in turn. Ten thousand times.

And moving through even this potentially endless series of things, we might continue to play at discovery, marking each minute difference along the way, each moment in a perpetual displacement of attributes, as a unique quality, a new found joy.

But in his installation McCollum presents them all at once – their differences demanding singular attention, their mass a rebuke. Laid out on a table, spatialized, they are not easily reordered into the temporal procession through which their differences can be identified as positive qualities. Quickly, they become illegible, and, in the space of the gallery, the heterogeneous collection of individual works is finally reduced to the homogeneous mass of *Individual Works*.

If McCollum's *Plaster Surrogates* are signs for painting, and his *Perfect Vehicles* signs for the antique or exotic *objet d'art*, his *Individual Works* are not signs for anything. They're simply bibelot; small, decorative, household objects. They are not now symbolic objects, but, rather, they are made to become symbolic objects, in use, as souvenirs, keepsakes, tokens of affection; little mnemonic traces. It is not the absence of another object that their presence marks, but the absence of the subject who will be retained by them.

In an anthropological construction, psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan locates the advent of subjectivity in the symbolic object as that by which the subject was first marked off as subject; the "memorial (that) distinguishes his (or her) ephemeral apparition from that which will reproduce it again in the invariability of the type."<sup>2</sup>

In the memorial is embodied the two lacks, the two absences upon which, Lacan claims, subjectivity is conditioned. As an objectification

of memory it distinguishes the subject finally and in anticipation of the absolute absence of death. But in order to distinguish, the memorial must itself be distinguished and not simply at the quantitative level of a reckoning, in which one pile of stones is the same as another but in a system of differences as a presence conditioned by a lack.

Later, describing the appearance of the symbolic object in a child's game, Lacan writes:

*This is the place to say, in imitation of Aristotle, that man thinks with his object . . . If it is true that the signifier is the first mark of the subject, how can we fail to recognize here from the very fact that this game is accompanied by one of the first oppositions to appear that it is in the object to which the (signifying) opposition is applied in act . . . that we must designate the subject.<sup>3</sup>*

But this object is not simply a thing that the child takes up to represent itself. Rather, "it is a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his, still retained."<sup>4</sup> It is a trace of the subject's being made signifying by the effect of an amputation; a fragment of itself lost as absence in the signifying opposition that is the condition of symbolization. The object, which Freud defines as that "in respect to which and through which" the subject seeks to attain satisfaction, is henceforth not a return of this trace in the form of a thing, but, rather, the cause of the return, the perpetual return, of the subject to the promise of satisfaction; that is, a lack inscribed as difference.

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*When I was a child both of my parents worked on the assembly line in a large aircraft factory in Southern California. On Christmas, the company invited all the employees of this huge industrial complex to bring their children to an enormous party in one of their larger warehouses, and all of us were given exactly identical Christmas gifts. There were stacks upon stacks of these gifts, all in identical wrappings, stacked very high. There must have been hundreds and hundreds, maybe thousands, and we all had to stand in line for maybe a half an hour to get one – handed to us by a Santa Claus of course . . . I found the whole experience really frightening, as I recall, but, naturally, I wanted the gift.*

Allan McCollum<sup>5</sup>

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Allan McCollum. *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works*, detail. 1987/88. Enamel on cast Hydrocal, 2" diameter each, lengths variable.

Exchange is the condition of society, and the reduction of the qualitative difference of individuals, their labor, and the products of their labor to quantitative equivalents is the condition of exchange. In capitalist society this fundamentally economic reduction is generalized beyond what is necessary to merely hold a society together; through the commodity form it becomes the total logic of social functioning.

The mass production and consumption of standardized goods represents the full articulation of this operation of reduction, in which individuals, already reduced to mere quantities of labor in work, are served up a mass of identical objects to represent their wants as identical in all but degree. Subject and object become commensurable; the latter just another quantity of the stuff that the subject is made of – exchange value. With all alterity erased from the world of things, the subject, as individual, is once again lost in “the invariability of the type.” Its memorial will be no more than a pile of stones.

