Michael Tarantino

DETAILS (I)

Michael Tarantino: Perhaps a good place to start would be with "Details from an Imaginary Universe" [1973]. Two questions: firstly, where did the title come from? Secondly, were you conscious of the difference between the notion of a quantifiable universe and at the same time, that which is imagined, that which is variable?

Matt Mullican: The "Details from an Imaginary Universe" are details of places that exist, they don't exist in themselves. If you look at the pictures, there's a bus, a car, a plant. There's nothing in there that doesn't really exist in some approximate form. It's only the physical object that doesn't exist—that's the interesting thing for me. You can say, "Yes, buses look like this." But this is a fictional bus, not a real bus. At the time, I was interested in the relationship between the fictional and the imaginary. I had "Details from a Fictional Reality" [1973] and "Details from an Imaginary Universe." I made up the titles as a way of trying to define what I was doing. The first image was a detail of a car that didn't exist. The very word "detail" indicates a context beyond itself—so a detail of a fiction just doesn't "go." It's like a Catch-22. It doesn't work in terms of logic, but emotionally, it works very well because we're constantly doing this. Our understanding of the world is through our imagination. I can imagine what's happening in that house across the street. I probably do that without even knowing it. I am making great assumptions about where I am now, talking to you, which may be real or not real.

MT: Just the use of the term "details" opens up a whole other space. It's one thing if you talk about an "imaginary universe," but when you talk about a "detail" of it, it becomes very filmic. It can be compared to the notion of a close-up. When you're watching a film a close-up is also a way of bringing people deeper into someone's imagination. You see a scene unfold on a street, for instance, and then you cut to a shot of a tire. You will immediately place that tire in the context of that street, no matter what kind of leap of the imagination you might have to take.

MM: Because it's part of a sentence, and my sentence was all details on that sheet of paper. In film space, you would connect them and say, "Not only is there a connection, there's someone's life here and all these details are part of it." What I was doing was an attempt to remove the character completely and just look, in the way I would look at what's around me.

MT: Were you thinking about cosmologies at the time?

MM: The word cosmology really didn't enter the work until a year later [1974]. I was making up a cosmology. I had a fictional studio and I put in it objects that didn't exist, objects that did, objects from my dreams. So this space could hold these different kinds of ideas, objects. And so that's how I jumped into the context of the cosmology. You just trust that there's a terrain and that these things all relate to something. And I figured out that they really related to something. Intuitively I had the assumption that there was a relationship between the cosmology and the "Details from an Imaginary Universe." I didn't make those relationships up.

MT: What about the relationship between the subjective and the objective? Was that an important part of the work? What is the role of the object in an imaginary universe?

MM: I wanted to title this show and this book "More Details from an Imaginary Universe," because my work is all about that. Everything I do has to do with the interpretative world. It really is a very fabricated one. I'm very much interested in not what we see but what we think we see, how we feel we think we see, what it is. But to return to your question about the object: I was very aware of conceptual and minimal art before I had this insight into the details. Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, Carl Andre, to me these people were comparable to the impressionists. I thought they were doing something similar, breaking down the world, they were doing it conceptually. When we talk about objects, I just have to think about the objects I was living with: table, couch, watch, shoeslaces. They're tiny symbols, not big ones, but they collectively create the context, the real thing. As you say, in a film, the fact that you go to that car tire makes the film real: there's a ground, it's wet, and the details are almost like the physical world.

At the time, I was taking photographs of objects around me. I went to Oklahoma and I took photographs of houses inside and out: inside the refrigerator, underneath the bed, exploring the whole thing. I wanted a middle-of-the-road place. You could get more into the anonymous details. What I was doing wasn't about making sculpture or a strategy of art. It was about trying to figure out what life was.

THE FICTION OF THE IMAGINATION

MT: That's what I was getting at when I asked about the object. Even when there is a more up-front relationship to objects in your work, such as the work with the glass balls or the generators, the sculptural reference is not one that immediately comes to mind.

MM: The first references are, hopefully, to the immediate context of the world in general and then to the more rarefied context of contemporary art. At that time, I played with conceptual and minimalist work, mostly with allegorizing details, like Death's cape being rolled up, being burned and splattered with water like those adjectives that Richard Serra used: folded, bent. They're about manipulating the material and I was making that material the opposite, turning it into this very unnatural allegory, where it becomes symbolically charged. I made a point of projecting large abstractions, like life and death. There's a Mel Bochner piece, "Theory of Sculpture #1 (Leveling)" [1970], with some wood stuffed under a pipe and I thought, "What if that is a pillow?" I put a pillow underneath a piece of wood and it became the "Sleeping Child" [1973], which I have done many times since. It's still an important piece for me. Bochner was interpreting it mathematically, lifting it up five degrees.
That somehow is less fictional for most people than inserting the pillow and calling it a person. Somehow it's more real, and yet it's a very abstract system. The fiction of that is one that we accept as real, but the fiction of the imagination is another that we don't accept as real.

**ENTERING THE PICTURE**

MT: Two of the terms which have already come up in this conversation are "fiction" and "imaginary." Could you relate those concerns with your interest in "entering the picture" and hypnosis?

MM: That was a performance ["Entering the Picture: Entrance to Hell," Artists Space, New York, 1976]. At the time, I wanted to show that stick figures live lives, treating a fantasy as a reality. When I'm looking at you, I see your picture through my eyes. And I understand you are living, you are a real person. But if I see a picture of you, there is a part of me that will project life into you. Of course, there are other parts of what I'm looking at, and I'll say, "No, you're not real." But it's the whole play of something being real or not real. How do we define reality, virtual reality, virtual space, the Internet, when the media now rivals, at least conceptually, reality? People are participating together socially, in a very abstract sense. Or supposedly in an abstract sense. So "Entering the Picture" is, in a way, just showing that up. I'm going into the imagination in a kind of analytical way, which makes it a little more possible for some people to see it. Those early performances were a form of self-hypnosis, like entering the picture.

MT: Like reading a book.

MM: All media do it. Every time you read something symbolically, writing, talking, film, TV, you are dealing with another world, an imaginary world.

MT: In terms of film, of course, it's often the way that we measure the success of a film. For a lot of critics, if you don't "go into the picture" then the film is not successful.

MM: Which I disagree with, because there's the filmmaker who wants you to do both. The filmmaker who wants you to say, "Yes, it's a film," and then to wake up in the theatre and think, "Where am I?" and then go back in again. Like Godard, who did all the time. It's a matter of trying to articulate the different sides of understanding.

**STICK FIGURES AND COMIC STRIPS: PROJECTIONS**

MT: Let's go back a bit. I'm interested in talking about the relationship between [the fictional character] Glen, the stick figure, and the comic strip figures. How do you see the relationship between them?

MM: They all demonstrate this kind of projection. For the Glen figure, there are no eyes, no nose, no clothing, but there's a personality there, a body. And yet I talk of all the details, like brushing his teeth. There he is, but you don't see the teeth, you don't see the toothbrush. You are projecting those things when you have a comic strip guy doing the same thing. But they're represented so you're not aware of it. But when they're taken away, your own projection is more obvious. So, Glen is just more real than the comic strip because it demonstrates what we're doing already, which is to build the life of the picture.

MT: Glen is more real, but at the same time it calls for a much more potent use of our imagination, in terms of reading those images.

MM: And it gets it. It's the transference from a visual image to a more literary one. If a comic strip character is dreaming, you don't see that. You need a thought bubble over his head. The words are still important with the comic strip. It's funny because in a way, the comic strip takes the toothbrush for granted. That's a given, although what I'm interested in is the toothbrush. So there are different levels. I did a performance when I laid out a photograph of someone, and then a comic strip, a stick figure framed, a stick figure unframed, a sign-symbol, a head and body, a sign-symbol broken up and finally just material. Then I'd prick each image with a pin and ask which image feels the most pain? Most people said the unframed stick figure. The stick figure still represents an individual, but it's abstract and we're projecting things into it.

MT: So as you empty it out of details, it makes it possible for us to fill in the details.

MM: Right, and then at one point, the stature of the symbol then becomes language, in the most obvious sense, and we read it without asking questions about it. I'm referring to that kind of projection and trying to narrow down the mechanics of how that occurs.

**I AM A MODEL OF ME: STRIPPING DOWN THROUGH HYPNOSIS**

MT: We've talked about hypnosis and the relationship between the subjective and objective, how objects relate to this notion of the subjective. Do you think the hypnosis performances are a way of mediating between subjective and objective states? Do you see it as a kind of tool or program, which can approximate those two states?

MM: The only reason it could be used as a program or tool is because it's slightly artificial. It's set up more. You have a hypnotist, he tells you things, you're not psyching yourself up to do this thing. It's not abstract, because it becomes subjective when you have the hypnotist there to tell you. So in a way, it does become a tool in defining those points, those references. I'm a thirty-year-old hypnotized to be a five-year-old, the two, in a way, are having a conversation. They're both aware of the situation and of each other and either one can affect the other. There's a photograph of me drawing as a five-year-old. When you see the photo, you assume it's a five-year-old. It doesn't look like me, because the body was that of a child. All the parts that I wasn't thinking of were reacting automatically as the child. Whereas my brain was the child and me, so it's a funny relationship, being that it is in front of an audience a lot of the time.

The most embarrassing thing I do as an artist is the hypnosis performance, for most people. I've stripped away the context and somehow the person being portrayed is raw. I've not stripped my
clothing: I’ve stripped down the context, the room, and the symbols that surround all the meaning that we create for ourselves.

MT: It strips down the audience as well, because they’re more aware of being in the picture.

MM: Yes, and of not being in the picture as well. There’s a kind of flipping back and forth, and I ride with it because I’m always in between. You’re never in the trance at the same level at any given time. You go up and down.

I just gave a lecture at the Lenbachhaus in Munich and I talked about hypnosis. At the beginning, I was talking about the book we had just produced for the exhibition, using a blackboard to illustrate it; the second part was a slide show, the slides illustrated the stories I told; the third part was videos having to do with hypnosis and virtual environments. At the end, I am under hypnosis, but on video. At the beginning of the lecture, the audience thinks I’m in a trance because I’m reconstructing something one to one, the ideas are coming from me, and then the ideas become more and more solid until they become me. I am a model of me. I’m no longer there. When we think of stripping ourselves down, we always think of our clothing, but actually it’s our beliefs: it’s how we feel and act.

MT: It’s like the experience of feeling that we’ve gotten “too close” to a person or a situation. Things are so stripped down, that we are brought to a level where we feel uncomfortable with it. With you, the hypnosis performances, and the fact that people see your lectures as performances, can give one the sense of “how deep into this picture do I want to go?”

IT STARTS WITH ARCHITECTURE

MT: Let’s talk about the different ways of structuring or ordering your work. A working title for this exhibition was “World/Information/Architecture.” Could you talk about why you see those three terms as particularly important?

MM: It starts with the word “architecture.” I’ve been included in quite a few exhibitions having to do with architecture and participated in panels with architects. But I’m not an architect, I’ve always placed architecture inside a virtual city. I represent buildings and urban spaces so there’s a presumption. More recently, I’ve been thinking about the architecture of information, like the glass balls, where the city is turned in on itself. It is no longer a city: it’s a chart, and my city is a map. It’s a city as a kind of interface for transferring different kinds of information. And that was the starting point for me saying not only is the city architecture, but so is the cosmology. There’s an architecture to the way I’ve organized all those figures. The drawing of the person, the stick figure, the symbol: it’s all architecture, because it puts things in relationship to each other. I would include my cosmology and my charts in the architecture section. It’s interesting to me because I had always separated those things from the representation of buildings.

The word “world” is so broad. For me there are two key pieces in the “World,” one is photography and film of the world, the other is hypnosis, because that’s about the experience of being in the world.

