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IMPOSSIBLE OBJECTS:
Man-Made Fulgurites by Allan McCollum

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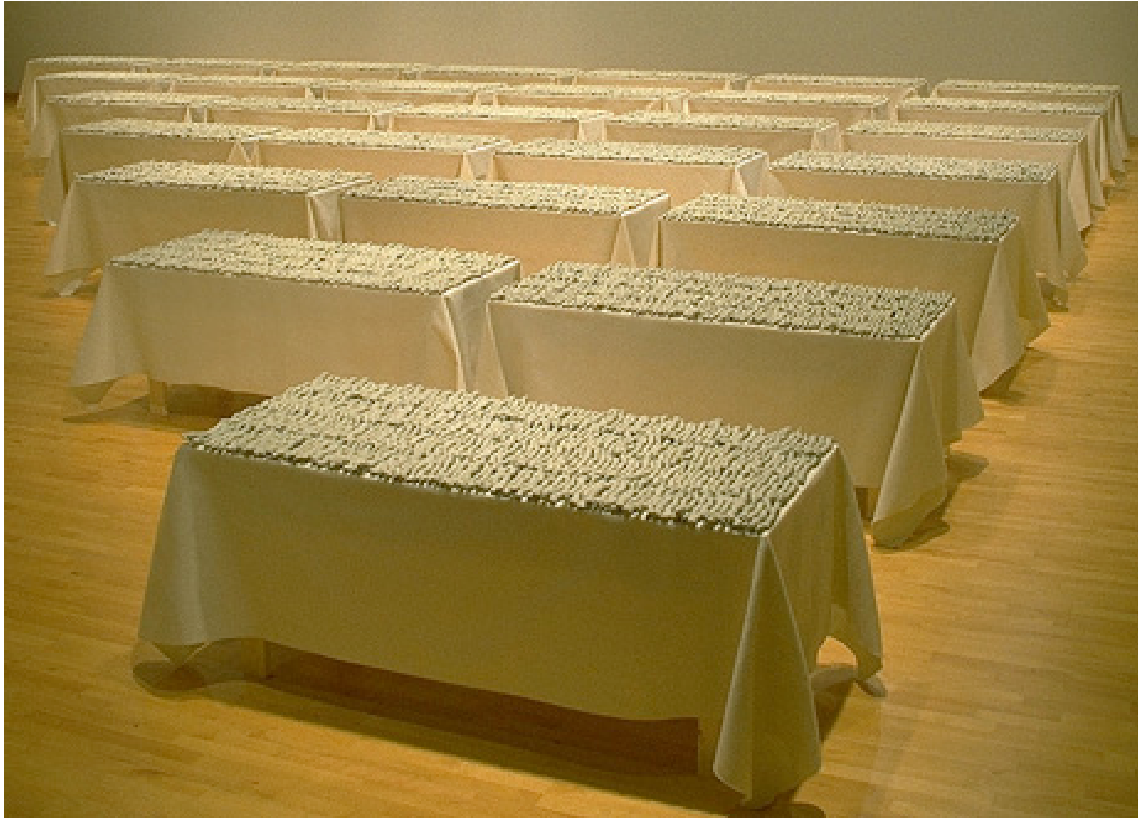
Allan McCollum. Fulgurite, 1998. Fused zircon sand. Produced by the artist artificially triggering a natural lightning bolt with a small rocket at the International Center for Lightning Research at Camp Blanding, Florida.

