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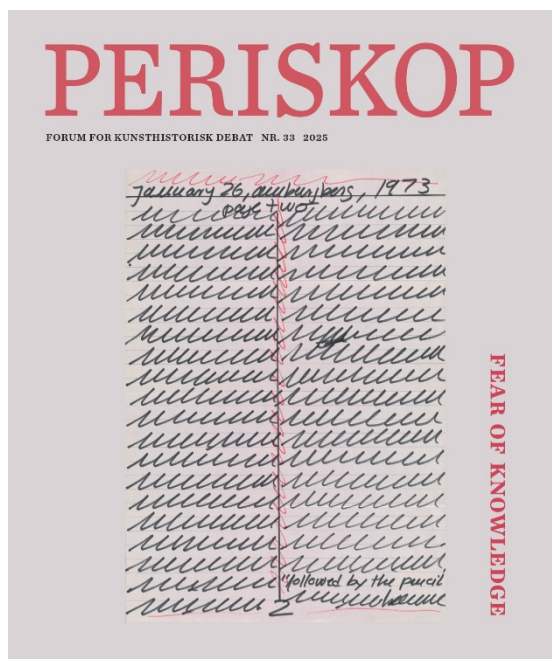
Titel: Moulds, Casts and Clichés. On Knowledge in Allan McCollum's Projects

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Moulds, Casts and Clichés

On Knowledge in Allan McCollum's Projects

Antiques – Always modern fakes.

(FLAUBERT 1881)

Allan McCollum, born in Los Angeles in 1944, is one of the most interesting of contemporary American artists. Key areas of his artistic exploration are the culture of mass production, with its concomitant indeterminate status of original and copy, the process of appropriation of art by institutions and the market, as well as the subordination of art and knowledge to systems of power and prestige. His career began in the late 1960s in the Californian art scene. In 1975 McCollum moved to New York, quickly becoming an important figure in American art.

In my text I would like to reflect on several projects by McCollum dating from the 1990s, which make direct reference to fossils and other products of nature – traces of past history and natural phenomena, objects of scientific enquiry that symbolise knowledge of the world we live in. In these projects McCollum created various objects, often multiplied, resembling artefacts displayed in museums, which represent knowledge of the past. I will explore the purpose behind producing these objects and examine why the artist adopts museum strategies to present and support specific scientific discourses. By analysing several projects and their technical execution, I will consider how McCollum's work engages with knowledge and the institutions that shape it. In addition to the literature on the artist's work, an important reference in my text will be Gustave Flaubert's novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, interpreted today as a bitter comedy revealing the

fictitious nature of the narrative that proposes the continuity and usefulness of knowledge, as well as examples of contemporary critical reflections on the institution of the museum and its practices.

As Andrea Fraser has stated, although McCollum produces his objects in many identical copies, he does not impose the conditions of industrial production on artistic practice, nor does he attempt to elevate these objects to the status of high art, in the manner that minimalist sculpture, from which his art genetically derives, used to do. The artist uses complex techniques of mass production to create copies of objects endowed with symbolic prestige, emblems of history and trophies of our scientific knowledge (Fraser 1986, 3-4). By his own admission, he was interested in all these projects on the thin, elusive boundary between the exceptional and the commonplace, in the ranking of objects, essentially reflecting hierarchical relationships between people, and which are the characteristics of objects that induce us to invest them with symbolic value. The artist also emphasised that one such key characteristic is their age, creating an aura of time around them and investing them with historical significance (Berman 2010, 34, 53).

McCollum's projects address issues concerning the institutional conditioning of art that were important to many Conceptual artists, including Daniel Buren and Michael Asher, both of whom had links to California, or Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers. The work of these artists was motivated by the need to unmask the false idealism of the 'mystical body of art' that is the modern museum (Foster 1987, 101), to critique exhibition conventions and the model developed by institutions for perpetuating an idealistic and mystical role for art (Buren), to demonstrate the limitations of the museum as a site of historical memory (Asher), and to reveal the dependence of these institutions on the concerns and corporations that sponsor them (Haacke).¹ A particularly relevant example in this context is Marcel Broodthaers's *Musée d'art moderne* project, undertaken between 1968 and 1975. As Benjamin Buchloh wrote, Broodthaers's fictional museum collections, created from a variety of artefacts, inscriptions and reproductions, refer to both the language and the architecture of an institution in which the discourse of art is hidebound – resistant to any change. Above all, however, Broodthaers's fictional museum collections simulate the predictable fate of objects in museums – their subjection to ideology and the fact that they are utilised in the creation of a variety of myths in official cultural circulation (Buchloh 1983, 55). Of course seriality, derived from minimalism, also plays a key role in McCollum's practice, demonstrating, as Rosalind Krauss has argued, not only that objects in a capitalist world are structurally inscribed within systems