That’s actually closer to the photograph, because the photograph is a symbol and so is the hypnosis. The latter is less obvious as a symbol: it’s a demonstration of an experience. My understanding of the world is as an experience, an experience that is fed via symbols. The experience of the world is the experience of being in this chair talking to you in this room. That’s the world. And the hypnosis is really the only work that I do that demonstrates that, independent of the symbol of you sitting there, and me lifting up and separating the different parts of the picture.

“Impersonation” is the stuff that’s left over. It could be considered the photograph or language. The difference between “World” and “Information” is the difference between the experience of something and the reading of something. Although one is experiencing reading and one is reading an experience.

MT: So is “Information” a way of reading, of translating, the “World?”

MM: Well, there’s just the prefix “trans.” I’m interested in translating, transforming. Another interesting thing is the generator and the transference of energies. I was always very much interested in the relationship between the generator, information and the cosmologies, as ways of transferring information and experience. World, Information and Architecture are so basic. Architecture less so, but it’s really to represent the architecture, in a funny way, as a way of doing something, a way of depicting something. Because, like art, you can apply architecture to everything. The art of doing something and the architecture of how it’s built, or made, or done.

MT: In your representations of the city, one notices the distinct absence of people. I was wondering if your use of signs and symbols, in the city, is a way of getting away from what had been a very evident concern with the body. Or is it simply a way of re-stating it?

MM: In a way, it just represents the context for the body or the individual. The individual more than the body. The city itself is an abstraction of ways of understanding things, as are the signs. It’s like the interface of our experience that represents the ways that we experience things. So the people are absent because it’s a process. The city is misunderstood as a place where people should live. Those kinds of representations of people are really more manifest in the experience of me going through hypnosis. It represents that gap in defining the city as a city. The other thing would be game playing, Dungeons and Dragons, video games. The games are very involved but there’s no architecture, just places. Architecture helps you orient yourself with each other, like on the Internet.

MT: I think it’s important to make that connection between the hypnosis and architecture works. People often want to separate them. For me, I see the absence of people in the space not as absence itself, but as the presence of human traces, and the signs and symbols are part of that.

MM: Yes, in the sense that they are to be read. In the virtual environment, in a piece like “Five into One” [1991], furniture can be moved and I made it like Legoland. I didn’t want to texture-wrap it, I
wanted it to be cartoon-like; I wanted to figure out what was the
minimum I had to do in order to feel these feelings. People say, “But
that’s so toy-like” but what is a toy? A toy is a minimum amount of
construction because a child is supposed to imagine the rest. I think
the toy relationship to my work is really interesting, no one ever talks
about that, maybe because they feel it would be dismissive of the
work.

WORLDS APART: I HAVE MY REASONS

MM: Also in the city the scale changes so much. In “Five into
One” there are five worlds and they’re not the same at all. The first
time that I went to Digital Productions in 1986 I asked the
programmers, “What is that place called?” and they said the technical
term is “the world.” So I have five worlds, five environments. And then
there’s “Mullican World.” There was a poster by that title which I did
in the late 1970s, which becomes clear because it’s about a
construction. It’s not the world that you see, it’s the world that I see
representing the world that you see.

MT: Well, I think people are surprised by the order and wonder,
“Why is that world structured like that?” For instance, I noted in a
chart from 1981 that there is a cosmology above. That makes sense,
I don’t think many people would question why there is a cosmology
above.

MM: Well that’s because it’s heaven. Heaven’s above us. I
don’t think there is a “right” position for these categories, other
than “cosmology,” which most people would start with and work
down.

MT: Why is “Language” below that and why are “City” and
“Country” underneath “Language”? It’s this ordering which may
confuse people.

MM: The chart represents a map of the world. The “Mullican
World” poster has an image on it and that image is of the world in the
most graphic terms. I’ve never had a chart with “Mullican World” on
it. I’ve never made that association or defined it as that.

MT: Why do you use the terms “Arts,” “Elements,” “World
Unframed”? Why those determinants?

MM: Well, “subjective,” at the top, is pure meaning. No material
exists there—an impossibility, I think. Then at the bottom is
“elements”—materiality without meaning. Pure matter. It’s the idea
that something can exist without any meaning at all. You take a cup
and break it into a thousand pieces and melt it down, then it becomes
ceramic. It’s always going to be something. And yet, what I’m trying
to do is get it to be nothing. Once it stops being a cup it loses its
meaning. So that’s at the bottom and then I have the “arts” in the
middle, which is really the bridge between these two concepts, the
bridge between meaning and subject, between subject and object.
The object being the material below and the subject above. And then
the “world” would be experience, living your life, and what happens
when you’re living your life in art. Then “language,” when a

heightened reality separates and becomes self-sufficient. It becomes
abstract in itself. But it’s all lifting and separating, separating these
different ideas. It just seemed to make sense to me that they were in
that order. I know that the colors that I apply to them are arbitrary. I
have my own reasons for why red is subjective and black is language
and yellow is the arts and blue is the world and green is the elements.
But they’re arbitrary: it’s a construction.

MT: Do you encounter resistance from a lot of people in
accepting the arbitrariness of certain elements in the construction?

MM: This is really the first time this has come up. It makes sense
to people that “language” is above the “world,” as a concept, and that
the “material” is below the “world,” as a concept. Because we stand
on the ground and if you want to go down into the ground, you go into
earth and its material. If you want to think about the sky and heaven,
you’re imagining something that doesn’t exist. In a way it’s based on
the classic heaven and hell charts of the medieval era.

MT: Did your interest in architecture start around the time of the
“Dallas Project” [1986], or was it evident before?

MM: I think it was there before. The earliest charts where I
showed architecture were in the mid-seventies, ten years earlier.
There were also the gouaches, with pavilions.

MT: What happened with the “Dallas Project”? That was a work
that made a lot of people aware of the importance of architecture to
your work.

MM: It was really the computer that got me into architecture and
that was later. But for the “Dallas Project,” it probably comes down to
detail again. I had two hundred feet of hallway in the Dallas Museum
to build this long picture. When I got to the “world” part, I had fifty
feet to have a city. So I really went for it, into the details. And for the
“arts,” it was the Paris Opera House, from an anonymous stage to a
specific context. And history wasn’t just a few pictures; it was maybe
five hundred pictures. So I think the issue of architecture really has
to do with details. I visited [the architects] Diller and Scofidio the
other day and I’m amazed at the amount of detail work they architects
have to do. If you depict the details in an environment, you are almost
becoming an architect. I had to work with so many details, it wasn’t
just a quick sketch, it was a two hundred-foot by eight-foot high
frieze, describing the breakdown of the big chart. I think in that
sense, it does that very well and maybe it is that element of detail
that defines it as architecture.

MT: So the “Dallas Project” allowed you to address those
concerns on a much larger scale than you had before.

MM: Yes, and it was filling up an architectural space. That was
the first major interior space where I was asked to install a work. I
used the parameters, the two hundred feet, as a way of filling up that
painting, that space with all of my concerns, the whole cosmology.

MT: Is this hopping around from subject to subject OK with you?
MM: I don’t think we’re hopping around at all. Your first question is being asked again and again. I’m using the same words again and again. So, clearly we’re getting down to that point. What makes architecture architecture? And immediately, my brain goes to details. When you talk about the architecture of something, it has to do with all of the complex relationships that you have to put together. And, that somehow represents architecture.

MT: You’re right. Everything comes back to the details.

MM: In this interview, absolutely.

HYPNOSIS: THE MEDIUM IS NOT VIRTUAL

MT: I’d like to jump to some recent installations that you’ve done, such as the “Laboratorium” exhibition in Antwerp [1999] based around this idea of “rooms,” constructing rooms. There’s a direct relationship to architecture in those spaces. And within those rooms, hypnosis comes back to the forefront. Why did you return to hypnosis?

MM: The last hypnosis piece I did was in 1984 or 1985. In the interval, I did the “Dallas Project” and the computer work. And after the computer work, it became obvious again that hypnosis had never gone away—because it’s about the experience of things. The first time I connected the two was in my taped hypnosis performance in my studio. I was invited to participate in “Medialex,” a virtual reality exhibition at the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg in 1993. There were all these super machines and I just showed this simple little tape of me under hypnosis and it worked, because it was so understated. It was not about technology. Virtual reality is not about technology.

COLLECTING

MT: Going back to “Laboratorium,” the other thing that struck me in that installation was that, besides the central importance of the hypnosis installations and this constructed space that housed them, there was also this notion of that space being another collecting point. Which relates it to the “MIT Project” [1990], and other works in which different zones are laid out. Those zones are about collecting material, whether it’s insects under glass, whether it’s vegetables and spices from the market in Valencia, whether it’s people’s old photographs, or even the bulletin boards, which are also about collecting. If you consider the importance of collecting in your work, it makes you think, once again, about details, breaking something down into its constituent elements. But it also makes you think about the possibility of assembling a collection. Art collectors talk about this: they have their real collection and they have their imaginary collection. And the latter will never be fulfilled or completed. How do you see the collection in the context of your work?

MM: In the relationship that I have to language. There’s an interest in moving things around, getting things and switching them around and seeing what happens when you put things together. Collecting, curating, showing and exhibiting...are all done on a refrigerator door, in a drawer. Whether you are going to make specific judgements about what’s where in relationship to this or that, subconsciously or consciously, there is a curator there, a collector. And I’m examining that process.

Then there’s the realm of collecting and the encyclopaedia, Diderot was collecting, of course. Somehow, he had it in him that collecting everything was possible. Now it’s an impossibility. It was impossible then, but one had the sense that they could do it. I think we always have that sense.

MT: Well, there’s this attitude that the circle isn’t valid until you close it, even if you close it artificially.

MM: There you go. Talking about cosmologies. I talk about living cosmologies and dead cosmologies. This need for closure is a kind of living cosmology.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD: HEAVEN IS NOT THE VIRGIN MARY

MT: How important is it that the viewer feels a sense of being involved in the game?

MM: I think the work explains itself, but it doesn’t give itself. We live in a time where everything is explained for you more and more, it’s like computer programming. I much prefer for people to make up their own stories. When you see a 20 by 20 foot banner of a huge symbol, you may not know what the symbol means, but you understand its physicality. And I give clues, one piece will explain another, so people will get a sense of what the structures are. But people still say, “You don’t explain it.” But, you know, when you go to the Egyptian wing of the Metropolitan Museum you can be in awe of the complexity without understanding anything about what that complexity represents. Of course, it would be much richer if you knew the story, and some people do. So those are the different levels of understanding the work, which are represented in the work itself.

MT: People want art to be like jigsaw puzzles. They want to take the individual elements, sort it out and say, like Sherlock Holmes, “Aha! That’s it.” But the structuring of your work takes a different path. It encourages people to bring an intuitive sense to it.

BULLETIN BOARDS

MT: You once described the bulletin boards as a “changing situation,” putting something up, taking something down. Given that, how do you explain the non-changing status of the photographs of the doll’s head and the cadaver, which are almost always present?

MM: It’s true, they are used more often than others are. They are the key images, probably the most important photographs I’ve done, because of this life and death issue. It’s like the beginning of a chart, like heaven and hell. If I do a cosmology, I can’t do it without heaven and hell. There are other elements or details, which might not be there, but heaven and hell, life and death, are important. In every bulletin board there is a photograph of a house, for instance. There are certain constants. I don’t want to put them under glass, because
they're not museum pieces. Someone can replace an image, in some of the shows people add images and little notes to the bulletin boards. It's like a community bulletin board: anyone can do it.

MT: It has to do with keeping the open character of the work. Some people are going to relate to the openness of it and some are going to jump back, because they want it to be closed.

MM: Closing the circle. They want it to be finished. I've kept it open, while people want closed things. But I think the openness in my work is one reason why I'm still learning and why the work is vital. I can show works from an earlier period and put them in a space where they don't seem to be any older than the new pieces. I'm going forward.