1. In his copious notebooks from the now legendary voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle, Charles Darwin re–counted his finding of "those vitrified siliceous tubes, which are formed by lightning entering loose sand." His observations were measured and studied, mind–fully denoting texture, color, size, and shape. He treated these underground tubes as a form of evidence, proof that lightning had occurred; in other words, he bestowed upon them the same detailed attention that he usually reserved for fossils. This should come as no surprise, after all it was Darwin who saw in the fossil record part of the data that helped him to develop his theory of evolution. Through his meticulous observation, the backbone of the work of a naturalist, Darwin's theory of natural selection slowly and deliberately countered the fallacy of European philosophy, that Nature had no history. The fossil record made clear that Nature was far from an unaltered steady continuum, everlasting, ever the same, without a history of its own. Darwin transformed fossils into the Rosetta Stone of Nature, organic history rendered inorganic, processes transformed into things, the past made permanently present. In the meantime, these tubes of fused sand came to be called fulgurites, or in lay terms, "petrified lightning." Differing markedly in size and shape, depending upon the force of the lightning and the composition of the soil, each fulgurite is a unique record of lightning, mirroring its brilliant flashes of light and electricity with an often mundane counterpart, a craggy tube of fused earth.

2. Ten thousand or so gray objects lying in rows on tables draped in cream-colored felt. They're small, ever so slightly sparkly, their sinuous striations make them appear somewhat extruded, mildly fecal, even, and they're all the same: inert, curious, strange. In an adjacent room long banquet-sized tables are covered with brightly colored but nonetheless sober-looking scientific pamphlets, each one's title relating in some fashion to lightning and its strange by-product the fulgurite. It becomes clear that the objects on the table are casts of a fulgurite, made in mass, repeated some ten thousand times.

The original for this mold is a "man-made" fulgurite produced by artist Allan McCollum, in conjunction with electrical engineer, Dr. Martin Uman, geologist, Dan Cordier and curator, Jade Dellinger, at the Center for Lightning Research at Camp Blanding, in Starke, Florida. Working with a group of scientists, McCollum helped to design a system to create an above ground man-made fulgurite through the use of triggered lightning.



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.

Experimenting with different kinds of sand, and different housings for the man-made fulgurites, over a period of six weeks during the summer of 1997, finally a successful above ground fulgurite was produced. The possibility of making a man-made fulgurite galvanized the researchers at Camp Blanding's Lightning Research facility to experiment with fulgurites formed in a wide range of materials, from dirt to glass marbles to plastic toys. Fulgurites have no known use value for human beings, and it seems that their lack of function produced a kind of experimental glee, as making man-made fulgurites seemed to embody "pure science," experimentation for its own sake. This sense of an activity undertaken "for its own sake" could not help but evoke the intellectual root of "art for its own sake" in Immanual Kant's argument about the purposive purposelessness of art; art and science, both, then, for their own sakes. But instead of high-minded rhetoric, the on-location snap-shots make this work look like a lot of fun and games.

3. It is common now for artists to travel to places other than where they live to make art works that in some way engage with, question, or bring attention to the particularity of a given place. Site-specific work, as this recent mode of artistic production has come to be called, often has an ambivalent relation to the place it is situated in. The demand to articulate the uniqueness of a given place is a burden, after all, especially to a person distinctly not from there. Where does one begin; with monuments, local histories,

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.*

community groups, regional museums? Problems of tourism, ethnography, and authenticity suffuse this type of work. Who speaks for a place, its people, its concerns, its local character and texture? When the Contemporary Art Museum of the University of South Florida in Tampa approached New York-based Allan McCollum to do a project in Tampa, they were explicit in their desire for a process as opposed to an end product, an engagement with the region of South Florida, as opposed to a more traditional "public art" project; in other words they wanted to engage McCollum in a site-specific project. *The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (With Supplemental Didactics)* is the result. But where exactly does its site-specificity lie? As an art object it bears the hallmark mass-repetition of McCollum's practice. It is not rooted in space, as it is possible to be transported to any locale. It doesn't narrate the story of a group of citizens who make South Florida "regional." In fact the project has a certain generic feel to it, as the cast fulgurites don't appear to register the particularity of a soil, for instance, and their presentation does not differ markedly from the presentation strategies used by McCollum in the past.

