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Allan McCollum's One-of-a-Kind Shapes in 'For the Millions/Just for You'

“PEOPLE accuse me of making fun of the art world, of cynically satirizing it,” the artist Allan McCollum [once said](#). “But I only feel I’m trying to dramatize it, to reduce it to its most simple codes.” During an era when the contemporary art world can feel like a planet for the 1 percent — soaring auction prices, private museums, new international art fairs by the week — the codes seem ever more exclusive and cryptic. Yet at the same time, entry to one of the largest contemporary-art collections anywhere in the world — the galleries of New York City — is free. To enjoy it, you don’t need much more than a good pair of walking shoes, a list of addresses and an open mind.

In this spirit, The New York Times recently asked Mr. McCollum, a pioneering Conceptual artist, to create a work specifically for a newspaper page, that great democratic leveler and, these days, an [endangered species](#). For decades, Mr. McCollum, 70, has operated in the territory between mass production and the work of art as a unique, exalted object. He is probably best known for his “[Surrogate Paintings](#),” a series he began in 1978, consisting of constructed objects that resemble framed artworks, sized and colored with minimal variations so that thousands of unique surrogates can be made and grouped together on walls, salon-style — an image of painting that turns out not to be painting, exactly.

In 2005, he began his most ambitious foray into the assembly-lining of originality, [“The Shapes Project,”](#) a software system that allows him to hand-design 31 billion two-dimensional shapes, no two alike — far more than enough so that every person projected to be on the planet by the middle of this century could have one of his or her own, as a print, for example, or a sculptural object. “I also sometimes imagine a unique shape coming up every time someone goes to Google, or selling them on Amazon for 95 cents each,” said Mr. McCollum, who began his career in Los Angeles in the 1960s and has worked in New York since the 1970s, where he is represented by the [Petzel Gallery](#).

“Most of what I grew up with were things that were mass produced, and I’ve always felt that what’s missing in the fine-art world is a sense of the excitement of mass production,” he said, describing a “particular kind of pleasure, like a chorus singing, and the thought that everyone could have something.”

There is no way he can make more than a tiny fraction of the possible shapes by himself, during his lifetime. So he has enlisted [help](#) and hopes others will continue the project after his death. For *The Times*, he departed slightly from the master plan. “Ideally, every newspaper would be printed with a different unique shape on the page,” he said, “but I guess that would require printing technology that no one has.”

Instead, he created 108 unique shapes — shadowed and colored green — that he felt worked well in a grid, on a broadsheet page that can be cut out and saved, or in a digital image that can be used any number of ways. The project draws on a rich history of Conceptual artists considering the pages of publications to be exhibition space just as good, or sometimes better, than the white cube. (Dan Graham, who did such pieces beginning in the 1960s, has [described it](#) as “looking for a hole inside magazine culture”

where he could show his work to the masses.)

Mr. McCollum, of his piece — “For the Millions/Just for You (One Hundred and Eight Unique Shapes Out of Over Thirty-One Billion)” — said: “It’s something I’m still thinking through, frankly. But having it in a newspaper where it might be seen by hundreds of thousands of people means that more people will be aware of it, and maybe they’ll become involved and help.”



The artist Allan McCollum, in his Brooklyn studio, uses methods of mass production to create unique objects. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times