DETAILS (II): INSIDE OR OUTSIDE THE PICTURE?

MT: We've been talking about not closing the circle, but I have a last question that could be read as closing it. It has to do with one of the statements in your notebooks about "Details from an Imaginary Universe." In a drawing of a room, you isolated a detail from it in a box. The question I pose is: is this a fictitious detail of an imaginary reality or is there anything outside of the picture? In your words, "Is there anything outside the picture or is everything outside the picture?"

MM: There are two ways of looking at it. One is, is what we don't see there? And there are two views: one is that I am the center and everything emanates from me. I project everything into this world. This world is created through my understanding of it. Therefore, only what I see is there. The other is to say that I am one of twenty billion people. I live in a universe. And that would be the statement that there is a lot out there. One philosophy says that man is the center of the universe and one says that man is not. In that drawing I was trying to understand what death was and I had this idea of a box with something in it that I'll never see when I'm alive. I'll never see this object, so relating to it, I was never alive. That object never existed. There was death between us. I remember once, around 1960, we were watching some Saturday morning magic show on television and the magician comes on and gives this riddle: "I have something that has never been seen. I will show it to you and then it will never be seen again. What is it?" So he takes out a peanut, opens up the shell and eats the nuts. It's a little bit like that object in the box.

Oxford, December 18 and 20, 1999
The world is only a ball that the ego has thrown and which it catches again in reflection.
—Fichte

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, artists began to construct earthworks, inscribe figures in the landscape, and cut through the floorboards and ceilings of buildings. Others arranged geometrical volumes, attaching them to walls or standing them on the floor. Still others organized exhibitions employing taxidermy, labels, and the apparatus of natural history in spaces usually reserved for more conventional aesthetic objects. Although ostensibly distinct, all of these practices shared a new awareness of space and structure, a willingness to take risks, a heightened sense of working in the interstices between accepted codes of representation, thought and action.

Matt Mullican’s work is at once close to and distant from these practices. When viewed within the aesthetic context delineated by these operations, Mullican’s oeuvre—so methodical in the pursuit of its aims, so neutral in its epistemological assumptions, so intent on registering the permutations of a restricted constellation of objects—reveals its emphatic singularity and exemplary status. Like some of the most innovative artists of the sixties and seventies, Mullican discovered his point of departure in an area of inquiry where traditional aesthetic criteria manifestly ceased to apply. His work continues to unfold in an undefined zone between discrete aesthetic domains, subjectivity and objectivity, the sign and its meaning and, especially, the culturally demarcated spheres of art and architecture.

Indeed, Mullican’s simultaneous claim to uniqueness and exemplarity is explicable in large part by his engagement of “para-architectural” activity—the cultivation of a type of artistic work which approximates architectural conditions without adopting exclusively architectural means, and which appropriates methods of representation from architecture for its own ends. Precisely, Mullican’s work should be characterized as para-architecture, rather than paraarchitecture. The operative distinction here is based not on Anthony Vidler’s descriptive term, which applies exclusively to architectural strategies associated with the ideological framework of Deconstruction, but on an analogy with Gérard Genette’s more widely applicable critical model of the “para-text.” This, a liminal device which allows a given text to deploy its codes of reading, acts as a fringe or margin controlling interpretation by referring discourse to its framming conventions. In view of this analogy, Mullican’s installations can be seen as occupying an intermediate condition between the work and the world. In tacit opposition to its Minimal and Conceptual precursors and counterparts, which tended to imprison the work in an aporetic condition of self-enclosed objectivity, Mullican’s work turns outwards towards the world, elaborating a practice that is neither self-referential nor tautological, but rather, beside itself. In this sense, Mullican’s para-architectural assemblages function as so many thresholds of the sign in which signification is signaled but never wholly actualized, articulating a field of deployment for new ruses of the aesthetic object which arise in response to a crisis in the reigning order of representation.

Despite his frequent recourse to a recombinatory aesthetic, the emergence of Mullican’s para-architectural practice can be divided into three stages from 1973 to the present. In the first, from 1973 to the late seventies, para-texts prefigure and enable subsequent para-architectures, even as they condition the interpretation of a fictive subject whose dislocation is registered by the architectural mise-en-scène. In the second, from the late seventies to the mid-eighties, para-architecture retains a discursive dimension imbued with its own rules, codes, and aesthetic presuppositions. These involve a crisis in the relations of the general and the particular, effecting a ramifying system of objects and the unstable semantic field which they constitute. In the third phase, from the mid-eighties to the present, different types of para-architectural intervention enter into architecture itself, occupying the spaces, and becoming part of the structures of actual buildings. The unfolding of this dynamic changes not only architecture’s forms and meanings, but also its modes of signification and the ways it is perceived. Thus, for Mullican, what initially appears to be of para-architecture—that is, what seems to be nothing more than a marginal or minimal representation of architecture per se—ends up being an inevitable physical presence in architecture: a process of constant redefinition of the work’s parameters which functions by isolating new areas of para-architectural critique. What follows is an attempt to show, by specific examination of the works, that this critique refers as much to the material and social conditions of architecture as to its institutional norms and ideological assumptions—norms and assumptions which bear crucially on the situation of the subject in Mullican’s enigmatic, carefully constructed world.

DEPLETED SIGNS: THE PARA-ARCHITECTURAL SUBJECT IN CRISIS

When trying to understand the para-textual and para-architectural aspects of Mullican’s artistic universe, Benjamin Buchloh’s remarks on the decisive role played by the depleted sign in contemporary art can point the way through what at first might seem to be an impenetrable labyrinth. This way of formulating the problem is recommended by the fact that Mullican’s initial premise of reducing the subject to a sign of uncertain epistemological status, no less than his latest musings on the possibility of figuring a refined, wholly administered world from which nothing (not even meaning) can escape, serve to indicate the losses incurred by a subject which can find no place in this world. This placelessness of the subject is expressed most succinctly by a para-architecture which assumes allegorical valences, a condition of architectural reference against which the subject will struggle to retain its margins of autonomy.

Such a subject must resort to strategies of signification and designification, transforming itself into a dislocated object that falls in and out of the domain of the sign at different moments. Thus, by a
curious paradox, the first ruses of the object in Mullican’s universe are played out on the level of the subject’s relations with itself and the world. Mullican first embarked upon his investigation of a subject that is architecturally mediated with early images which place the subject in nondescript, neutralizing, or alienating architectural settings. The images present the subject in terms of a crisis of physical dismemberment which affects the constitution of the sign, as if the body were a signifying field traversed by tensions culminating in an actual collapse (as in the binary sequence “Sign” and “Sign Broken-Up,” 1975–6), or in terms of the loss of consciousness of a stick figure who recurs in different contexts and situations (as in “Glen falls Asleep Near a Corner of His Studio,” 1973), or, most paradigmatically, in terms of the assimilation of schematized representations of a corpse, or corpses, into the surrounding architecture, thus suggesting the transformation of the subject into a trace of its own disappearance (“Five Live Stuck Figures, Two Dead Stick Figures,” 1973).

At the root of this complex process of mediations, in which the subject is subordinated to an intimate dialectic of appearance and disappearance which transpires against a shifting architectural backdrop, one can sense the effects of early para-architectural objects such as Duchamp’s “Door: 11, rue Larrey,” 1927, and “Etant données,” 1946–66. The first of these paradoxical objects, like many an ideogram in Mullican’s constantly reworked galaxy of practices, assumed the most radically divergent forms as it was assembled, disassembled, reassembled and photographed in different contexts. In this sense it engages a subtle questioning of the coherence of the object which can be identified with one of its most sophisticated ruses. With respect to the insidious rural playmate viewed through the peephole of “Etant données,” it is not the vicissitudes of the object which are at stake, but rather the adventures of a para-architectural subject poised between the brute facticity of the readymade and the eclipse of the artistic character of the work as such. Although it might initially recall the visual conditions prompted by Mullican’s early artistic interventions in 1973, the voyeurism of ambiguous subject-objects precipitated by “Etant données” is at best only remotely analogous to the situation which unfolds when we spy Glen-Mullican’s stick-figure alter-ego who appears in a series of related drawings in which the inner life and outer adventures of this protagonist are traced— in his studio asleep, when he should be working. In fact, unlike Duchamp’s motionless femme fatale, he is working, dreaming up worlds that he will inhabit when he awakes. For the subject who has fallen out of consciousness in Mullican’s initial world of images is, of course, nothing more than a graphic sign, one that can be disarticulated by a slight pressure, or a wave of the artist’s hand. What Mullican shares at this point with Duchamp’s para-architectures—and what by the same token distinguishes him from his immediate precursors and contemporaries—is a drastic reduction of the figure to a zero-degree of representation, an Existenzminimum of the subject which makes it susceptible to processes of repetition, manipulation, and marginalization. Words accompanying the image—as in the case of the caption which informs us that “Glen falls asleep near the corner of his studio”—are laconic and to the point: they serve as explanatory devices framing the image, as para-texts in the true sense of the term. Yet they have a more complex, and less immediately evident function, in that they also serve as pre-texts for the para-architectural absorption of the figure. At the same time these words quite literally have no sense, logically speaking, if one considers the simple fact that a stick figure cannot fall asleep, just as that which is given—étant données—is poised illogically between the fictional space of an inanimate object of desire and the real condition of the architecture which frames its viewing.

In “Five Live Stick Figures, Two Dead Stick Figures,” conditions of meaning and subjectivity are simultaneously disqualified, so that the question implied but never asked by this image, except perhaps in the viewer’s mind, is: how can a stick figure be dead, when by definition it was never alive? A similar query is presupposed by “Doll and Dead Man,” 1973, a work comprised of two photographs, the first representing an object that was never alive, and could never have been, the second documenting the physical remains of a person that was once living—objects which share the inert, and hence comparable, status of inanimate matter. Such implied musings provide the conceptual basis, and, one is tempted to say, the intellectual justification, for the para-architectural absorption of the depleted subject—as sign poised on the brink of becoming a trace of its own non-existence—the only kind of signification (or remnant of signification) permissible at this moment in Mullican’s work. In this sense Mullican’s earliest para-textual and para-architectural subjects are transformed by means of ruses of the object into so many predicates of architecture. We can thus infer that one of the characteristic features of Mullican’s sensibility as the seventies drew to a close is the incessant translation of one mode of representation into another, a process which involves a deliberate sabotage of meaning and a concomitant bypassing of the real.

ANTITHESIS OF THE PARA-ARCHITECTURAL OBJECT:
INTERIOR/EXTERIOR, MUSEOLOGY/TYPOLOGY;
COLLECTION/MONUMENT

To bypass the real is to deplete the sign: ultimately both procedures involve, for Mullican, the conversion of one signifying fiction (or level of this fiction) into another. Throughout the eighties and nineties, Mullican’s proliferating classification schemes, composed of ideograms as orderly in their formal arrangement as they are indeterminate in their meaning, sugges, on the one hand, a universal code without identifiable referents. and, on the other, familiar signs posted throughout airports, at street corners, on subway and train stations the world over. In this way familiar classifications are converted into meaningless diagrams even as meaningless diagrams refer to unfamiliar classifications. Both sides of this reciprocal process are rendered opaque by the fact that the functional signification of the diagrams and the signs which compose them has been disrupted by procedures of decontextualization and desemanticization which have architecture as their condition of possibility. Charting the trajectory from overt representations of architecture inserted within interiors, to signs that need not relate in any representational sense to architecture attached to the exterior surfaces of buildings, from the banners installed at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, in 1986, onwards Mullican’s installations mediate between the infinitely expandable domain of an open collection and the mute presence of a localized monument. This enactment of the antitheses
of para–architecture involves a dual critique: on the one hand, it miniaturizes the museological or collecting impulse, and with it any possible representation of the museum as architectural space; on the other, it reformulates the question of typology in terms of this ambiguous link between institutional imperatives and architectural codes. The result is a series of artifacts which represent traces of a vanished subject. These are marked by a common fate, a horizon of necessity cast in the form of an implacable alternative: either to become part of the general, anonymous, and shifting collection of objects or be assimilated into the structure of an impasse monolith.