Central Florida is known as "The Lightning Capital of North America," receiving as it does more lightning than any other region on the continent. Nestled in between the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the cooler Atlantic Ocean, the lightning phenomenon of the region explains the location of the Lightning Research field at Camp Blanding. McCollum's engagement with the regional site was not predicated upon its inhabitants or culture, but rather took as its base a more traditional notion of the uniqueness of places — the landscape, the terrain, the weather.

Following his *Surrogate Paintings* from the late 1970s, Allan McCollum made two series of works entitled the *Plaster Surrogates* and the *Perfect Vehicles*. Cast from molds, these mass-produced objects were mostly installed and sold in groups, yet through seemingly infinite variations in color and size, each grouping was unique. The resolute emptiness of the *Surrogates'* black centers, the removal of any trace of the artist's hand or signature or

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

style, meant that the *Surrogates* appeared generic: they were signs for paintings. Likewise, the *Perfect Vehicles* were signs for objets d'art, generic ming vases, their implications of taste and class rendered simultaneously evident and moot.

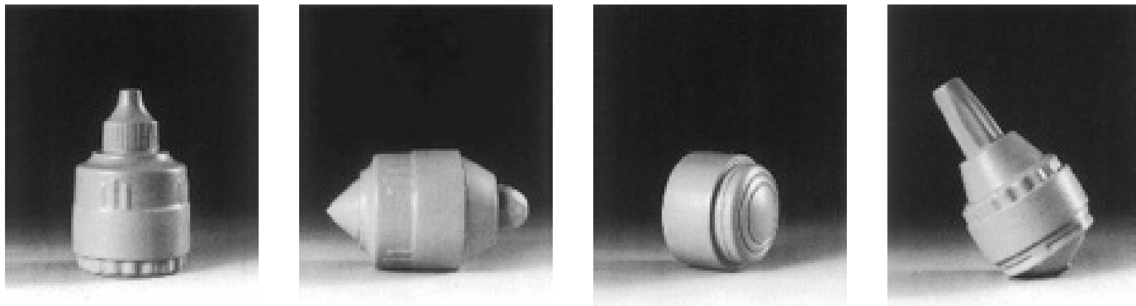
4. In the tradition of the Duchampian readymade, McCollum's work, like that of many other artists who came to prominence during the 1980s, pointed toward the role of the museum — particularly the modern art museum's desire for uniqueness and originality — and its power to designate what is and is not an art object. Installed in large groupings the *Surrogate Paintings* (series begun in 1978), the *Plaster Surrogates* (series begun in 1982) and the *Perfect Vehicles* (series begun in 1985) presented a mock museum emptied of "master–pieces," populated instead with a seem–ingly endless series of art objects — "one thing after another," in the words of sculptor Donald Judd. And McCollum's work had a strong visual and conceptual relation to Minimalism, in that it highlighted the logic of mass-production — repetition and the series — that had come to dominate our experience of the world. McCollum mirrored mass-production in the making of his work, turning the artist's studio into a miniature factory of sorts. This gesture made it explicit that art, through both its production and consumption, was inextricably tied to the economic structures of the day. And true again to the inheritance of both the readymade and Minimalism, McCollum's work drew equations between the world of the commodity and the realm of art, disallowing a straightforward distinction between the two.

Plaster Surrogates, 1982/84

While many artists of McCollum's generation focused on how the museum/gallery nexus defines and determines the meaning of art objects, they tended to neglect the space of the home, be it the home of the art collector or the "average" person. Along with Louise Lawler (with whom he occasionally collaborated) McCollum's work, however, continually referenced domestic space as well as the museum as one of the

Perfect Vehicles, 1988

major sites for art, a site integral to the creation and maintenance of art's meaning. So the *Surrogates'* salon-style hanging, and the accumulation of the *Perfect Vehicles,* also evoked the displays of pictures and collected objects (not necessarily considered Art) typically found in domestic space as opposed to the modernist museum. This mode of display, combined with the mass-produced generic quality of McCollum's work, poignantly evoked the ways in which we display objects in our homes as a means to display our very identity. This sense of how our identities are bound up with our objects was perhaps made clearer when McCollum enlarged the *Vehicles* to slightly larger than life-sized, making them monumental, and memorializing.