of meaning and hierarchy, but simply that capitalism also generates our demand for cumulative possession – for the acquisition of things on an ever increasing scale (Krauss 1990, 7, 10).

A Hundred Dogs of Pompeii

In 1991 Allan McCollum carried out a project that resulted in the production of around a hundred copies of the plaster cast of the body of a dog killed in Pompeii during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE [1, 1a].² The figure of the animal, with the visible form of the collar around its neck, frozen in a dramatic, contorted pose,³ was reproduced, with the permission of the Museo Vesuviano in Pompei and in collaboration with the Studio Trisorio gallery in Naples and the New York based sculptor Nathaniel Lieb, in the form of circa 100 identical white copies, made of fibreglass reinforced with Hydrocal – plaster of Paris to which a small amount of Portland cement has been added (McCollum 1991). Photographs from various exhibitions, such as the 1993 Studio Trisorio gallery show, indicate the way the casts were presented: arranged in rows, one next to another, on grey cuboid pedestals.⁴ The project was accompanied

[1, 1a] Allan McCollum, *The Dog From Pompei*, 1990. Cast in in polymer-enhanced gypsum. Photo from an installation: Musée de Art Moderne de Lille Métropole, Villeneuve d'Ascq, France, 1998. The casts are taken from a mould which was made from a cast copy of the famous “chained dog” plaster cast in the collection of the Museo Vesuviano, in Pompei, Italy, with the museum's help, the help of Studio Trisorio in Naples, Italy, and permission from the Pompei Tourist Board, Pompei, Italy. Courtesy of Allan McCollum.

by the publication of a popular scientific study that describes the history of the annihilation of Pompeii, Herculaneum and Stabia, both 19th century and contemporary archaeological excavations, scientific research, as well as the circumstances of the project and the technique used to make the casts.

The manner in which the project is presented, and the fact that it is accompanied by a scientific study, places it at the very centre of scientific and museum discourse. The arrangement of the casts in the exhibition may, of course, resemble a minimalist series of identical objects, but at first glance it brings to mind a scientific exhibition and its educational function. The key point here is that McCollum presents casts, i.e. copies of original objects, even though they were not actually created from the original, since all that was left of the original body of the dog and the other victims of the catastrophe are voids in the Pompeian rock, painstakingly filled with plaster by archaeologists. McCollum has spoken of the specific status of the copy that he has managed to capture in his designs on several occasions. For example, in an interview with Thomas Lawson, he noted,

I think that part of the challenge we face in living with the copies we make ourselves is that we are experiencing them as alienating because they always seem to represent something else, they're never the thing itself. So to the degree to which we're enmeshed in relationships with our own copies in the world, we are constantly in a state of banishment, from the imaginary "source" of things – from the more "authentic" things that these copies seem to replace (*McCollum 1998*).

It should be noted here that McCollum's Pompeian project fits perfectly into the critical discourse regarding the institution of the museum and its claim to represent universal knowledge.⁵ As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill wrote in her book *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, insofar as the disciplinary technologies described by Foucault shaped modern schooling and prisons, the same processes can also be found in the way in which the museum functions (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 168). The museum, born in the era of the French Revolution and operating according to a specific agenda, produces regimes of truth, and during the Modern period the education provided by it comprised a new form of social governance, directed towards the collective good of the state rather than the benefit of the individual (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 172-175). The basis of this education was a belief in the continuity of history, ordering and classifying, and investing individual objects with a meaning which would remain permanently inscribed in the canon of national values (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 175, 183, 191).

