

AN ARRAY OF 10 QUESTIONS ALTERNATING BETWEEN PROFOUND AND MUNDANE

FOR ALLAN MCCOLLUM
BY DANIEL LEFCOURT

DANIEL: Have you ever truly suffered?

ALLAN: That's a trick question. If I say no, than it makes me sound like I'm not an artist. If I say yes than it makes me sound very self indulgent and self-pitying. Do things bother me? YES. I think there is a constant difficulty when you've chosen to be a fine artist in trying to understand who you're working for. For me, nearly all of the opportunities to do what I want to do are managed by people from a different class, because I come from a lower working class background. I've never even understood, for instance, why an art collector wants to collect art. That, in itself, is a constant kind of torture. I don't know if that qualifies as suffering, but it's a constant feeling of being out of place... socially and professionally.

DANIEL: Do you use mac or windows?

ALLAN: Mac... as far as programming things—I don't know how to do that stuff. It's very primitive the way I use the computer, I don't even know the simplest things about scripts or whatever. The project I'm working on now, I'm doing it totally in the computer, so far. I've been working on it about a year, it's so unbelievably tedious. I'm developing a system that you can use to create a unique shape for everyone on the planet. There are 300 different shape parts that get put together in different ways. Each shape is made up of up to 6 parts and so you wind up with billions and billions and billions of different unique shapes. I don't have time to make them all—100 people wouldn't have time to do them all in their life span. So the way I'm doing it is so that the system can be farmed-out to anybody—to an elementary school teacher, a child, an art

collector—to people who aren't necessarily interested in computer programming. I want it so that it doesn't involve skill, just a very, very minimal familiarity with Microsoft Word and Adobe Illustrator. That's the main reason I'm doing it the way I'm doing it as opposed to, say, calling a computer consultant and saying how can I do it easier.

DANIEL: Why has giving become so important to you?

ALLAN: I think part of it is quite personal. For the "Visible Markers" project I was trying to make an object that had no meaning until it was given away. I was approached by Susan Inglett who was trying to get me to do a multiple for years—I had refused to do multiples, because then it would seem like all my works are "multiples" and they're really not—they're meant to be in a different category. Somehow she convinced me, and I said OK, but I'm not going to limit the edition, I hate limited editions. And I said to Susan in order to initiate this drama, we have to give things away, we have to say "Thanks." I had her make a list of 200 people she was thankful to, and I made a list of 200 people I was thankful to. We sent them all gift certificates, which they could bring into the gallery to get their free "Thanks" bar. Lots of people came to the opening! It totally worked! And what I hadn't guessed was that by doing that, a lot of the people that came turned around and bought more to give to their friends. I thought, "Oh—not only do I feel really good, but it was a great marketing strategy."

Part of this came out of the disillusionment I was feeling with wanting to make hundreds of objects and finding that this was working against me—art collectors and museums don't buy my work so often, because they think there's too much of it around, it goes against their concepts. So, I didn't give up the desire to make hundreds of objects, I just figured out a way to feel good about doing it.

DANIEL: Did you know your surrogate paintings are in the movie *American Psycho*?

ALLAN: The producer or someone called me and first they asked if I was an "eighties artist"... and I said well, "not really, I've been showing regularly since 1970, but, I guess that's how I've been described in some of the magazines." Then they asked if they could use my work in the movie, which was about the eighties. I told them that I couldn't lend them out because they're very fragile and break easily. And they said, "oh no, we don't want to borrow the work—we're going to have our props department recreate it!" I thought that was so funny, so I agreed

on the condition that I would get them after the movie was over. So now I have them and I want to get them shown somewhere.

DANIEL: How, if at all, do you judge the quality of your own work?

ALLAN: If I still enjoy looking at something after years have gone by, that's how I know it was successful. I know, that sounds simple minded. I love looking at the "Perfect Vehicles." I think they're beautiful. And these new shapes, I can't stop looking at them. It's like every one of them just seems so interesting, and exquisite.