By articulating his project in this way, Mullican marks out the stages of a progressive ossification of the subject. A possible answer as to why he might be compelled to do this—that is, why he should present the question of the subject in terms of such a rigid dichotomy of objective world and individual existence, only to erase this distinction in favor of a hasty reconciliation of the two poles embedded in the sign—would seem to be provided by one of Adorno’s insights. In his essay “Subject and Object,” the German philosopher and social critic noted an essential epistemological equivocation built into the Western concept of the subject, since this term refers at once to the particular existence of a specific individual and to general attributes of consciousness.6 Mullican’s work in the eighties, and especially the “Dallas Project” of 1986, whose panels titled “History” incorporate an image (an ideogram of a human head) taken over from posters of the late seventies which bear the words MULLICAN WORLD and MULLICAN ART alongside, would appear to play on the ambiguous status of the traditional philosophical concept of subjectivity. In these images the general attributes of consciousness and the particular consciousness of the artist are conflated in the common space of the sign. The real, as in Fichte’s statement cited at the beginning of this essay, thus becomes nothing more than a ball the ego throws and which, in subjective reflection, bounces back as the world—with the highly consequential difference that in Mullican’s case the figured subject is already marked by a universal process of commodification dividing the sign from its meaning.6 Here one might add that when subject and world are reductively identified, and when the semantic field which both occupy is indefinitely suspended, it is hardly surprising that ever–changing combinations of the same personified ideograms should cover a cosmos so conceived, thereby fusing conditions of subjectivity and objectivity, dispersion and totalization, urban collectivity and isolated individuality, in a single, proliferating image whose meaning lies beyond any reading the observer could possibly offer. In this way, not only does the world acquire a hieratic, petrified status underscored by the incessant recirculation of its components, so does the subject that underlies it, thereby evoking by antithesis a historical horizon in which the imprisoned, reified consciousness might break free.

The consequences of this conunctio oppositorum are most clearly felt at the level of architecture and its representations—that is, at the level of that art which, among all others, most clearly relies on metaphors of petrification and solidification to convey its linguistic theses. Here a double series unfolds: on the one hand, in the MIT installation, 1990, (which employs the framing device of a rectilinear enclosure containing exhibition tables on which bones, toy trains, diagrams, and other disjecta membra are placed) and the installation at the Rijksmuseum Kröller–Müller, Otterlo, in 1991 (which privileges the labyrinth as architectonic type and urban model, and was simultaneously viewed with the MIT installation) we confront a new configuration of the museological premise, as well as a procedure of miniaturization. This replaces the museum’s architecture with the installation’s para–architecture, and introjects the space of display into the work itself. On the other hand, in the interventions in Brussels, 1986, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in the same year, and in Lyons in 1992, pre–existing monumental public architecture is revalorized and reinscribed by the strategic placement of banners within its spaces or by means of diagrammatic figures applied to its vertical surfaces. If the referent for the first sequence may be Beuys’ “Darmstadt Block,” the model of the second would seem to be Aldo Rossi (especially the Rossi of the mute, hermetic architectural objects like the Modena Cemetery of 1972) and ultimately, Piranesi—the same Piranesi whose “Campo Marzio” recurs in a series of distinct visual contexts in “Pages from a Library” with greater frequency than the work of any other architect which Mullican cites.7

In the second sequence, the varied and complex strategies which Mullican employs reveal unexpected resonances between the formalist aspiration towards an absolute architectural sign—a typological condition which, as in Aldo Rossi’s early work, merely rearranges “fragments of discourse”—and Beuys’ project of constructing a museological labyrinth of cosmic scope. Thus the impulse to syntactical recomposition of geometric structures is actualized as a means of framing the unstable semantic field of disjecta membra destined to become part of the museological system. The point where the extremes of this synthesis touch is the collection, just as their common element is the valorization of the collectible fragment: the result being a configuration whose open spaces are epistemologically capacious enough to contain both the “hallucinating organisms of an ‘order’ in a state of decay”8 and a natural and/or ethnographic phantasmagoria at once ecstatic and embalmed. Yet the ultimate implication of this antithetical encounter is para–architectural: for it is only by recourse to an inventory of senseless signs arranged in a “system of differences” on vertical and horizontal surfaces, which are themselves bounded by enclosures reminiscent of architectural models, that Mullican’s installations acquire their characteristic shape and peculiar integrity. In this way the “secondary” components of the assemblage are given optimal articulation, while the “primary” architectonic rules governing the overall formation are strictly maintained despite the shifting contexts of display and actualization.

There is however a third option inherent in this system which arises when the depicted sign, having been transmuted into an object which usurps the position of the subject—an ideogram uncannily close in form and appearance to a corporate logo—becomes integrated with the architecture itself. This occurs in the installation at Swiss Bank in New York City, and in certain moments in the Lyons mural. It is in these works, which fix the sign within actual built contexts, that the sign’s meaning veers away into a region of no return, and Mullican comes closest to staging the Adornian concept of Naturgeschichte.
This idea refers to a desiccated world of petrified signs, a system of refined images incapable of yielding up their meaning even to the most ardent scrutiny, the scrutiny of the melancholic subject. In this allegorical transposition of the sign, nature and history come together in a condition of expressionless stasis, and the subject is purged of the possibility of rational insight and the particularity of experience itself. Only a general awakening can shatter this stasis of the sign and bring the ossified fragments back to life—a process which is perhaps implied by the earlier, yet admittedly faint, evocations of sleep and waking, and the cognate theme of hypnotic suggestion which inform Mulligan's work throughout the seventies. Yet it is precisely here, in the Swiss Bank work and the Lyons wall, that Mulligan's para-architectural practice comes perilously close to being subsumed within the system of (architectural) ideology, only to recoll from this matrix into a region of indexicality appropriate to the hieratic fixity of the monuments themselves. Subjected to such ruses, the spectator is forced to confront the traces of a subjectivity in extremis, which, to be sure, are opened in the next phase of Mulligan's work to a play of transparency, rather than being hermetically presented on the surfaces of an opaque monolith. In this sense Mulligan articulates his project in a way that increasingly comes to resemble not a general epistemological critique of the subjective dummies inherent in Naturgeschichte, but a site-specific archaeology whose privileged domain is modern architecture itself.

PARA-ARCHITECTURE AND THE ARCHEOLOGY OF THE MODERN IN MULLIGAN'S RECENT WORK

In 1995 Mulligan placed a series of banners with signs of uncertain meaning in Mies' Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. Here the specter of the political instrumentalization of art, and hence also the insidious possibility of the aestheticization of politics, one of the most evident abuses of the means of visual signification to have occurred in twentieth century German history, is once conjured and dispelled. This is the case, not simply because of the form employed—the banner—a medium of signification which has inevitable political valences, but also for a less immediately evident reason. Rather, it is because Mulligan's intervention involved a peculiar displacement of the political implications of the decentralized sign from the architectural context of Mies' American period to his German work. For Mulligan's ambivalent symbols of a subjectivity usurped by capitalism—the pseudo-subjectivity of the corporate logo—were inserted not within Mies' more ideologically compromised buildings (such as the Seagram Building) which have been almost universally regarded, whether consciously or not, as monuments to the global expansion of Capital, but rather in the Schinkel-inspired, classical, Modernist temple to Kultur. In this sense Mulligan excavates architectural modernism itself, exposing its ideological assumptions, if only by an oblique gesture which shows modern architecture's hidden complicity, the "positive unconscious" of its discourse. The transparency of the building is crucial to this operation, since in sharp contrast to the vertical projection of the system of signs deprived of stable meanings in Lyons, or the materialization (one might almost say muralization) of the inventory of symbolic structures in the Swiss Bank project, the opacity of the wall seems to fix the intervention with a finality that permits no volumetric or lateral reading, no extension of the sign and its ambiguity in space and time. One might compare these works with Daniel Buren's intervention at the Arts Club of Chicago in 1994, a space also designed by Mies, where striped banners rearticulate the top floor, when trying to assess the implications of this work. Modifying the space without specifying its meaning, both Mulligan and Buren, the first by adapting the banners to ambient conditions of transparency, the second by using them to emphasize the planarity of the wall surface, implicitly identify their interventions as signs poised at the threshold of the political. Their respective strategies thus permit no political closure to occur.

From the domain of para-textuality to that of para-architecture, from the use of representations of architecture to the restructuring of architecture's actual physical conditions and signifying codes, Mulligan consistently repositions his project in a space of transition between images and their interpretation. Privileging system and classification while questioning the enforced equilibrium between form and meaning which tends to typify architecture under present cultural conditions, Mulligan exposes the inadequacy of signs to their objects. In so doing Mulligan isolates the recurring discrepancy between systems which claim to definitively constitute the congeries of resistances, stasisms, and hopes for critical renewal that make up the field of "contemporary subjectivity" and the actual experience of the subject itself. In a world in which such experience is becoming increasingly difficult to come by, in part—perhaps in large part—because of the rampant ideological abuse of architecture, such recourse to an aesthetic "ruse of the object" comes to resemble a genuine ruse of reason which remains, if not wholly uncolonized by reification, then at least in a state of implicit tension with it.

6. On the philosophical context and wider implications of this remark in the context of the "mythical" status of the subject in German idealism, see H. Blumenberg, Work on Myth, tr. R. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 98 ff.
ENTERING THE PICTURE

In 1973 Matt Mullican presented a performance in which he took a magazine photograph of a typical living room and hung it on a wall. He then "entered" the picture: he described what he found in other rooms after he had crossed the first room in his imagination, and what he saw when he went up the stairs or through one of the closed doors seen in the picture. The descriptions were detailed and full of personal experience, as if Mullican really had wandered through the house. In many other performances, including some carried out under hypnosis, Mullican was to return to this theme of "entering the picture."

Following on from this idea, Mullican created works such as "Physical Experiments," which was staged in one of these virtual rooms. A cube rests on a thin plank, which is supported by two other cubes—only in the artist's imagination. In fact Mullican didn't have a studio in 1973, so it may have made sense for him to retire to a fictitious studio. Other scenes from this imaginary studio are portrayed in Mullican's drawings of a stick figure called Gien, who falls asleep in a corner or discovers a letter pushed under the studio door.

"The Treachery of Images" is the title René Magritte gave to a painting in an attempt to demonstrate the misunderstanding of reality that pictures have: a painting of a pipe is not a pipe, and the conception of a pipe should not be mistaken for the real thing. In 1973 Mullican entitled a drawing "This is a pipe," in order to assign the mental image a key position in human perception. Whereas Magritte sees all relations on the part of the conceived image, Mullican seems to link it to other pictorial images and manifestations of reality. Just as the melancholic writer Heinrich von Kleist always felt as if he was wearing a pair of blue-tinted spectacles through which he gained only a completely subjective view of the world, so Mullican ultimately only ever finds the conceived image behind facts and their depictions. Such a reading of Mullican's work presents the artist as a naive follower of the German Idealist tradition. Ulrich Wilmes offers perhaps the most firm support of this theory in his survey of Mullican's work published in 1992: the experience of reality as a subjective projection and, by association, a synthesis of the subjectivity of the author and the objectivity of the material world.

However, this interpretation of Mullican's work is flawed, since it portrays him as having been a representative of modernism at the very time when his fellow students and artist friends were laying the foundations for a postmodernist understanding of art. A re-reading of Mullican's work is called for.