Douglas Crimp assumed a more radical perspective in his 1980 essay with the telling title “On the Museum’s Ruins”. In his view, the notion of the museum is based upon the fiction that the collection of objects which it contains comprises a coherent whole. This fiction uses, among other things, the metonymic figure of the part for the whole, where one object explains an entire era or broad phenomenon; it also stems from the belief that ordering and classifying can lead to an understanding of the world and of the mechanisms that govern it. Moreover, the ordered discourse of the museum is based on a metaphysical conviction of the continuity of history, with its ‘meaning’ and source encoded in the artefacts it engenders (Crimp 1980, 49).

The concepts of ‘source’ and authenticity, referred to with scepticism by McCollum in the passage quoted above, constitute the foundation of the modern museum. They have been perceived as representing the purported continuity of history and its meaning, as recognised by Crimp. These are among the tools through which the museum mythologises history and nature. For, as McCollum himself pointed out, what we have at our disposal are mere representations (for example, copies of objects in the absence of their originals), while at the same time we have no actual experience of the past. The concepts of ‘source’ and ‘authenticity’ represent cultural memory, but this is not individual memory but an institutionalised discourse of history in which artefacts are the only trace of the past, a confirmation that it once took place. As McCollum noted in his conversation with Lawson, the most exquisite artefacts at our disposal, even if they evoke extraordinary emotions, will remain only representations of history. The dog of Pompeii is an object that embodies this sense of alienation from the past, despite the fact that what it does, after all, is precisely evoke the past (Lawson 1996). Above all, however, *The Dog from Pompei*, part of the critical discourse concerning the museum, problematises the rationality of an institution whose fundamental role is the collection of objects and their storage within a specific intellectual environment (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 4). The even rows of identical white casts raise the question of whether this rationality is indeed something obvious and self-explanatory, or whether, on the contrary, they demonstrate that any collection of objects, appropriately presented and arranged, can in fact claim the right to be rational.

Prehistory Inc.

In 1991, McCollum began a collaboration with the Section of Vertebrate Paleontology of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, in Pittsburgh, which resulted in him and his assistants making seven hundred and fifty casts of fossilised dino-



[2] Allan McCollum, *Collection of Two Hundred and Fifty Lost Objects*, 1991. Photo from an exhibition at the Mary Boone Gallery, in 2017. Cast in glass fibre reinforced concrete from rubber moulds taken of a selection of fossil dinosaur bones in the collection of the Vertebrate Paleontology Section of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, with the museum's help, and coated with many coats of enamel paint. Courtesy of Allan McCollum.

[3] Allan McCollum, *Collection of Two Hundred and Fifty Lost Objects*, 1991. View of the installation at the exhibition at the Mary Boone Gallery in 2017. Courtesy of Allan McCollum.

saur bones (including fifty series of fifteen types of bones) belonging to the museum's collection. The entire set, created as part of the *Lost Objects* project, consisted of fifteen different types of bones from five species of prehistoric animals. The casts were made of fibreglass-reinforced concrete and painted with enamel in various shades of earth colour, and each was also marked with a registration number. The project was presented as part of an installation at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, in 1991, and elsewhere; photographs from this exhibition show that the bone casts were arranged upon low pedestals in groups of from a dozen to over a hundred, filling the entire surface of the Hall of Sculpture at the Carnegie, reminiscent of archaeological sites displaying freshly excavated bones (Kalina 1992, 99) **[2, 3].**

A year earlier, while visiting the College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum in Price, Utah, the artist had discovered another collection of dinosaur-related fossils, which formed the starting point for his project *Natural Copies*, completed in 1994. These are natural casts of dinosaur feet from 65 million years ago, found from the 1920s onwards by miners working in coal mines in central Utah. Prehistoric animals living near rivers and marshes left deep footprints in the peat. Before these were obliterated, a local river flooded them, filling them with riparian sediment and thus preserving them. Over time the peat turned into coal and the sediments that filled the dinosaur footprints became



sandstone. When the coal was removed, archaeological excavations yielded fossilised three- and four-toed footprints of prehistoric reptiles (Parker, Rowley 1989, 362-363). The College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum (now called the Prehistoric Museum, USU-Eastern) agreed to loan McCollum fossils from its collection so that he could make casts of them in his New York studio. As a result, the *Natural Copies* project has produced more than three hundred copies of the fibreglass-reinforced Hydrocal dinosaur footprints, cast from forty-four moulds; all are painted in a variety of colours with enamel paint – both dark, in the shade of the natural fossil, and bright, recalling toys or school teaching aids [4].⁶

Photographs from exhibitions presenting *Natural Copies* (for example at the John Weber Gallery in New York in 1995) show the same display method that had been used in the *Lost Objects* project – the casts were arranged on low pedestals in even rows, in a manner that echoes the scientific methods of taxonomy and/

[4] Allan McCollum, *Natural Copies From the Coal Mines of Central Utah*, 1994/95.