Allan McCollum. *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works,* details. 1987/88.

So much of what humans make, however, is destined for the trash heap of history, not to be enshrined in the museum, but instead relegated to the world of commodities and mass consumption. No work of McCollum's dealt with this better than *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works*. Here over ten thousand objects all the same color were displayed atop a long table. The objects were made from a series of repeating tops and bottoms combined according to a mathematical system that allowed for each object to be unique, individual. The patterns for these parts were taken from common household items such as bottle caps, paper weights, cat toys, shade pulls, etc. Here the logic of mass production is laid out on the table. In the face of the mass, the proliferation of the same, there grows a contrary desire for the unique, the individual. Art, in particular, is asked to carry the burden of this desire. A paradoxical situation developed: just as the historical juncture of the industrial revolution made art available to the masses through mass production and the development of photography, a desire was born for it to remain elite by being unique. In *Individual Works* the tension between the mass and the individual is made clear. Each object is unique, but they are all so very much the same. Their pleasure lies in the compare and contrast, in the proliferation of objects, as opposed to any singular one. *Individual Works* proposes that one's desire may be for the mass after all. The analog for this experience in everyday life is the pleasure and fatigue of shopping, the constant demand to pick something out of the great repeated mass of objects. More importantly, the demand is to pick something that exemplifies your uniqueness; a mass-produced object that "speaks to you," that "is" you, a mass-produced object that will help to create and maintain your sense of individuality.

The *Surrogates,* the *Perfect Vehicles,* and the *Individual Works* all revel in the category of the generic, which means that our ability to choose among them is thwarted. In the

realm of the generic a certain form of expertise is foiled, likewise within the confines of the generic the choice of the individual is rendered moot, for generic objects make our choices seem arbitrary. So choosing one *Surrogate* or one set of *Surrogates* makes the exercise of the deployment of taste (and taste is the crucial element at play whether one is shopping for art objects or mass-produced goods) into an elaborately staged game. (Do I want six or eight? How many can I afford? Pastels or neutral colors? etc.) So one effect of McCollum's work is to baffle our expectations at every turn. We want art to be singular, here we find it overwhelmingly repetitive; we want to be able to choose what we like best, here our ability to choose is rendered superfluous. McCollum's earlier work explored the burdens we place upon objects, the ways in which we press them into service to aid us in articulating our individual identities in a world dominated by the mass. These desires strike me as poignant and melancholic: poignant in large measure due to their ultimate futility; melancholic in their perpetual repetition.

Allan McCollum. *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works,* (detail) 1987/88. Enamel paint on Hydrocal.

5. What does repeating the formal structure of repetitive casting mean? Or, more to the point, how is it affected by various forms of content? Repetition has clearly been a structural condition of McCollum's work, and it points to the ways in which our daily lives are governed by the forces of repetition, be they mass production, shopping, or art making (or sleeping, eating, or doing the laundry). Now, in *The Event,* by focusing on a natural occurrence, a lightning strike, McCollum has shifted from the cultural arena to the natural world. This is part of a trend in his more recent work, as is evi–denced in his *Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah* (series begun in 1994). In this series McCollum made casts of the natural casts of imprints of dinosaur tracks found by coal miners in Utah. Here too, McCollum's version of specificity arises from the evidentiary capacity of a given terrain. And McCollum's shift from culture to nature has also meant a shift in focus from the art museum to the natural history museum, as a site of inquiry.

Allan McCollum. *Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah*. [Detail, 30" x 30" x 30"], 1994-95. Enamel paint on cast polymer-enhanced Hydrocal. Natural dinosaur track cast replicas produced in collaboration with the College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum, Price, Carbon County, Utah.

