



Allan McCollum. Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah. 1995

## Formless: A User's Guide, [excerpt]

### A User's Guide to Entropy\*

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**X MARKS THE SPOT.** Sometime in 1965 Bruce Nauman made a plaster cast of the space under his chair. Perhaps it was late in the year, after Donald Judd's "Specific Objects" essay had appeared, or perhaps earlier, for example in February, in relation to Judd's review of Robert Morris's Green Gallery exhibition, or in October, after Barbara Rose had published "ABC Art," her own bid to theorize Minimalism.<sup>1</sup> In any event, Nauman's cast, taking the by-then recognizable shape of a Minimalist sculpture, whether

\* The main body for the catalogue for the exhibition *L'Informe: mode d'emploi* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996), from which this [excerpt] derives, is in dictionary form, divided roughly into four sections: Base Materialism; Horizontality; Pulse; and Entropy . . .

<sup>1</sup> Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 7 (1965); Judd, "Reviews," *Arts* (February 1965); Barbara Rose, "ABC Art," *Art in America* (October 1965).



Bruce Nauman. A cast of the space under my chair, 1965-68

by Morris or Tony Smith, or Judd himself, was more or less cubic, grayish in color, simple in texture . . . which made it no less the complete anti-Minimalist object.

Several years later, when the tide against Minimalism had turned, and the attack on Minimalism's industrial metaphor—its conviction in the well-built object, its display of rational tectonics and material strength—was in full swing, this reaction would move under the banner of "Anti-Form," which is to say a set of strategies to shatter the constructed object and disperse its fragments.<sup>2</sup> But Nauman's cast, which he repeated the following year in two other forays—*Shelf Sinking into the Wall with Copper-Painted Plaster Casts of the Spaces Underneath* (1966) and *Platform Made up of the Space*

*between Two Rectilinear Boxes on the Floor* (1966)—acting well before anti-form, does not take this route of explosion, or dismemberment, or dissemination. It does not open the closed form of the fabricated object to release its material components from the corset of their construction, to turn them over to the forces of nature—gravity, wind, erosion—which would give them quite another articulation, one cast in the shadow of natural processes of change. Rather, it takes the path of implosion or congealing, and the thing to which it submits this stranglehold of immobility is not matter, but what vehiculates and subtends it: space itself.

Nauman's attack, far more deadly than anti-form—because it is about a cooling from which nothing will be able to extricate itself in the guise of whatever articulation—is an attack made in the very name of death, or to use another term, entropy. And for this reason, the ambiguity that grips these residues of Nauman's casts of interstitial space, the sense, that is, that they are object-like, but that without the title attached to them like an absurd label, one has no idea of what they are, even of what general species of object they might belong to, seems particularly fitting. It is as though the congealing of space into this rigidly entropic condition also strips it of any means of being "like" anything. If the constant utilitarian character of Minimalist objects—they are "like" boxes, benches, portals, etc.—or the more evocative turn of process works, continued to operate along the condition of form, which is that, having an identity, it be meaningful, it is the ultimate character of entropy, Nauman's casts force us to realize, that it congeal the possibilities of meaning as well. Which is to say that this conception of entropy, as a force that sucks out all the intervals between points of space, not only understands the "Brownian movement" of molecular agitation as slowed to a stop, but also imagines the eradication of those distances that regulate the grid of oppositions, or differences, necessary to the production of meaning.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Morris, "Anti-Form," *Artforum*, vol. 6 (April 1968), pp. 33-35; reprinted in *Continuous Project, Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

Although he never, himself, pushed his own concerns with entropy into the actual making of casts, Robert Smithson had always considered casting as a way of theorizing entropy, since he had written about the earth's crust as itself a giant cast, the testimony to wave after wave of cataclysmic forces compressing and congealing life and all the spatial intervals necessary to sustain it. Quoting Darwin's remark "Nothing can appear more lifeless than the chaos of rocks," Smithson treasured the geological record as a "landslide of maps," the charts and texts of the inexorable process of cooling and death.<sup>3</sup> For each rock, each lithic band is the evidence of whole forests, whole species that have decayed—"dying by the millions"—and under the pressure of this process have become a form of frozen eternity. In a movingly poetic text, "Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction," he attempted to prize apart these layers of compression, alternating blocks of writing with strips of photographs showing the fossil record trapped within the magma of the rock, as the demonstrative presentation of wave after wave—Cambrian, Silurian, Devonian, Permian, Triassic, Jurassic—of wreckage.

Smithson realized, of course, that the very act of textualizing this material was one of building spatiality back into it, of producing those oppositions and differences necessary to open the surface to the intelligibility of reading and the organization of form. He quoted the paleontologist Edwin Colbert saying: "Unless the information gained from the collecting and preparing of fossils is made available through the printed page, assemblage specimens is [*sic*] essentially a pile of meaningless junk." It was the conflict between the "junk" and the "text" that seemed to fascinate him.