Photo from an installation at Galerie Mitterrand, Paris, France, 2013. Enamel on casts made in polymer-reinforced gypsum. Produced with the help of the staff at the College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum, in Price, Utah. Courtesy of Allan McCollum.

[5] Allan McCollum, *The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with Supplemental Didactics)* 1997.

Photos from an exhibition of the project at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery New York, in 2000.

Over 10,000 casts of a single fulgurite, in epoxy mixed with zircon sand mined from the site of the lightning strike, where the artist in a sense triggered the lightning strike himself, using a rocket, with the help and collaboration of the International Lightning Research Center in Camp Blanding, Florida, and Sand Creations Manufacturing, in Sanford, Florida. The lightning was directed to hit a 44-gallon receptacle filled with sand, in order that a natural fulgurite would be created. The project was done in collaboration with the Museum of Science and Industry, and the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, in Tampa, Florida, and the University of Florida in the town of Gainesville. The project also included printing out over 13,000 booklets of 66 different writings by different writers on lightning and fulgurites. Courtesy of Allan McCollum.

or shop displays (see: Decter 1985, 104). These artist-made casts replicate traces from 65 million years ago, becoming a parody of museum artefacts, which have not only scientific value, but also an economic one. After all, the dinosaur footprints found by the Utah mining community had been sold by miners to the Prehistoric Museum and thus became part of its collection. The artist's project therefore also demonstrates the commercial aspect of museum practices, based on the tangible, economic value of the artefacts and their copies that were collected. It also indicates that the commercialisation of the knowledge over which the museum has custody is one of its main forms of distribution. Particularly telling in this context is a comment on McCollum's collaboration with the Prehistoric Museum at Price. In an interview conducted by the art critic Catherine Quéloz, the artist cited comments made by the museum's curator, who, while agreeing to lend him fossils of dinosaur footprints for a fee, stipulated that the museum could itself produce casts of them for sale in order to improve its financial condition. The curator also added that, in granting him permission to make the casts, she did not want his project to compete in any way with the economic interests of the institution she represented (Quéloz 1995, 67). This interaction between the artist and the museum curator seems to be a clear illustration of the fact that knowledge is understood and treated in museum practice as a commodity, and that museums, in order to survive economically, are obliged to adopt the ethos of corporate engagement, offering visitors their artefacts and the narratives accompanying them as products presented appropriately for consumption.

In the *Natural Copies* project, McCollum thus confronts the phenomenon of the museum industry, but also shows that the status of the objects he creates is extremely complex, uneasily suspended between the fields of science (scientific artefacts, teaching aids), art (surreal objects shaped by natural factors, in André Breton's terminology so-called *objets perturbés*, or simply Duchampian ready-mades), collecting (precious specimens, curiosities), and industry (mass-produced gadgets, toys). It could be said that collections of museum-scientific artefacts find themselves at the intersection of Foucauldian *epistemes*, unable to fit into any of them.

Sudden Illuminations

A particular type of collaboration by the artist with individuals and institutions representing scientific expertise was that exemplified by *The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with Supplemental Didactics)*, carried out over six weeks in the summer of 1997 [5]. Working with scientists from the Center for Lightning Research at Camp Blanding, near Starke, Florida, and with the



support of the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum and the Museum of Science and Industry at the University of South Florida, the artist made use of a procedure to trigger lightning bolts at Camp Blanding, which then struck the ground to form fulgurites – irregular, tubular formations created by melting quartz sand. So many storm clouds float over central Florida, located between the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the cooler Atlantic Ocean, that the peninsula has been dubbed ‘The Lightning Capital of North America’ (Molesworth 2000, 41-43). Lightning was triggered by small rockets fired into the storm clouds, to which a thin copper wire was attached, targeting the discharge at a specific location. The flashes of lightning directed through the wire hit pre-prepared containers filled with a suitable type of responsive material, melting it at almost 30,000 degrees Celsius and thus forming fulgurites or