DANIEL: What did you have for breakfast?

ALLAN: That's just the type of question you would ask. I didn't have breakfast.

DANIEL: Do you agree that your recent work is less a critique of existing conditions and more about providing a democratic alternative?

ALLAN: I don't feel I'm doing something so simple as trying to democratize art. There are many ways to do that. My work originally tried to dramatize the connection between the uniqueness of an art object in relation to the commonness of other objects. Then, once I had established this reading, my interests began to branch out. If the uniqueness of an art object can only be understood in relation to the commonness of other objects, then maybe we don't understand the art museum unless we understand the decorative arts museum, or the natural history museum, or the historical society museum.

The art world exists to exclude people. The artists I like most are trying to work against that. But it's a dilemma, you're always excluding somebody, no matter how you try. So, I don't know if my recent work is more democratic, but it definitely has led me to be more involved with people. I went into the "Imperial Valley" project feeling that I was not involved enough with people. It was a psychological issue with me. I was afraid of people and I realized that I had chosen a career that allowed me to be by myself. Yes, you meet people in the art world—but the art world is so sequestered. I really wanted to address that personally. For that project, I decided that I wanted to end up thanking as many people as possible. So that means I needed to get involved with as many people as possible. It was like psychological self-help. So when I got out of it I had a long list of people that I thanked. That experience was very positive for me.

DANIEL: How much do you pay for healthcare?

ALLAN: I have health insurance as an individual, I don't belong to a group, I know I should. It's become extremely expensive. It's driving me crazy. I don't know why, but it's over \$1000 a month. I don't know how this happened. I mean, I'm old, I'm now in my sixties... but \$1000 a month?

DANIEL: In an interview in 1985 you said "Whenever I walk into a museum, I am very much aware—and maybe this is increased because I have sometimes worked in museums for money, as a laborer—of the fact that I had nothing to do with choosing what got in there.... My awareness of what kind of people decide what goes into these shrines, and how we are expected to emulate their tastes in our own lives, and find personal meaning for ourselves in their souvenirs, causes a hostility to arise within me which becomes the major factor in my experience of being in a museum." Now that your work is in the collections of museums around the world, how do you feel when you walk into a museum?

ALLAN: I still feel this way. I see it like the noble burgher inviting the peasants into his home once a year because of his noblesse oblige: "Come see all this stuff that you may or may not understand and we'll help you learn." There's an arrogance to that.

But it is complicated, of course I feel sort of important when I see my work in a museum. And I'm happy to see my stuff in museums when it makes other people feel good.... My dentist, for instance... I traded him some "Plaster Surrogates" for dental work. He tells me that he and his kids went to the Museum of Modern Art and the kids were saying, "Hey Dad, that's the same things we have in our house! Wow!"

DANIEL: How do you make lightning strike?

ALLAN: Lightning strikes where there is a charge that develops in a cloud, and at the same time there's an opposite charge that develops on the ground. They measure charges on the ground all over the world. The engineer I was working with, Dr. Martin Uman, he was involved in developing a computer system that's connected to satellites, that can tell you everywhere in the country where lightning is striking—in real time. When they know that a cloud is about ready to strike over their research site, instead of waiting for it to strike, they send up a rocket. The lightning gets triggered and hits the rocket. They have these really long copper wires

attached to the rocket that unravel as the rocket goes up. The lightning will follow the path of the wire. But, what's really weird is that the wire, as it goes up, creates an ionic path... whatever that is. So, sometimes the lighting will follow wherever the wire was a few seconds before, instead of where it is at the time, because the wind will have moved it. Either way it will strike where the rocket was grounded. In my case, the wire went to this forty-four gallon bucket of sand that I'd set up, and created the petrified lightning. You would think that because these guys are scientists they would be jaded, or neutral about it, because they do this all the time, but when the lightning hits everybody goes "Oh Man! Fuck! Did you see that! WOAH!" ¶¶