THE MECHANISM OF TRANSFORMATION: SUBJECT/OBJECT

So did Mullican enter another room or not? This question is in fact not easy to answer. While for those watching his performance he remained with them in the room, he himself felt that he had left it. He entered the other room only in his thoughts. Viewers usually make a distinction between facts and ideas, body and mind. Paintings and drawings belong, as do all signs, to both spheres. As physical manifestations of expression they belong to the world of objects, to which they also refer. At the same time they have a significance which is ascribed to the conceptual realm. Paintings, drawings and sculptures are, as signs, in actual fact functions that relate signifiers to ideas and facts. Mullican disregards the signs' relation to reality, assigning them only the abstract level of meaning of the signified. For him reality is always something that is perceived, a construct of the imagination; therefore for Mullican objects are ideas. Paintings, drawings and photographs can be likened to things, as they can also be understood as constructs of the imagination. In Mullican's work the conventional separation of idea and object is revoked.

For the viewer these considerations may at first seem unacceptable, as they go against everything he has experienced. However, one can feel vis-à-vis the relation to reality is undermined when Mullican is hypnotized in order to allow involuntary perception to take place in the imaginary rooms. In a certain sense the hypnotic state itself constitutes an image. Josef Breuer describes how the components of consciousness that occur in this state bear little or no association to the rest of the subject's mental life. What emerge are autonomous associative groups which can reappear in an isolated form. Thus if Mullican lets himself be transported back to his childhood by the hypnotist he is on the one hand still present in the "real" room he shares with his audience, and on the other in an imaginary room, although this cannot be as clearly defined in material terms as, say, a drawing or a photograph. If real behavior can only be distinguished from hypnotic behavior in that the imagination forms different associations, then viewers of a performance by Mullican are bound to run into difficulties with their traditional criteria of reality.

In Mullican's view, the objective world appears to be so engulfed in its own subjectivity that there no longer seems much sense in separating the subject from the object. Which leads him to say, in an apparent paradox, "... the idea was not to pay attention to the object of the work, but obviously to the subject of the work."—as if things possessed their own spirituality.

THE NOTION OF SUBJECT/OBJECT IN ART HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

"... idealism in general, and the mind/body problem in particular, mark a philosophical interest and ambition that link Modern Man discourse and the theory and practice of some of the young artists of the New York School," writes Michael Leja in his fundamental work on abstract expressionism. This painterly process, which was neither interrupted by any form of judgmental criticism nor directed by any reference to reality—indeed, it presented itself as part of this reality—was modernism's most radical attempt to date to bring about the congruent identity of subject and object. Conception and material form were to be paralleled and form a unity in the gesture.
Minimalism came into being as a counter-movement to abstract expressionism, and this is reflected in its vocabulary of geometric forms and the possibility of planning sculptural on the drawing board. However, in what Marcia Tucker termed the “making—seeing—nexus” in connection with the work of Robert Morris, the synthesis of subject and object remained a hidden goal. The minimalist object was to be so simply formed as to create identity not only with the conception of the producer but also with that of the recipient. As an exponent of conceptual art, Joseph Kosuth transferred this ideal to the mental realm in his early works; “One and Three Chairs,” 1965, for example, strategically underlines the difference between three types of signs in order to draw attention to the congruence of the conceived images. His tautological motto “art as idea as idea” effectively means the exclusion of the “object” level of art, a goal also shared by Mullican. Even Dan Graham’s early works examined the link between subject and object; in “Two Correlated Rotations,” 1969, two protagonists film each other while circling around one another and finally exchange cameras in the course of one rotation; the filming subject becomes filmed object and vice versa.

Michael Leja found this theme of the relation of subject and object embedded in what he terms the “Modern Man discourse.” Leja showed how this discourse supplied the coordinates for the intellectual world following the Second World War. Moreover, the theme of a subject/object link can probably be related to bourgeois thinking as a whole. The need for a connection between idea and material can be traced back to the end of a traditional society characterized by seemingly natural relations between people. The decline of this society and the beginning of the bourgeois one led to the isolation of the individual, whose behavior was no longer grounded in a meaningful whole. The price to be paid for the freedom of the individual was the surrender of the compulsion of natural law. Philosophers and poets such as Schelling or Hölderlin considered art to be the last remaining synthesis of freedom and necessity. In addition, artistic production is held to be the interplay of both conscious and unconscious activity. Whereas conscious activity represents the citizen’s functional rationality, unconscious activity helps to make the necessities of the trans-individual visible. It is only when Pollock surrenders himself to the unreflected gesture that thinking and material are combined. The unity which only art can create is legible only in the product, the completion of which reflects the unification. The producer himself does not experience the union of conscious and unconscious, or else it would be separated once more.

This theme was handed down from the German idealist philosophers through Friedrich Nietzsche to Konrad Fiedler, and has now become a standard topic for the practice of many artists. Mullican’s desire to enter the picture has therefore ultimately been fuelled by a two-hundred-year-old tradition of bourgeois culture.

THE DISSOLUTION OF SUBJECT/OBJECT IDENTITY: THE END OF A PRINCIPLE

The 1970s saw the development of the first strategies which explicitly turned their backs on an identity of idea and object. From 1968 onwards, Smithson’s “Non-Sites” created a body of work which cannot be fully described either in terms of relics in an exhibition space or of the locations in the outside world from which they stem. Besides this, the cartographic representation of the places where they were found introduces a sign-like level into the work, producing further difference. Sol LeWitt felt bound to the minimalist principle of identity when he developed referential systems that connected number patterns and geometric figures. With the wall drawings he began in 1969, LeWitt invented a constellation of production and reception that inevitably ended in difference. If the concise and hence extremely abstract title of one of these wall drawings is read as instructions for the assistants who are to execute the work, there is bound to be a difference between the concept held by LeWitt as the author and the work drawn on the wall as a result of his directions.

The key impetus for the shift from a paradigm of identity to one of difference was provided by the discovery of discursiveness. Whether one links this to Pop art and the way in which it reduced a seemingly individual world of artistic expression to the jargon of consumer aesthetics, or one attributes this change in attitude to pivotal figures such as Jacques Lacan, who expounded the importance of sign systems for the development of subjectivity—it is in any case a question of understanding that there is no spontaneous, individual access to modes of expression, but rather that these sign systems are always consensual products of a social process. These conventional sign systems clearly determine the ideas of the individual, especially the ideas he has about himself.

Film was the first artistic medium to react to the new theories of the subject. In particular, the British film journal “Screen” provided a forum for discussion on the way that every film first of all creates a certain type of subject. Cindy Sherman’s “Film Stills” are just one example of how the so-called “Pictures Generation,” of which Mullican is held to belong, adopted this theory of the mediated subject. It is crucial for an understanding of Mullican’s work to examine his strategies in relation to this particular period in time and its thinking. How can one demonstrate that the discourse of identity which is usually associated with Mullican’s work is in fact a discourse of difference?

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SUBJECT/OBJECT: MEDIALITY

Interpretations of Mullican’s work which claim to observe a unity of subject and object imply a guiding, centralist ego—possessing a specific identity and fundamental human qualities distinct from and beyond its membership in a social order: a “firmly enclosed nut, a small hard-shelled thing, the deeply-hidden crystallization point of our being” was how the popular philosopher Otto Rank described it in the 1930s, an image which even today elicits the intuitive agreement of many when they talk about their ego. Opposed to this is a contemporary understanding of the subject as a social construct, the product of communicative processes.

At the same time as he showed his first performances, Mullican was also working on series such as “Details from an Imaginary Universe,” 1973, “Details from a Fictional Reality,” 1973, and “Dead Comic Book Characters,” 1974. To avoid falling back on his personal
graphic intuition he used found images from an extremely inartistic medium that had already been employed by Pop artists. However, instead of aestheticizing individual images, Mullican left them in their original state and merely created new combinations.

In “Details from a Fictional Reality” Mullican isolates trivial elements of the comic images, such as depictions of rain, sand, sky or grass. Simply by being removed from their familiar narrative context these signs become so abstract that the artist has to provide them with an explanatory concept. What is unimaginably understood while reading a story suddenly appears to belong to some abstract language. This series emphasizes the feat of translation carried out by every reader, when for example a black square is described as “no light” or a light brown area with four short lines is characterized as “skin.” The work distinguishes between two reading positions: one where the reader is positioned inside the comic and another where he assesses the comic’s means of expression at a critical distance. The reader’s apparently immediate access to the narrative world is blown apart in the process. He becomes aware of himself as someone in command of a language. Like a film, comic positions the reader in such a way that he can overlook the artificiality of the sign language and see himself participating in the action. Mullican disposes with this fallacy.

If one follows Mullican’s development further, it becomes clear that the series with Glen in his fictitious studio and the drawings featuring the rituals of the stick figures are developed through gradual abstraction from the comics. Even if in scenes such as “Smelling his own body” Mullican seems to be referring to himself, it is crucial that the systematic order of the comic is nevertheless maintained. Mullican is not creating a (drawing) realm for himself which is removed from reality and allows him to take liberties he doesn’t actually have; instead, in identifying himself with the figures in the picture he is subjecting himself to other, discursive laws.

During his brief period at the California Institute of the Arts Mullican was, like most of his fellow students, a regular visitor to the school’s own cinema which showed feature films almost round the clock. Anyone who watches a film does in a sense enter the filmic image. In film theory in the 1970s this process came to be known as “suture,” describing the way in which the viewer is woven into the action of the film. Summing up the discussion, Kaja Silverman wrote, “The classic cinematic organization depends upon the subject’s willingness to become absent to itself by permitting a fictional character to ‘stand in’ for it, or by allowing a particular point of view to define what it sees. The operation of suture is successful at the moment that the viewing subject says, ‘Yes, that’s me,’ or, ‘That’s what I see.’” The identification implicit in Mullican’s “entering the picture” is therefore not “naive,” nor does it establish an identity of subject and object; instead it is modeled on filmic suture and explores the way in which the author and recipient are intertwined with the text. The textual structure thus becomes a kind of discursive interface, laying down new rules for the old relation of subject and object. The subject does not simply receive the picture, the object; rather, the text is so closely linked to the subject that it is in fact constructed through it. Mullican’s works, which undoubtedly make the occasional play on the traditional view of a subject/object relation, also follow this discursive structuring of the subject.

If one follows Mullican’s thinking on the basis of his sketchbooks, as reproduced in the book “World Frame,” 1993, the growing complexity of the artist’s deliberations can be clearly observed. The stick figure soon leaves his room and finds himself confronted with a world order in which Mullican’s work increasingly develops into a formal language; elements, signs, science and the world are summarized in pictorial shorthand and then assembled to create a “chart.” The pictographs in these charts provide perhaps the clearest indication of the ambivalent status of Mullican’s thinking. In terms of content they express a very subjective, holistic world view. Human activities are bracketed between heaven and hell, ranging from the most basic phenomena to the complexities of scientific thought. However, the pictographs presuppose a subject carrying out the most elementary activities within a community: crossing a street, making a telephone call or looking for an emergency exit.

3 In Wilmes, op. cit., 48.
9 Matt Mullican, World Frame (Tampa, Fla., 1993).
Kathy O'Dell

THE ARTIST’S STUDIO, NEW YORK, 1992

A length of white tape runs along the floor of Matt Mullican’s studio, extending from a bookcase on the left side of the space to a desk about five feet away on the right. Made with adhesive tape, the line is exactly parallel to the lower edge of the video frame documenting this scene. On the viewer’s side of the line is a folding chair in which Mullican, having already been guided into a trance state by a hypnotist, sits and waits for her to deliver one of several sets of suggestions. Each will involve “being” a different age under specific circumstances (for example: “you are four-and-a-half...your parents have not come home...you are beginning to panic...you’re scared...your room is twelve feet by ten feet.”) Each will involve Mullican commencing his response to the hypnotist’s suggestions as soon as, in her words again, he “crosses over the line.”