sandy glass tubes, so-called ‘petrified lightnings’. Once the fulgurites had been extracted from the sand, McCollum, in collaboration with Sand Creations, a local company producing plastic souvenirs, made 10,000 casts of them from a compound that was a mixture of epoxy resin and zircon sand (Molesworth 2000, 41). The photographs documenting the exhibition at the Petzel Gallery in New York in 2000 show the now familiar method of presenting the objects – neatly arranged, one next to the other, although this time not on pedestals, but on tables covered with grey cloth.⁷ *The Event; Petrified Lightning from Central Florida* tells the story of the role of the museum object, this time embodying not – as in the previously discussed projects – a past time which is beyond our experience, but a sublime and powerful natural phenomenon. It was ultimately turned into a mass-produced memento by Sand Creations, alongside the starfish and flamingo figurines the company already made for tourists visiting the Florida beaches (Molesworth 2000, 48). But it is by means of this transformation that the artist manages to position himself in the space between museum and shop, between science and the sentimental souvenir industry, and to show the entanglements of scientific discourse with the commodity reality of capitalism. These small, identical, mass-produced ‘petrified lightnings’ made of plastic also show how easily the discourse that popularises scientific knowledge transforms sublime phenomena and processes that are difficult to verbalise (for example immense energy or the brightest light in nature) into something banal, an object of interest for collectors and tourists hungry for souvenirs of the places they have visited.

The specificity of McCollum’s project, however, directed as it was towards the process of atmospheric discharge, leads to another reflection, related to the impossibility of practical application of certain areas of knowledge. As mentioned by the artist himself, *The Event; Petrified Lightning from Central Florida* was inspired, among other things, by the scientific work of Martin Uman, of the University of Florida, one of the most eminent lightning researchers. This renowned scientist, who specialises in lightning location techniques among other subjects, and who collaborated with McCollum in the development of the lightning triggering system with the use of rockets, is the author of numerous scientific and popular science works dealing with atmospheric discharges. In his book *All About Lightning*, an excerpt of which is posted on McCollum’s website, we read that there is no effective means of harnessing the power of lightning, in addition to much information on the origin of lightning, and the process of its formation, and the electrical charge and voltage contained in a single discharge. There are two main reasons for this – firstly, lightning strikes a single location (such as a hypothetical tall tower constructed specially to capture it) with insuf-

ficient frequency to produce a significant amount of energy; and secondly, most of the energy that could be harnessed is converted into thunder, heat, light and radio waves. The only areas of research that so far have practical relevance are related to protection against lightning, not the exploitation of its energy potential. This is the case, for example, with measurements of the electromagnetic noise generated in the radio band by lightning, allowing a thunderstorm to be located for meteorological and aviation purposes (Uman 1986, 146).

Martin Uman is well aware of the large areas in which human knowledge is incomplete or insufficient to produce beneficial practical results. In an interview with both McCollum and Helen Molesworth, conducted a year after the project at Camp Blanding, he stated,

At any level when you try to understanding [sic] anything, it's clear we don't understand it well. At any level when you try an equation for something or draw a picture of it, there's another layer underneath, you never get there, all the atoms and whatever else are out into the cosmos and what was before that. I think the pure scientists know best that they are never going to understand what real means. It'll turn you into an artist, right? At least what you do is real. (Laughter) What you want to do, it's your reality (*McCollum, Molesworth 1998, 12*).

Consequently, applying the most radical interpretation, McCollum's project perhaps refers to the uselessness of our knowledge, which, despite advanced methods of acquisition and technological progress, contributes very little to the understanding of the world in which we live.