If fossils are nature's form of casting, the turn taken in art world concerns in the 1970s and '80s led away from Smithson's attention to the natural, by moving deeper into the terrain of industrial culture that Minimalism had been exploring from the outset,



Allan McCollum. *Natural Copy from the Coal Mines of Central Utah, 1995*



Pablo Picasso. *Moulage de papier froissé, 1944*

<sup>3</sup>. Smithson, *Writings*, pp. 75-77.

although by now this had become a kind of Minimalism crossed with Pop art. For the concern was no longer with the tectonics of industrial production so much as with its logic, which is that of serialization, the multiple, and replication. And although casting is a paradigm of any process of reduplication, of spinning out masses of copies from a single matrix or mold, it was the photographic rather than the cast form of the duplicate that increasingly took hold of the art world's imagination. For the photograph brought with it the simulacral notion of the mirage, of a reality that had been engulfed within its own technology of imitation, a fall into a hall of mirrors, a disappearance into a labyrinth in which original and copy are indistinguishable. The photograph seemed capable of raising the problem of reality in the grip of what Baudrillard would call "the mirror of production" in a way that the mere cast could not.

Itself emerging from this culture of the multiple, Allan McCollum's work was, however, not to move along this photographic construal of simulacra. Rather, it was to cycle back to the issue of casting by entering into a relation with the very most classical enunciation of the matrix or original as a kind of ontological ideal from which all existent objects are modeled. This *eidōs*, or form, could also be thought of as the genus that contains within itself—as a kind of ideal repertory—the "footprint" for all actualization of its form of life into species.

Proceeding, then, to an exploration of the generic, McCollum's work became an ironic rewriting of modernist art's own attempts to reduce individual media—painting, sculpture, photography, etc.—to their very essence as genres, or aesthetic norms. However, anti-formal to its very marrow, McCollum's reduction was not to an abstract condition—flatness, say, or opticality—but to a generic type ("painting" as a blank canvas with a frame around it; "sculpture" as a kitsch bauble, a shape meant for mass production) that could serve as the model from which to generate potentially endless numbers of copies.

It was thus the industrialization of the *eidōs* that interested him, as he struck a kind of blow against the reproductive as natural or ideal (the constant reclaiming of species "identity") and presented it instead as a force of proliferation of the same, a kind of silting up of the space of difference into an undifferentiable, entropic continuum. In this sense, proliferation, as the endlessly compulsive spinning out of "different" examples, came full circle in the 1980s to join hands with the 1960s effacement of difference, as McCollum's nightmare of mass production began to reinvent Smithson's fantasy of mass extinction, thus bringing about a convergence of the two over the importance of the fossil record.

If the fossil as the "natural copy" fascinates McCollum, this is because it brings the generic—in the form of the industrialization of *eidōs*—into collision with the biological genus, realized through the fossil in the form of its own genetic eradication, marked only by the mold of one or more of its members left in passing. The production of dinosaur tracks is a particularly interesting example of the natural cast, one that had fascinated Smithson as well, at the time of his "Geophotographic Fiction."<sup>4</sup> Such tracks are made by

<sup>4</sup> Not only does Smithson reproduce a photograph of dinosaur tracks (found on the Connecticut River in Massachusetts) in his "Geophotographic" text (ibid., p. 129), but he also made a work related to the idea of footprints, by photographing an array of dog tracks around a puddle of water in Bergen Hill, New Jersey. Called *Dog Tracks* (1969), the paw prints, with their overlapping and indeterminacy, symbolized for him the way his Sites constituted "open sequences." See Hobbes, *Robert Smithson*, pp. 117-19.



Allan McCollum. *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works [detail], 1987/88. Enamel on cast Hydrocal. 2" diameter, lengths variable, each unique.*

the heavy animal's having walked through mud-covered peat bogs, leaving large negative depressions that were filled in by the mud, which eventually hardened into solid rock "casts" of the footprints while the peat around these tracks reduced into coal. In the Utah sites these were revealed as the coal was removed from around them, leaving the footprints to protrude from the roof of the mine.

The specificity of these casts as evidence, their testimony to the passage at a particular time and place of the movement of a now-vanished animal, would seem, of course, to give them a particularity that is far away from McCollum's earlier practice of the cast as a form of the "generic": that endlessly proliferating series of increasingly meaningless signs. Working against the grain of the multiple, these casts would seem instead

to have the character of something absolutely unique, something that had existed in a specific place, and to which this object mutely points: *X Marks the Spot*, as the title of a book on criminal deaths, reviewed briefly by Bataille,<sup>5</sup> put it—the trace of an utterly contingent "this."

If, however, McCollum's impulse is to treat these "trace fossil" footprints as though they were readymades, and to parade them both as burgeoning sets of multiples and as the gaudily colored items from the most kitsch of souvenir shops—thus industrializing not just the generic but also the genetic—this is not simply from an irreverence for the idea of primal life. It is, rather, to go back to the kind of content that Nauman had built into his casts of particular spaces—which understood the very specificity of the trace itself (the "this") as a form of entropy, a congealing of the paradigm. Once more it is to join the proliferation enabled by the mold or matrix to the X that congeals the very possibility of space even as it marks the spot.

<sup>5</sup>. Bataille, "X Marks the Spot," *Documents* 8 (1930), p. 437.