Instead of one object after another, we have one lightning strike after another. Nature too is filled with repetition (we need only think of the earth's repeated journey around the sun...the supreme repetition). But in nature repetition is often marked by a seemingly infinite number of differences. (No two snow flakes are alike.) In science, the "legitimator" and arbitrator of nature, however, predictability and repetition have a different valence than they do in art. A scientific experiment is valued in large measure on its ability to be repeated, whereas art has been routinely denigrated for its forays into

the realm of the copy. What is strikingly different in McCollum's latest project, however, is that all of the fulgurites are the same. Ten thousand, or so, of the same object. Oddly, this makes sense within the logic of McCollum's work, for as every lightning strike is unique, so every fulgurite is unique as well. If previously McCollum's objects were stand-ins for people, now they are stand-ins for natural events. The most familiar stand-in for singular events in nature is the fossil, a remnant, impression or trace of a living thing, preserved in a mineralized or petrified form. Like a fossil, fulgurites function as an indexical trace of a given event; each one is singular the way a thumbprint is singular. And, like fossils, fulgurites mark, in a relatively permanent fashion, the passage of time (or at least that something happened once), for they are the record of the singular event of a lightning strike.

McCollum's earlier work surmised that our response to the mass is to attempt desperately to individuate in the face of it. What then, this project asks, is the human response to the singular event? Particularly a singular natural event, one of significant drama or beauty? And once again, McCollum's mode of production points toward one of the answers. For one of the more significant site-specific aspects of the fulgurite project is that, instead of casting and fabricating these objects in his New York studio, McCollum worked with Sand Creations, a small souvenir factory in Central Florida.

We have all encountered the types of souvenirs made by Sand Creations — sand dollars, starfish, flamingos — mementos of vacations, little repositories of memory. One way to think about the souvenir is to see it as experience objectified, nature transformed into an object that can be placed at a remove or distance so that it might be able to be grasped. A fulgurite is like a souvenir made by nature; it's as if lightning objectifies itself, transforming itself from a sublime, instantaneous moment of electrical power, into a craggy misshapen glass tube, a trinket, a tchotchke of sorts. And true to the souvenir, the fulgurite does little either to encompass or to convey the awesome visual and sensorial impact of lightning.

Souvenirs, from the French verb to remember, are mnemonic devices. We buy them as a means to an end, as a way to fix a transitory experience, usually one that exceeds our ability to convey it to other people (the "you had to be there" effect). They offer us opportunities to tell a story, they provide us with moments when we are able to summon our pasts forward into the present; they permit the mingling of past and present. A form of evidence, proof that something has happened, the souvenir is an attempt to congeal experience into a thing, a thing to be carried, to be displayed, ultimately, perhaps, to be forgotten. In a culture dominated by tourism the souvenir acts as a way to "authenticate" our experience. Yet as it has become progressively harder to distinguish the specificity of places, as the experiences of travel and tourism have become homogenized, it may be that the souvenir is now asked to aid in the increasingly difficult project of differentiation. For this we need only look to all the airports' "regional" gift shops, replete as they are with the ubiquitous salt-water taffy, and t-shirts and refrigerator magnets that sport an endless substitution of place names.

In this struggle for differentiation the vast majority of souvenirs inhabit and produce a particular brand of kitsch. This is not surprising, given that their task is to contract an overwhelming experience of travel, love, another place, a natural site or event of great beauty into a thing, an object. But McCollum's fulgurites, if we see them as a form of souvenir, are resolutely not spectacular, not kitsch, not conventionally beautiful. If anything, they court the banal. Lying row after row on the table, small, gray, unspectacular, they seem stubborn in the way in which they deny the sublimity of their electrical progenitor. But McCollum's fulgurites also lie on the table, abjectly undifferentiated, looking like cast-offs, residues, by-products. In discussing this aspect of McCollum's work Rosalind Krauss has argued that undifferentiated repetition transforms "the space of difference into an undifferentiable entropic continuum." Entropic because without differences it is impossible to produce meaning, because without difference meaning congeals. The congealed nature of meaning is of course supported formally by McCollum's use of casting. And casting lends itself to repetition, a repetition so often experienced as banal. And this is supported again by the dejected quality of the fulgurites, their quality of extruded uselessness.