Literature

All of McCollum's projects are accompanied by scholarly and popular science studies, which he eventually compiled into his own online database called "Project Supplements". These are short essays, often illustrated, written by a variety of authors, which the artist came across in books and journals and then included in his projects in order to explain the processes of making the objects, the scientific research conducted around them and the various theories about them, as well as the history of museum display practices, the history of collecting specific artefacts, casting techniques, etc. Project supplements are an integral part of McCollum's endeavours and are presented during exhibitions, as well as also being available on the artist's website. They remind us that museums create their own discourse in the form of leaflets, brochures and catalogues, while at the same time introducing a postmodern added value, which consists of intermingling discourses and blurring

boundaries between different fields of knowledge, and which makes us seriously doubt its usefulness. For example, 'Reprints' – booklets reproduced as photocopies on coloured paper and placed in wooden trays alongside casts made as part of the *Natural Copies* project – present the history of dinosaurs, explain how their footprints were created and preserved in peat, the history of the discovery of footprints in Utah coal mines, the history of the creation of museum collections of them, and many other issues thematically linked to the project.⁸ It is significant that many of the texts present different views on specific issues and, from a scientific point of view, are mutually exclusive. The project supplements comprise didactic material, but are often full of discrepancies and contradictions, functioning as a polyphony of differing opinions and hypotheses.

In subsequent projects the artist seems to have been increasingly convinced of the key role played by the accompanying educational materials. For example, for the project *The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida*, the artist produced as many as 13,000 small brochures on 66 topics related to lightning and fulgurites. Their quantity, as MaryJo Marks wrote, dominated the adjacent casts (Marks 2012). There were examples of very diverse narratives, divided between science, statistics, biblical references, lived histories and mysticism, and this diversity is reflected in the titles of some of them. For example, the text "Tubes Formed by Lightning," part of Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*, published in 1839, included remarks on "a group of those vitrified, siliceous tubes, which are formed by lightning entering loose sand" found by the scientist in Uruguay by the Atlantic Ocean, near Maldonado (Darwin 1909, 70). In the essay "How Many People Are Killed by Lightning Each Year?," the author, Martin Uman once again, analyses the statistics of lightning injuries and deaths in the United States between 1950 and 1969, taking into account such factors as distance from open water and the type of activity being performed during lightning strikes. In "References to Lightning in the Holy Bible," the author, Daniel J. Robinson, quotes passages from the Old Testament books of Exodus, Samuel, Job, Psalms, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Nahum and Zechariah, as well as the New Testament Gospels of Matthew and Luke and the Book of Revelation, where thunder and lightning are mentioned. "Lightning Strike – My Story," by Elizabeth Anne, recounts the dramatic experiences of summer camp participants at The Green River Preserve in North Carolina (six boys and six girls) who were struck by lightning that hit the campground, from the perspective of one of the chaperones. "Sudden Illuminations, Like Lightning," on the other hand, is a short text by Wassily Kandinsky, from the collection *Letters and Reminiscences 1902-1914*, by Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter, in which the artist proclaimed "a great day of one of the revelations of this world," and declared

that “the interrelationships of these individual realms (art, nature, science, political forms, etc) were illumined as by a flash of lightning; they burst unexpected, frightening, and joyous out of the darkness.”⁹

It is hard not to notice that the project supplements, by acting as a narrative parergon for the objects McCollum produces, mimic the practice of museums and galleries of creating explanatory paratexts for their exhibitions. They show that the objects present in an institutionalised exhibition system always function within a discourse that gives them both meaning and a specific role to fulfil, although the number of texts and variety of narratives present in the project supplements invests them with parodic qualities. Like the objects themselves, they are representations of history, of past time and of phenomena and processes inaccessible to our direct experience. On the artist’s website, in an article dedicated to the project *The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida*, there is a quotation from his own statement, which reads:

[6] Allan McCollum, *Supplemental didactics*. Printed paper brochures, view of the installation at Petzel Gallery, New York, 2000. Courtesy of Allan McCollum.



It's hard to imagine how memory and meaning could exist without language – both are always only available through some sort of representation. I imagine that objects having meaning – artworks, keepsakes, people, stones – could not exist for us without their 'literature'. How could a bolt of lightning, lasting only for the tiniest fraction of a second, be understood otherwise? Events this brief will always evade our synapses – and their existence will always only exist after the fact, amongst one's representations.¹⁰

In an Epistemic Void

It appeared to them that this substance was filled at night with an icy coldness, carried away in an endless course towards a bottomless abyss, and with nothing around them but the Unseizable, the Immovable, the Eternal. This was too much for them, and they renounced it. And wishing for something less harsh, they bought the course of philosophy for the use of classes by M. Guesnier. (*Flaubert 1896, 315*)

In the essay "On the Museum's Ruins" quoted earlier, Douglas Crimp refers to two novels by Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874) and *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (1881), establishing a dialogue with Foucault's text "Fantasia of the Library" (1980) and Eugenio Donato's essay "The Museum's Furnace: Notes Toward a Contextual Reading of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*" (1979). Crucial to my conclusion in the context of Allan McCollum's work is the second of these works by Flaubert, the unfinished story of two Parisian copyist friends who share a compulsive thirst for knowledge.