SEDUCTION, AND MORE

Freud found “something positively seductive” about hypnosis. He made this admission in his autobiography, published in 1925 at the age of sixty-nine, after he had carried out his voluminous clinical studies, some of which involved experiments with hypnosis as a potential and very serious method of psychotherapeutic treatment. I have no such credentials, of course, but I do have a hefty logbook of time spent screening and rescoring, over and over again, with the ardor of the truly seduced, dozens of hours of video documents of Matt Mullican performing under hypnosis before a live audience. It is on the basis of these empirical credentials that I can say unequivocally that there is “something” about Mullican’s hypnosis performances that is “positively seductive”—and more. This work is seductive and serious, poignant and funny, tranquil and intense, boring and stimulating, and, perhaps due to all the foregoing, profoundly moving and disturbing.

HYPNOSIS AND/OR MASOCHISM

I have written elsewhere that “in being disturbed, we ask questions. In being moved, we seek answers.” Though I was writing at the time about my reactions to a different type of work (masochistic performance art), my reactions to Mullican performing under hypnosis are similar. It is these personal reactions that drive this essay.

The questions I raise, however, will far outnumber the answers offered. One question, right off the bat: is a hypnosis performance by Mullican so different from a masochistic performance by, say, Chris Burden, who in his notorious 1971 performance “Shoot” had a sharpshooter friend take a shot at his left arm, intending only for it to be grazed, but instead lost a big chunk out of it? On one level, there is an obvious difference: Burden’s body is left with a hole in it; Mullican’s body is left wholly intact. On another level, both Mullican and Burden put a great deal of trust in another individual to provide the details that would help them flesh out, so to speak, the preconceived structure of their performances. Do not both types of performance, then, involve considerable risk—a psychological level, at least—by relying on a sort of contractual agreement between the artist and his partner, be it a sharpshooter or hypnotist?

METAPHORS FOR LIFE AND LINE

Mullican’s hypnosis performances abound in metaphor. At the head of a long list of examples: To perform at various ages under hypnosis (hypnotic suggestions have taken Mullican from childhood to adolescence, middle age, and senior status) is to perform a metaphor for understanding life as a historicized human being, an individual whose identity is constructed from one’s memories and imaginings.

But for this understanding to become clear, one must recognize another key metaphor in operation here—that of the line. Lines in Mullican’s work—lines as metaphorical as the white adhesive tape line in his studio were literal—are continually getting crossed. Not the least of these is the metaphorical line between the conscious and unconscious mind.

METAPHORS FOR THE DIGITAL WORLD

Mullican started working with hypnosis in 1978 and has continued to the present, with a decade-long hiatus between 1982 and 1992. The hiatus was significant. It was during this time that Mullican started “asserting the public aspects” 3 of his work over the more private, personal, or intimate, which form the bedrock of all his performances, whether under hypnosis or not. He started exhibiting widely. His charts, banners, posters, and etched granite slabs, featuring precise signs, derived loosely from the universally coded photographs encountered daily in streets and stores, became as visible in the art world as Cindy Sherman’s photographs of herself, Barbara Kruger’s works combining mass-media images and engaging text or David Salle’s multipart paintings that ride a fine line between pornography and its deconstruction.

Also during his hiatus from hypnosis, Mullican started working in digital media, producing architecture-based works that continually require the viewer to question his or her position in relation to the work and to the world. These pieces link to Mullican’s hypnosis pieces in a provocative way. The former are about “submerging yourself in a database,” according to Mullican—a database which is not so unlike the psychical “database,” the unconscious mind, that storehouse of memories which one draws upon in hypnosis.

Despite these metaphorical ties between Mullican’s computer and hypnosis-based works, his experience with virtual reality did not become a substitute for hypnotic experience. In 1992 Mullican resumed his hypnosis performances, at the same time as he continued working with the computer.
METAPHORS FOR THE SUSPENSION OF CRITIQUE

After a piece in Los Angeles scheduled for May 2000, Mullican’s hypnosis performances will total eight, constituting a substantial body of work—which is, to my mind, so rich in and of itself, and so abundant in connections to the rest of Mullican’s oeuvre and to the art world in general, that it is quite startling to discover that these performances have been so underexplored critically.4 But this oversight may be oddly fitting, for a great deal of the hypnotic process is about bypassing critical thinking.5

This premise typically refers to the hypnotized subject, of course, who seems not to care if he is behaving in peculiar or unattractive ways which he might not want others to observe under other circumstances. But by being hypnotized in the context of performance art, the success of which relies in large part on audience identification with the performer, has not Mullican enacted a poetically ironic commentary on the art world and its institutionalized dependence on critique as the measure of art’s success? Again, no answers, only more musings.

AN APARTMENT IN BRUSSELS, 1996

“One of the things I’m after in these performances is I want complete suspension, so that I’m not responsible for anything.” Mullican is saying these words while under hypnosis (although he keeps contesting whether he is or not) in a segment of a performance in Brussels in 1996. Having completed one segment in which he was a six-year-old boy watching fireworks, another in which he was a young child in the 1950s in his family’s upstairs bathroom, he is now following the suggestion to be “himself.”

Mullican is clearly unhappy with the hypnotist, the first of two who would work with him during this week-long project. By the end of the week, Mullican had carried out over a dozen pieces, totaling eighteen hours. It is clear, even to a novice observer, that the hypnotist wished to control his subject’s experience too much. Nonetheless, Mullican crossed the line. In the literal sense, the line was a strip of white tape on the floor, but this time it was part of a square, three sides of which were outlined in tape, with the fourth formed by a wall with a window. Once Mullican was inside the square, the hypnotist tried to direct the artist’s imaginings of what fireworks might look like to a six-year-old (“Ah! Just like the bubbles in champagne. Do you see it?” asks the hypnotist), instead of giving Mullican full berth to follow the hypnotic suggestions delivered outside the box: to watch the fireworks through the window and wish not to have to stop watching.

“But Mullican managed to cross over the line in the figurative sense, as well. He simply did not respond to the hypnotist’s prodding questions. In Mullican’s post-segment reflections, he made it clear that the hypnotist’s expectation of some sort of dialogue was not working. “My body gets it,” Mullican reports to the hypnotist, “but my mind is having a hard time... it’s that duality [problem]... I really want the [same] suspension of mind [that my body is feeling]... don’t say stuff, because that distracts me... I become aware it’s you, and that we’re in a house. It reminds me of where we are in actuality... It’s amazing that the body and the mind together are so inventive, so inventive that if you’re really there [mind and body together, suspended], it’s like dreaming. Anything can happen. And that’s what I’m interested in.”

CONCLUSION

Under hypnosis, Mullican has made huge drawings (he almost always draws in his hypnosis pieces, perhaps the largest drawing being produced in 1981 at The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Performance in New York, where he drew a ten-foot self-portrait complete with “sparks” flying from the heart). He has frantically hit blocks of wood on the floor (another frequent activity, producing quite extraordinary sound pieces in themselves). He has gone “searching for an essential quality concealed in a living room” (a paraphrase of the hypnotic suggestion delivered in the apartment in Brussels, followed by the artist obsessively burying his head into very tight spaces, including the crevices of an overstuffed sofa). He has “fallen in and out of love” with a glass of water, approaching it in adoration one moment and throwing his body away from it, onto the floor, the next (in “Pattern/SPA/Lecture,” presented at “Festival a/d Werf” in Utrecht in 1998). All these activities stand for Mullican’s overarching desire for “complete suspension.”

As I screen and re-screen the video documents of Mullican’s hypnosis performances, it is this statement that resounds in my mind above all others, carrying with it what I see as the work’s most important message: We must value and nurture intermittent suspensions of criticality—not only in the art-making process, but elsewhere.

Mullican has indicated that the channel-surfing, music-jamming, dream-like sensation of not knowing what will appear or happen next while under hypnosis is precisely the sensation artists hope to—indeed, need to—experience everyday. Entering into this psycho-emotional state is not necessarily easy, as anyone who has tried to create something where nothing existed before has discovered. And “anyone” is, of course, everyone. Internal and external resistance, like the proverbial line in the sand, can stand in one’s way of periodically experiencing productive suspensions of criticality. Mullican’s hypnosis performances are instructive metaphors for how to cross over that line.

3. Matt Mullican, phone conversation with the author, 15 March, 2000. All quotes from the artist are from this conversation, unless otherwise indicated.
4. See my article, “Through the Image Maze,” Art in America 76, no. 1 (1988): 114-123, for discussion, albeit brief, of two of Mullican’s hypnosis pieces in the context of his other performance works, starting in his high school years through the late 1980s. For an account of Mullican’s earliest hypnosis pieces, see Allan McCollum’s essay, “Matt Mullican’s World,” reprinted in the present volume.
5. For discussion of this phenomenon in terms of the hypnotic subject’s abasement of “self-analysis” or “self-monitoring,” see Steven Jay Lynn and Judith R. Rhue, “An Integrative Model of Hypnosis,” in Theories of Hypnosis: Current Models and Perspectives, an anthology also edited by Lynn and Rhue (New York, 1991), 397-426. This anthology provides an enormously helpful overview of contemporary researchers’ work on hypnosis.
Allan McCollum

Our primitive impulse is to affirm immediately the reality of all that
is conceived, as long as it remains uncontradicted. ¹

"And there are no angels either, is that only a story too?"
"No, there are no angels, that too is only a story."
"But there are locksmiths, aren't there? For who else would make
the boxes?"
—From a conversation between a mother and her four-year-old
child.²

Seen from the point of view of the social sciences, our sense of
reality is acquired during childhood in the same way we acquire
language—through communication with those around us. The "real
world" is a domain we learn to inhabit only gradually, as we are taught
the names of things appropriate to its sphere, as opposed to the
names of those which are excluded; the relationships between things
are discovered to be synonymous with the relationships between
the word—symbols used to represent them; and as time goes by, we come
to infer the nature of reality—just as we infer the grammar of our
language—through our interaction with others. Because we learn
reality this way, it must be described as a social construction—
maintained by a community of belief, and transmitted from individual
to individual, from generation to generation, through the use of
symbols. Thus the everyday reality we take for granted is, at bottom,
a kaleidoscopic interplay of signs and meanings, created out of—and
bounded by—the conventions of those who came before us.

What is interesting about this sociological view of worldly
knowledge is that it locates the real world within the symbolic field
along with other realms of meaning in such a way that the difference
between the real and the not-real becomes a matter of social
convention—not as we generally assume, a self-evident differen-
tiation proceeding from natural law. If we were to articulate and
divide the continuum of experience in a different way—as anthropol-
ogists have discovered is done in different cultures—we would literally
inhabit a different "reality."

Thus reality can be felt to have a provisional, synthetic quality;
reducible as it is to a symbolic system, constructed from signs and
social conventions, it is never quite as cohesive as we would like it to
be—and its inherent precariousness compels us to expend a certain
constant effort to keep it intact.

It is this inner process—constructing the world we live in and
preserving its stability—which seems to be of special interest to Matt
Mullican. His work, which is the product of a detailed, near-obsessive
introspection, is devised as an elaborate attempt to duplicate
externally the vast complex of inner representations which add up to
his understanding of the world he lives in. Through the use of all
conceivable media—drawings, readings, performances, posters, signs,
sculptures, banners, etc.—he has undertaken to re-create for the
outer senses a multidimensional picture of those normally
unconscious, interior processes which are present in all of us.

Matt Mullican's World

Through his work, we watch a drama unfold—one which we all
experience in our day-to-day lives, but unconsciously—as he
represents the way he constructs, assimilates, disintegrates,
modifies, reconstructs, and generally works to maintain his personal
sense of reality.