But all of McCollum's works have courted the banal, the common, the ordinary. Here, though, this use of the banal is more pointed, and it emerges as a strategy of sorts. In this work banality seems to be used as a way to guard against kitsch. Banality is used here, not as a way to empty the objects of their meaning, but rather as a way to reconfigure the grid upon whose coordinates meaning is drawn. The cast fulgurites refuse both the monumentality of the high art object and the glittering kitsch of the souvenir. Banality is offered as a means to ward off the sublime and a corresponding aesthetic tendency toward emotional kitsch. In the re-mapping of the grid, these cast fulgurites lack a certain legibility. They don't necessarily read as art objects (after all, they're the type of object you might normally find in a natural history museum), neither do they read as an accurate scientific representation of fulgurites, for real fulgurites are tubes, with only one possible closed end (a "terminal sack" in the language of fulgurite specialists). McCollum's experiment designed the fulgurites in such a way that they are closed on both ends. They relinquish the sublimity of lightning for the banal, and they eschew the scientifically accurate for the aesthetic choices of the artist. Hence, they rest uncomfortably somewhere between the art museum and the natural history museum, not quite adequate to the specifications or demands of either institution.

6. McCollum's move outside of the art museum permits us to see some of the extra-aesthetic ideas that have been at play throughout the body of his work. In the 1980s explorations of the copy, in both art and its attendant criticism, tended to presume (and champion) a copy without an original; moments when "the original and the copy [were] indistinguishable." *The Event*, however, suggests that copies without originals might not be the only, or even the most important problematic, but rather the more difficult and resonant question might be about the relation between history and objects. What happens when we ask objects to stand in for history, to convey the past, to tell our stories for us? What happens when our experiences are congealed into things; transformed into souvenirs, art objects, commodities? In the early decades of the twentieth century, when the logic of the mass-produced commodity consolidated its stronghold on the daily lives

and imaginations of citizens of the developed world, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin attempted to theorize the relations between the fossil and the commodity object. Both, he suggested were reified; experience, history, made thing-like. Yet, for Benjamin, the fossil offered a way to cleave open the commodity, to disarticulate its objectness, to render it both permeable to, and a repository of, history. If there was a correlation between the cultural and natural worlds, then perhaps it could be ascertained by thinking the dialectical relation between nature and history. If the fossil, via Darwin, proved that nature was not an undifferentiated, entropic, ahistorical continuum, so too, perhaps, the commodity could be seen as history congealed into a thing, but a thing that punctuated the "naturalness" of history. The task then, of the historian or the artist — of critical thought — was to de-objectify the commodity, to transform the commodity from the realm of stasis to the realm of process, to reinvest the thing with experience, with history.

7. McCollum's cast fulgurites are neither souvenirs nor fossils, but an attempt to register the relations between the two. That is, the souvenir and the fossil both provide evidence of transformations; one natural, the other cultural, they represent transformations of time, place, and experience into things, objects. So these objects also point to the extraordinary burdens we place upon our objects, and the myriad institutions we create to arbitrate those desires, among them the art museum, the natural history museum, the souvenir shop and the collector's home. This work, therefore, participates again in the poignant desire to have objects tell us who we are, poignant because the souvenir is destined to be forgotten, and actual fulgurites encountered in the field will often crumble and disintegrate upon contact. This is the paradox of McCollum's work, its use of repetitive casting as a formal device and banality as a strategy for creating meaning can be seen as an attempt to reanimate the (art, commodity, souvenir) object, to endow it with process, experience, history — to pluck it from the continuum of undifferentiated meaning. In *The Event* McCollum's not souvenirs/not art objects, his non-singular object for a singular event, show us that no amount of repetition can ever compensate for the singular. That the singular, in a world dominated by repetition, is always slightly beyond reach, just shy of being attainable — an impossible object.

Helen Molesworth
1998, New York City.