Bouvard and Pécuchet is a story about the impossibility of acquiring the knowledge that, in an adequate manner, would explain various, if not all, aspects of the world around us. In the novel two Parisian civil servants who have moved in together, away from the city, in order to be able to explore knowledge in all possible fields, experience a profound disillusionment with the divergence between the disciplines of science. Bouvard and Pécuchet discover that there is no single coherent system of science, that the methods of classifying knowledge are questionable, and that the knowledge they have themselves acquired explains nothing, and certainly does not answer the fundamental questions about the origin of things and the cause of events. The encyclopaedic quantities of chemistry, physiology, anatomy, geology and archaeology that they feverishly absorb are merely abstract creations of the imagination. In Flaubert's novel, science, seen as a unified system for

explaining the world, falls to pieces – into incoherent unconnected fragments, and both protagonists “seem suspended in an epistemic void” (Wróbel 2022, 73).

As Crimp writes, the image of knowledge in Flaubert’s bitter comedy is essentially that of a museum, which is built on a foundation of faith in the continuity of history and on concepts such as ‘source’, ‘origin’, ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity,’ understood as being capable of explaining history, as well as its meaning and purpose (Crimp 1980, 47).

The few decades of the 19th century that the narrative of Flaubert’s novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet* covers is the period during which the Enlightenment institutions that governed power and knowledge were established, accumulating artefacts, ordering and prioritising them, giving them meaning and assigning them a specific role in history. It was also the era of the birth of liberalism in the public sphere, within which tolerance for different kinds of views was declared, although, as Frances Ferguson writes, this was often on account of powerlessness rather than broad-mindedness (2010, 791). A variety of narratives, claiming objectivity and, above all, truth (as opposed to literary fiction), became the primary vehicle for the institutionalisation and popularisation of knowledge. As the philosopher of science, George Henry Lewes, wrote in 1874, “science is penetrating everywhere, and slowly changing men’s conception of the world and of man’s destiny” (1).

As we have already seen, the two clerks who met one hot day on Boulevard Bourdon in Paris epitomise the utopianism of the Positivist project, and their experiences and frustration call into question the usefulness of encyclopaedias, dictionaries and lexicons. Their compulsive absorption of knowledge seems as automatic and devoid of critical reflection as the act of copying documents they had performed as clerks. Copying remains their model of operation, even when they abandon their clerical work (only to return to it eventually, as a result of frustration at the uselessness of the knowledge they had acquired). For them, copying consists of always engaging with what is already present as a fashionable discourse, romantic ideal or popularised scientific knowledge, and then repeating to themselves what they have read and learned. (O’Meara 2023, 429). The resulting accumulation of knowledge bears the characteristics of useless recycling, of which the *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, probably planned by Flaubert as an appendix to the novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet* and consisting of alphabetically ordered clichés popular in French society in the 19th century, may be a representation. A cliché is a matrix – a plate for reproducing images. A cliché is a tool for mechanical copying, like a mould for making casts.

It seems that the affinity between McCollum's work and Flaubert's novel lies precisely in the activity of copying and reproducing objects and discourses. By copying museum artefacts and various studies concerning them, the American artist expresses the same scepticism as the French novelist towards knowledge and its institutions, and towards the implicit and supposed universalism of this knowledge. The multiplied objects presented by him on pedestals appear to be neutral representations of history and scientific facts, but the discursive network of different kinds of theories and concepts reproduced through his project supplements suspends this neutrality, showing that the language used to express knowledge imbues it with emotions and desires, a sense of loss and inadequacy, longing and alienation. McCollum exposes these emotions, just as Flaubert allowed stereotypical beliefs and 'accepted ideas' masquerading as universal truths to resonate in his *Dictionary*. McCollum's projects, however, are not parodies, just as *Bouvard and Pécuchet* and the *Dictionary* are not purely parodies. McCollum's works are subversive, copying words and objects in order to express distrust of the purported universalism of knowledge and to show its fragmentation and its various dependencies within the world of modern capitalism. The dozens of identical copies of objects created by the artist and the accompanying project supplements, diverse in their content, also show that the objectivity and neutrality ascribed to knowledge and supported by museum practices is simply a fiction.