To "live in reality" is more than a matter of mental organization
for the human animal; it is a matter of survival. Like the circulation
of blood, it is a system which must operate at all times; and like most
vital systems, it operates automatically, beneath the level of
conscious awareness. It is an elaborate mechanism, which serves not
only to hold a society together in the same cultural "world," but also
to provide its individual members with reliable defenses against the
frightening intrusions of "nature"—intrusions which constantly
threaten to destabilize or destroy their realities, and their lives, from
within and without. Its devices are tenuous, vulnerable, often
safes—dash, and enormously dependent upon the human mind's ability
to skip over and repress data which is inconsistent with its
expectations. Maintaining a stable sense of reality involves great
leaps of faith, frequent periods of amnesia, and well-guarded
mechanisms of denial.

It's no wonder that this system operates unconsciously; to deal
with these manipulations consciously would be as terrifying as having
to consciously make one's heart beat. What if your mind drifted for a
moment? Likewise, what if you forget to construct the stable world
you live in one morning, and were overwhelmed by the fear of death
before getting out of bed?

Not surprisingly, most of us consider that the less we have to
scrutinize our sense of reality, the better off we are; but like certain
other bedeviled members of society—scientists, philosophers,
metaphysicians, etc.—Mullican has felt it necessary to submit these
matters to the light of conscious and rational awareness. As it would
be with any of us, however, his inner picture of reality is by no means
rational; and it is with great difficulty that he tries to represent it in
objectified form. Thus his work becomes ever more urgent and
obsessional as it develops: the more comprehensive his project
becomes, the more contradictions arise for him to resolve; the more
he tries to define things with any certainty, the less certain his
criteria become, and so on. In this way his work is constantly growing:
every move he makes to simplify his investigations creates new
orders of complexity. If one could count the number of artworks
Mullican has produced towards the goal of representing his world, it
would run into the thousands.

THE SIGNS

It is only because man originally felt himself identical to all those
like him...that he came to acquire the capacity to distinguish himself
as he distinguishes them...³

...before any formation of the subject, of the subject who thinks,
who situates himself in it, [there is] the level at which there is counting, things are counted, and in this counting he who counts is already included. It is only later that the subject has to recognize himself as such, as he who counts.6

A large part of Mullican’s work is an ever-growing ensemble of single images, which he refers to as his “signs.”5 Not without irony, these signs are represented in a familiar style: that of those idealized, featureless pictographs we see in such public places where a commonality of language may not be taken for granted, as in international airports. Designed to take the place of words, these pictographs can represent a large range of concepts; they can direct us to a baggage area with a picture of a suitcase, or to a restaurant with the image of a knife and fork. Mullican, of course, has added many images of his own to this “wordless” vocabulary.

It is to a very primitive level of understanding that these kinds of pictographs appeal, by necessity of their purpose, which is to be universally recognizable. What is interesting in this context is that this level of understanding is rooted in a certain stage of the child’s early psychological development. This particular stage is characterized by the child’s beginning to assimilate these basic schemes of classification which are inherent in the way his environment is organized by those members of society engaged in his upbringing, and which serve to isolate and establish separate identities for the objects which make up that environment. It is to this level of object-relations that Lacan is referring in the above quotation, where things are “counted,” and where the counter includes himself as another item in the tally—before, as he explains, yet separating himself out as “he who counts.”

Taken as a whole, Mullican’s sign-making is a clear expression of this phase of understanding: he has produced hundreds of single signs representing the “objects” of his world, from pork chops to sexual acts to metaphysical ideas. Included prominently in this lexicon, of course, is the human form.

Since it is only after this stage of counting things that the subjective self is established as the center of awareness in the psychology of the child, the depiction of the human form in this pictographic vocabulary—counted as one type of object amongst others—can be seen to represent the “self” in precisely this presubjective way of understanding.

For example, when I recognize that the masculine figure represented on the restroom door in a certain sense represents myself, I am simultaneously accepting my membership in a class of like objects—in this case, people who are “men” as opposed to “women.” This little picture of a man is as much myself as it is any other man, no more and no less; it is “me” as I am located amongst “them”—but not “I” as opposed to “them.” The pictograph, by virtue of its neutral identity, appeals to and coincides with that phase of my ego’s construction situated prior to the transition from myself-as-object to myself-as-subject. Because the image represents myself only insofar as I am included, within a scheme of classification I learned as a child, my identification with it transcends any need for a sense of “self,” and engages my attention on a purely infantile level.

I am interested to stress the psychological character of this pictographic code not only to point out its appropriateness to communication without language, but also to suggest that because Mullican uses this style of pictography, he is able to address the viewer on a very specific level, or phase of human “knowing.” The primitive, childlike character of this phase sets the tone for his entire work.

This phase of knowing has a number of qualities peculiar to itself, two of which are of particular relevance to Mullican’s work. First, it can be seen to coincide with the limits of conventional self-know ledge. For insofar as this phase is established prior to the precipitation of a “self” capable of this knowledge, the scheme of classifications established here will necessarily represent the boundaries of that self. In other words, a self-knowledge which has grown out of the recognition that one occupies a particular location within a social ordering cannot turn around and trace itself back beyond the boundaries of that original location.

Second, this phase of knowing has difficulty with distinguishing between the “real” and the “not-real.” Because it originates in that stage of development where there is no discrimination between a self-as-subject and a world of objects, the phenomena appropriate to these two spheres—which should be relatively sorted out to the more mature phases of the mind—tend to become intermingled. That is, what we call subjective and objective realities are confused in the more primitive, immature mind. It is easy to see that the precariousness of our sense of reality is rooted in this phase of knowing.

It is this underlying preoccupation with the world as viewed from a presubjective position which separates Mullican from so many artists of his generation; for where other artists might use their work to invite us into a world of personal imagery, with which we may identify only by constructing analogies to our own private worlds, Mullican, by invoking a more primitive phase of knowing through his style of pictography (and the simplicity of his imagery), draws us into a network of identification where the original boundaries of our worldly knowledge can virtually coincide. He can do this because, as noted earlier, these boundaries are inherent in the schemes of classification society provides us, and which all of us, as members of the same society, must assimilate before that which we call “knowledge” can make its appearance.

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This simple “counting” of things—while it could go on indefinitely—isn’t enough to construct a world. Mullican’s signs represent widely diverse concepts, some of which belong to the realms of objective reality, and some of which do not. Such a runaway taxonomy could only create a meaningless world of jumble and chaos. Appropriately, however, Mullican guides this burgeoning proliferation into a totally comprehensive system. Through this larger ordering, he
attempts to sort out and establish differences between the subjective and objective worlds, the real and the not-real, etc. In this way, he works to define and identify not only the everyday reality in which he lives, but also the metaphysical dynamics which underlie that reality.

THE COSMOLOGY

In the observable human propensity to order reality there is an intrinsic impulse to give cosmic scope to this order, an impulse that implies not only that human order in some way corresponds to an order that transcends it, but that this transcendent order is of such a character that man can trust himself and his destiny to it.  

For those of us who are not professional theorists in the area of metaphysics, the question of cosmic order probably doesn't occupy too much of our moment-to-moment thinking. Nevertheless, we all carry within us some notion, however vague, of there being a general orderliness to the “scheme of things.” It is impossible to imagine getting through the day without a certain taken-for-granted sense of there being some stable arrangement to phenomena at large. Included in this sense of order, of course, is some idea or feeling about how we ourselves, as individuals, fit into the scheme; whether we believe in science, religion, or common sense, we feel that there is a place for us, and that our existence is provided for in some greater natural design than is apparent to the senses.

If someone were to ask us for a detailed description of how everything fits together, we would probably find ourselves short of ready answers; after all, our lives depend upon our taking certain things for granted. For Mullican, however, who is attempting to reconstruct his internally-pictured world in an external and communicable form, his individual sense of universal design must be articulated. However childlike or untenable his personal cosmology may be, it plays an extremely important role in his life: it is the matrix of all his experience, the organizer of his world. Without it there would be no relationships and no possibility of meaning.

There are two basic diagrams Mullican uses to represent his cosmology. One I will call his “World View”7 and the other his “Cosmology Proper.”8 Both versions take the structure of the perceiver’s consciousness to coincide with and provide the order for the universe at large; that is, because he sees there are different levels of awareness towards the world, the world itself can be sorted out into different categories. In this way, each category of his world coincides with the perceptual attitude appropriate to his cognizance of it. For example, the location of the “arts” in the scheme of things coincides with an attitude of awareness in which subjective realities are allowed to interact with the objective world; whereas the location of the “elements” coincides with the retreat of subjective involvement, towards what we might call a disinterested, objective point of view. Man stands at the center of Mullican’s universe, then, and the qualities of his world reflect the qualities of his perception.

The “World View” diagram represents the cosmological system as it should seem to an individual engaged in simply living his life: a sort of commonsense view of the world. The diagram, which has a vertical orientation, is made up of three relatively distinct levels, although these levels are to be understood as overlapping into one another; that is, the shift from one level to the next is a gradual one.

The middle level represents the life-world of the individual: his daily activities, the objects in his environment, and his relative awareness of himself engaged in his life. Pictured within this level are people, buildings, the sun and moon, etc. Here we have the simple, immediate world of everyday reality.

Moving upwards and downwards from this middle level we progress into the realms of the mental and the physical, respectively. Beneath the level of everyday reality, we move through the world of inert matter, through the elements, molecules, atomic and sub-atomic particles, and finally into an undifferentiated area Mullican refers to as “Pure Physics.” This level is mainly characterized by its systemic breakdown into simpler and more fundamental phenomena, its comparative lack of reflexive consciousness, and by its ultimate transgression into an area beyond any real accessibility to our consciousness. It is out of this level that the body develops from conception, and into which it deteriorates after death.

Moving upwards from the level of everyday reality, we pass into the various symbolic realms. Depicted here are signs representing language, value systems, the arts, science, history, myth, religion, etc. At the extremes of this level, these symbolic phenomena fade into a realm Mullican calls “Pure Meaning.” This level is characterized by its progression through an increasingly simplified order of psychic operations, its gradual dissociation from all reference to the material world, and its culmination in a formlessness beyond all possibility of knowledge. Mullican identifies this level with the unconscious, spiritual aspects of existence, and associates it with both the source of life before birth and the ultimate destination of life after death.

There are at least three strands of correspondence which connect the upper and lower levels of this chart: they are both ordered according to a greater and greater simplification of processes, they both progress beyond the reach of awareness, and they both lead to the ultimate fringes of the life span, birth and death. Because these correspondences exist, Mullican is able to organize his cosmology into a circular pattern, which in this form can represent the dynamics of the universe as a continuous cycle. This version, which I’m calling the “Cosmology Proper,” places the corresponding aspects of the upper and lower levels of the “World View” model in direct connection with one another: the breakdown of psychic operations into simpler and simpler processes interfaces with the analogous breakdown of matter into energy; the outer reaches of both levels, which are beyond consciousness, coalesce into one another to form a single, undifferentiated value, or void; and the fringes of life—birth and death in the material and spiritual sense—cullimate at the same point. It is this final culmination that closes the circle, thus constructing a slightly different model: here we have a repeatable and continuing life cycle.

The cosmology of the “World View” diagram, which is depicted with man at the center, is translated by this circular diagram into an
organization of universal relations which operate through man, and may therefore be called a cosmology in the more sophisticated sense of the word, as it might be used in metaphysics. At this point, Mullican's cosmology aspires to the status of those transcendent metaphysical systems upon which theologies and religions are generally based.

In fact, Mullican includes a "religion" in his world, and very prominent amongst his collection of signs is a religious symbol of sorts, which represents this circular cosmology. The symbol simplifies his chart into an emblematic design, in which a circle is divided into four equal quadrants. These quadrants, which alternate from black to white, represent four basic phases of awareness; they are, roughly: the pre-subjective; the subjective and objective in interrelation; the purely subjective; and the purely objective. This circular symbol is often represented in the form of a rectangle, similarly divided into four black and white quadrants. What it stands for, however, is the same; a cyclical, universal order in which all phenomena are characterized and arranged according to their relative status as compared with the objective or subjective point of view. Mullican's religion, then, based upon his cosmology, is the organizer of his orientation between the objective and the subjective, the known and the unknown, the real and the non-real.

