

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 quantity 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 seven 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://allanmccollum.net>

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://allanmccollum.net/amcimages/introduction.html>