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the work of the contemporary American artist Allan McCollum. For several decades McCollum has been investigating the condition of artefacts and objects in culture and science, their semantic potential and the status of uniqueness imparted to them, for example, in the practices of collecting or the commonness achieved through the process of mass production. In projects carried out in the 1990s, such as *The Dog from Pompei*, *Lost Objects*, *Natural Copies* and *The Event*. Petrified Lightning from Central Florida, McCollum made casts of hundreds of objects in collaboration with archaeological and science museums, such as the body of a dog killed by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE, casts of dinosaur bones and their natural footprints, and thousands of casts of natural forms created by the melting of quartz sand after a lightning strike. In all these cases, the casts are presented in the galleries in even rows, arranged on tables, pedestals or on the floor, imitating museum objects while at the same time operating as a parody of the uniqueness of natural objects. They are always accompanied by 'literature' – scientific studies of their origin and history. The article refers to the way the objects are displayed and their scientific elaborations evokes the oppressive classification system of the museum, the role of the museum as an expression of the dominant ideology and the practice of museification as an element of the exercise of power, as indicated by Michel Foucault and followed by Douglas Crimp and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, among others.

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NOTES

- 1 Examples of the work of these artists, including the project *Musée d'art moderne* by Marcel Broodthaers, are discussed by Hal Foster in his book *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (1996, 20, 236, n. 29).
- 2 As a result of excavations undertaken between 1860 and 1875 for the first time ever in a systematic and scientific manner by a team led by Giuseppe Fiorelli, not only were many remains of victims of the cataclysm found, but also traces of bodies hidden under a 3,200-foot-long layer of calcified volcanic ash. Thanks to the method developed by Fiorelli, the moulds of bodies buried by ash that had decomposed but had left a void in the solidified rock were recovered in the form of plaster casts, which can be seen today in the Archaeological Park in Pompei.

- Starting in 1863, more than a hundred such casts were made. The remains of a dog were discovered in 1874 and, like those of many of the inhabitants killed in the catastrophe, a cast was made of the void which the dog had once occupied (Rowland 2014, 169-171).
- 3 As with the bodies of humans who lost their lives in the eruption, the dog's position was the result of muscle contractions in the high temperatures of the volcanic gases.
 - 4 Studio Trisorio website. Effective August 9, 2024. <https://www.studiotrisorio.com/exhibitions-blog/allan-mccollum-1>.
 - 5 Michel Foucault, for example, the pioneer in the analysis of modern institutions, recognised their role in his work on the archaeology of knowledge, which, in representing the rational and anthropocentric modern *episteme* and pursuing practices consistent with it, perpetuated a given political order and constituted an instrument of domination and control. Foucault's analyses of institutions which exercised disciplinary power in modern societies indicate that their effectiveness consisted not only in enforcing or prohibiting certain behaviours, but also in promoting particular beliefs and ways of thinking, i.e. in perpetuating knowledge useful to the exercise of power (Foucault 1995, 27-28).
 - 6 Allan McCollum, the artist's website. Accessed August 26, 2024. <http://allanmccollum.net/allanmcnyc/descriptions.html>.
 - 7 Petzel Gallery website. Accessed August 26, 2024. <https://www.petzel.com/exhibitions/allan-mccollum3>.
 - 8 Article "Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Eastern Utah", available on *Allan McCollum* – the artist's website. Accessed August 26, 2024. http://allanmccollum.net/supplements/Natural_Copies_Description.html.
 - 9 All texts, only a small portion of which are referenced here, are available on *Allan McCollum* – the artist's website. Accessed August 26, 2024. http://allanmccollum.net/supplements/supplement_samples.html.
 - 10 "The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with Supplemental Didactics)", available on *Allan McCollum* – the artist's website. Accessed August 26, 2024. <http://allanmccollum.net/amcnet2/album/fulguriteintroduction.html>.