It could be said that it is the task of the cultural to reinscribe in the social the qualitative differences eradicated by the economic. The art object, as symbolic object, thus marks the resistance of society to the necessary homogenization of its constitutive parts. What else could it mean to call an object ‘priceless’ if not the assertion that its value is purely and exclusively qualitative, and it is therefore outside the realm of ordinary economic exchange. The insistence on and persistence of the criteria that an art object must be unique, is thus not an anachronistic remainder from a pre-industrial past, but the very condition of its function as a differentiating symbolic object.

But in a class society the appropriation of cultural goods with such symbolic qualities is distributed as unequally as the appropriation of quantities. Cultural domination consists in the power of turning, or rather, of returning, accumulated quantities into unique qualities; of economic capital into what becomes cultural capital – what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called a profit in distinction:

*To appropriate a work of art is to assert oneself as the exclusive possessor of the object and of the authentic taste for that object, which is thereby converted into the reified negation of all those who are unworthy of possessing it, for lack of the material or symbolic means of doing so, or simply for lack of a desire to possess it strong enough to ‘sacrifice everything for it . . .’ The exclusive appropriation of priceless works is . . . a challenge thrown down to all those who cannot dissociate their ‘being’ from their ‘having’ and attain disinterestedness, the supreme affirmation of personal excellence.<sup>6</sup>*

Finally, the cultural monopoly of a class is not simply a monopoly of objects, a piling up of things, but the exclusive prerogative of its members to represent themselves, to re-present their differences as individuals in their unique objects, their individual works. This monopoly has become a part of our language, as culture (the customs, beliefs, and symbolic practices of a social group) is rarefied as culture (the enlightenment of taste), quality (a particular attribute) is appropriated as quality (status,



rank, degree of excellence), and distinction (differentiation) is elevated to distinction (special honor and recognition).

*If you're not one of those people who affects history and most of us are not then how are you supposed to enjoy looking for personal meaning in the souvenirs of that class of people who manipulate history to your exclusion? How can this be possible? I think it takes a pretty blind state of euphoric identification to enjoy another's power to exclude you. I usually end up feeling angry and powerless when I visit a museum. I find myself thinking, "Who are these people? Who paid for this building? Where did they get their money? Who chose these art works? How much did they cost? What does all of this have to do with my experience?" And on and on . . . I work to remedy this alienation by basing the value of my work on a new model, a model based on abundance and availability, not uniqueness and exclusivity.*

Allan McCollum<sup>7</sup>

With *Individual Works* McCollum attempts to turn the egalitarian promise of mass production to the service of a redistribution of symbolic objects. Neither an optimist of bad faith who embraces the structures that exclude him for vicarious legitimacy, nor a pessimist who simply abandons the art object to its present function as an agent of class hegemony, McCollum looks beyond the current state of affairs, conceiving the art object not as "a product of [class] domination predisposed to express or legitimate [class] domination,"<sup>8</sup> but as simply a symbolic object predisposed to designate the subject in its desire as distinct from "the invariability of the type."

McCollum neither simply superimposes the conditions of industrial production on artistic practice nor attempts to raise them, in a heroic gesture, to the status of high art as has been the tendency of modernist sculpture from David Smith to Richard Serra. McCollum is not an artist posing as a worker. Nor is he, like some of the 'postmodern' artists with whom he has been associated, a consumer posing as an artist. McCollum is, rather, a worker producing unique, potentially symbolic, objects in mass, posing as an artist who produces contemporary art.

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#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> *Three Essays on The Theory of Sexuality*, New York: Basic Books, 1962, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> *Essays*, New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1977, p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Robbins, David, "An Interview with Allan McCollum," *Arts Magazine*, October 1985, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984, pp. 280, 281.

<sup>7</sup> Cameron, Dan, *NY Art Now: The Saatchi Collection*, Milan: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1987, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Distinction*, p. 228.