

Allan McCollum

Excerpts from an Interview

LYNNE COOKE



Allan McCollum. *Lost Objects*. 1991. Installed at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

It has been on my mind to make fossils, to make casts of fossils, for a number of years. In the late seventies, when I began my *Surrogate Paintings*, I was more or less initiating a series of projects for myself, a series of projects in which I would work to reiterate and allude to all the different categories of objects that people collect and save—those objects people keep to memorialize certain meanings in their lives and so forth. I meant at first to consider *artworks* themselves, to focus on these as a kind of category of keepsake, and to perform a kind of reductive abstraction on all the different types of artworks: a reduction that alluded to the drama that is enacted by the making and owning of them. So I began to deliberately produce a kind of Painting, a kind of Sculpture, a kind of



*Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Section of Vertebrate Paleontology “Bone Room.”*

Photograph, a kind of Drawing, and so on. And while I've been doing this, as you know, I've been trying also to include within the logic of each series the logic of what we might say to be the artwork's *opposite*, the mass produced object.

But all along, I've been considering many other categories of collected object, too, and so fossils have been on my mind for a long while. They're not art objects at all, of course; they're collected and studied for scientific reasons. But they have a potency as symbols that seems to go far beyond this—entire museums are dedicated to their display and preservation. So while I've been wanting to do casts of

fossils for some time, I've never had access to any really dramatic examples.

So the idea's been on hold until now, until I was invited to participate in the *International* and found out that The Carnegie Museum of Art is connected to The Carnegie Museum of Natural History, which houses one of the most important collections of Jurassic dinosaur fossils in the world. I saw this connection as an opportunity to propose the project. It's been like a dream come true for me, so to speak.

Now, it is probably evident in my work that I suffer some preoccupation with absence, and with death, and with how the objects we produce and the objects we collect work to defer our knowledge of death, displace our fears of it, and so forth. All artists know how every symbolic object exists in some way to *re-present* that which is not present, that which is absent, that which is gone, that which is beyond recall. And I think that making as many molds and casts as I've made has worked symbolically for me as a kind of attempt to master my own apprehensions about death and absence. I've come to feel that a cast object quite automatically functions as a symbol for an absent original *model*, for instance, in a way that is especially visceral. Every cast re-creates an absent model, and every

cast is invested with the specific absence of its own “lost object,” so to speak, even as it serves as an uncanny recreation of that object. In this way, for me, producing a cast from a mold is always about *bringing something back*. And if you notice that we live in a physical environment made up almost completely of objects that progress from molds, dies, templates stamps, and other kinds of patterns and matrices, it’s easy to recognize the degree to which the world we create for ourselves is rooted in symbolic compensations for absence and loss, for death, and for so much else that’s painful beyond time and immediate apprehension. And death is always connected with the past in our imagination, in that they are both about that which can’t possibly be recovered, they are both only known by imagining. We live in time *only* through our representations.

So a fossilized dinosaur bone is such a dramatic symbol for me, a symbol of such enormous absence and loss, and such enormous time as to seem *beyond* time, beyond all possibility of any direct knowledge whatsoever. Not only does the fossil bone represent the loss of the original bone, and of the dinosaur itself and its species, but it also represents the loss of an entire so-called prehistoric world, which can never be recovered. An entire *world*. And yet, as virtual copies, as mineralized replacements of the original bones, as naturally produced replicas, so to speak, fossils work in the same way as memories and recollections do: as representations, as ghosts, that will remind us of this absence forever. They truly are, in a sense, *natural* signs, if such a thing could be said to exist, as if the Planet itself is remembering. The way we work to collect and study these “productions” of nature, these traces and replicas, symbolizes for me in a dramatic way all of those poignant, and sometimes desperate, attempts we make on a day-by-day basis to represent ourselves to ourselves, through our own recreations of our personal, absent pasts.

So, as an artist, as a maker of symbolic objects, I’m excited by the wealth of symbolism here. But more specifically, in terms of my own practice, I’m reproducing these fossils because I truly believe that cast reproductions can carry all of this symbolism along with them; the significance can’t be lost, or diminished, through copying. And I believe this is true because unlike virtually all other relics of the past, these types of fossils are yielded to us as naturally formed copies—not as originals—in the first place. They are valued *because* they are copies, wonderful copies, of objects from the past, which would otherwise be lost altogether. And because of this, I think that the copying can certainly be continued. Perhaps in this way, the significance of these relics can be extended as well, and to many more people.

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