Here again, we recognize Mullican's concern with the problematically tenuous relationship between reality and non-reality. Throughout his work, he focuses his attention along the fluctuating and permeable border which separates these two spheres, and his concerns as an artist are inseparable from his obsession with this primary differentiation.

It follows, then, that it is the structure of his cosmology which governs the whole of his work—not the conventions of the various media he utilizes. It is the artistic disciplines themselves—painting, drawing, theatre, etc.—which become as compositional units in this larger, cosmological scheme. In all of his work that involves duration, for instance, a narrative order is generally used which follows the sequence of the cosmological cycle; even the way he organizes his drawings, photos, and other graphic works upon the wall reflects this more comprehensive scheme. Everywhere in his work, then, the themes of moving from the known to the unknown, from the real to the non-real, from birth to death can be seen to prevail.

In a certain sense, then, what Mullican gives us is not quite art, but rather a complex and ambitious attempt to recreate the composition of that consciousness which precedes it, and through which its creation is possible. In Mullican's work, art seeks its place in the universal order of all phenomena.

Specifically, Mullican places art within the realm of the symbolic, as we might expect. The world of art describes a "fictional" reality, however, since he recognizes the anatomy of the "real" world to be made up of signs and symbols, the world of art and the world of reality obtain a queasy interchangeability. As transformational and unsteady a world as we recognize our fictional realities to be, how much more precarious is the world of reality, for which we en masse forfeit control by suppressing any knowledge of our own complicity in its construction as a symbolic system?

The symbolic activity of art, then, is for Mullican simply a play within a play; it is an acknowledged form of symbolic creativity set against an unacknowledged, but equally symbolic form of creativity we unquestioningly refer to as everyday reality. Mullican seems to view the polar worlds of reality and non-reality as an interrelated unit, with each implying the other, and by so doing, relying upon the other for its identity and meaning. It is this bipolar construct as a whole, this integrated dichotomy where the real and the non-real continually define each other, that locates and identifies the world of everyday reality and its relationship to the world of art. In other words, the non-real, or the fictional—as exemplified in the world of art—cannot be separated from the real, or the factual; they are two aspects of the same symbolic system.

To Mullican’s eye, then, the comfortable position of "reality" from which we perform as spectators into the contained arena of symbolic activity we call “art” is itself an unstable, fluid, and precarious world made up of those same signs and symbols which offer us such exotic entertainment; and these two symbolic worlds, separated only by conventions of belief, are forever in danger of collapsing into one another in an undifferentiated chaos, wherein all things would become equally real and not real—a situation we can only associate with madness or death.

In view of this danger—in which a work of art is seen to continually run the risk of becoming confused with the real world—the function of Mullican’s cosmology becomes clearer. It is a set of guidelines for organizing his experience—which, if followed, prevents the collapse of reality.

CONFRONTATIONS WITH EVERYDAY LIFE

Warranted systems have ever been the idols of aspiring souls. All-inclusive, yet simple; noble, clean, luminous, stable, rigorous, true—what more ideal refuge could there be than such a system would offer to spirits vexed by the muddiness and accidentality of the world of sensible things?

The "ideal refuge" of cosmological schemes, Mullican's as well as those constructed by human societies, have a way of being no more specific than is minimally necessary. They tend to provide general outlines and broad categories into which all phenomena should fit somewhere, but the specific work of assigning the details of experience to their proper places is largely left to the individual who takes the particular system to heart.

It is this kind of project which makes up the remaining part of Mullican's work: the coming to terms with life's details. Here the consoling belief in a stable and elegant universal order, and the security of having names for all things and things for all names must come face to face with the world of everyday experience—a world where the misunderstood, the marginal, the unnamable, and the uncanny lurk around every corner. The everyday world, however it
may be invented and re-invented, is regularly discovered, on a personal basis, to be irreducibly emotional, contradictory, and mysterious.

It is at this point that we can begin to see just how universal and human a dilemma it is that Mullican dramatizes for us in his work. Survival for all of us means that we must know reality—and yet how can we, when such knowledge itself is but a precarious construction riding upon an unruly substrate of unconscious desires, biological drives, and primeval fears? These forces are so alien to normal awareness that we must choose between hiding them from ourselves, or being overwhelmed by them completely. Either way, we may not know them—we are them.

It is to attempt to resolve these kinds of contradictions that cosmologies are created in the first place, and if we tend to forget the heretics involved in simply getting through life, Mullican is intent on reminding us.

Many of life’s experiences are easy to place into an orderly scheme of things, as long as situations remain routine. But many are not so easy. For example, the predictability of everyday reality is disrupted nightly, as each of us enters into the world of dreams. It is often only with difficulty that we are able to re-enter the “real” world upon waking, and certain dreams may govern our moods and our perceptions throughout the day. We like to think we can “explain” dreams, but it is doubtful that any of us are completely satisfied with our own explanations. The elegance of our cosmologies aside, be they Spiritualist or Freudian, we generally manage to deal with them most satisfactorily by simply forgetting them! Everyday life is filled with such small crises: accidents, misunderstandings, the confusion of fantasy with reality, the overwhelming power of one’s emotions, sickness, neurosis, etc; and sometimes, we are confronted with truly major disruptions of our taken-for-granted realities, such as natural cataclysm, war, insanity, and—the ultimate break in the routine of everyday life—the intrusion of death.

So it is these marginal situations in life, where the notion of predictable order is most difficult to maintain, that Mullican commonly chooses to confront in his work. He does this as a matter of course, as he organizes the details of life that are not dealt with in the more abstract cosmology. In this fleshing out of the general categories represented in his signs and his charts, he recapitulates the process we all go through in coming to terms with life—in-the-world. This recapitulation is accomplished through the various media of art, as the particular qualities he attaches to the different aspects of life are represented in such art forms as seem appropriate: photography for “real” things, posters and banners for “symbols,” drawings for imaginary or “fictional” things, theatrical performances for “events,” and so on. These various media have their particular location on the “Cosmology Proper,” and their use, in itself, is one of the initial steps in his representation of the details of life as he begins, essentially to “act out” the cosmology.

Confronting details is commonly problematic, as any case of turning general theory into specific practice will reveal; with cosmologies and other metaphysical systems, it’s often preferable not to look at anything too closely, or too many unanswerable questions arise—questions which make us doubt the validity of what we like to believe we “know” about reality. Most of Mullican’s work presents us with such contradictions as we would rather skip over in our thinking, lest we should suffer doubt about our fundamental capacity to know.

A good example of this focusing in upon what should remain vague is his drawing, “Detail of an Angel’s Wing.”10 In this simple pen- and- ink rendering, we are shown a “close-up” of the feather structure of an angel’s wing, in the tradition of Audubon. Now, there is no apparent reason an angel’s wing shouldn’t be represented in this manner; winged angels have been depicted by artists for hundreds of years, and scientific illustrators have given us detailed drawings of this type over and over again. The fact is, however, that ornithologists don’t study angels, and, maybe more to the point, theologists don’t generally analyze their body parts. Angels don’t need circulatory systems, skeletal structure, and so on; they are spiritual beings, and to ruminate over their physiology is to miss the point. And yet to investigate such details in the real world of science is virtually a moral imperative. In this drawing, two perfectly common realms of knowledge are brought into conflict, and questions arise as to the efficacy of either science or religion to explain the world in detail. To the degree that we might depend upon either of these two systems to provide us with answers, this drawing should inspire doubt about how and what we can “know” of the world.

It is this imminence of doubt—and the uncomfortable, sometimes frightening feelings that go along with it—that characterizes the tone of Mullican’s more detailed representations of his everyday world. As viewers, we are led with each of his works further and further into the realms of doubt which occupy such gaps as exist between our ways of knowing; little by little, we are made to focus upon those small leaps of faith, those brief moments of amnesia which serve to erode contradictions, and allow us the belief that we can know and understand the details of our worlds.

One of his pieces which dramatically illustrates this effect is a sort of tableau,11 in which he has reproduced life-size a photograph of the cadaver of an elderly man. The cadaver, which has been partially dissected, is lying on a laboratory slab, and the picture has been taken from above, giving a view which is uncompromisingly harsh. The photo is almost a caricature of an invitation to objective scrutiny—of a subject, of course, about which it is virtually impossible to be objective. Set adjacent to this photo, which hangs on the wall, is a table upon which have been placed some 1500 captioned drawings, the purpose of which, one infers, is to illustrate the life history of the deceased. Each drawing is of a simple stick-figure man, in varying positions, with an equally simple statement written beneath it; statements such as, “picking his finger,” “his thymus gland,” “his motivations,” “acting as if a child,” and so on. We naturally recognize that these illustrations are inventions of the artist’s, and are fictional—but we find that their plausibility as actual descriptions of this dead man’s life history is enough to generate a true feeling of poignancy. As we peruse through these drawings, the feeling grows,
until it begins to conflict with our knowledge that the illustrations are fictional—they could, after all, just as well be the "real" facts. The stick-figures, which operate in a way similar to that described earlier regarding the depictions of the human form in the pictographic "signs," invite us into a close identification with this man—a man whom we are told once loved, and was loved by others. These drawings slowly inspire real sentiment, or even grief, as this wealth of fictional data accumulates in our minds to achieve a strange, synthetic reality.

What occurs, I believe, is a recognition of how our knowledge of any human being—his fears, his joys, his life, his death—is as synthetically constructed in our minds as is this more obviously fictional representation. The question we must present to ourselves becomes: if I am experiencing what seems to be authentic feelings about a clearly fictional depiction, how may I assess the authenticity of my feelings—or my knowledge about the people I "know" to be real?

If we should suspect that this false poignancy is but our natural response to the photograph of the cadaver, which undeniably creates a dramatically eerie atmosphere around the whole piece, we might be further impressed by another of Mullica's works, in this case a performance, in which he recites a list of simple statements, similar to the captions of the drawings, but with no reference, visual or otherwise, to the existence of any actual person.

The reading (which is done in a subdued light) begins with the statement, "Her birth," and continues through around 200 or so cryptic phrases, ending with "Her death." These phrases describe what could be isolated memory images, or "moments" in a person's life, such as, "Hearing her mother upstairs," "Her best friend's brother," "Thinking about her son's life," or "Forgetting her age." The entire line of an unknown and undoubtedly fictional person is condensed into ten minutes worth of short, evocative statements, which are paraded through our mental apparatus almost faster than we can represent to ourselves the images which they invariably invoke. The accumulated effect of this assault on our image-forming capacity is an unquestionable growth of empathic feeling, or nostalgia; it is a feeling we would not have anticipated experiencing as a result of listening to a purely rote reading of such simple phrases which refer to a completely fictional human being of whom we know nothing, and have learned nothing. Again, we recognize an authentic and powerful poignancy in our response—not of the familiar sentimental sort that we are accustomed to feeling while, say, watching a melodrama, where we have willfully suspended disbelief, but a response which bypasses our will in the way spontaneous feelings develop in more appropriate circumstances, i.e., real life.

How one may confuse knowledge of imaginary reality with mental imagery of objective reality is further illustrated by Mullica himself in another brief performance. In this piece, he pins to the wall a drawing or photo of a typical living room interior which he has clipped from a magazine, or other popular source. He then proceeds to describe in realistic detail what he could not possibly know about the rest of the house, such as what one discovers when one walks up the stairs, or through the closed doors, etc. These descriptions are rich in personal observations and feeling, yet it is clearly evident that he is spontaneously creating these discoveries as he goes along; like a man in trance, he allows his imagination to operate beyond his conscious control, and virtually "dreams out loud" this unknown house in ever more elaborate detail. Recognizing that the house is imaginary, we still respond to his descriptions with the same mechanism of suggestibility we would expect of ourselves if we were being given "real" information about a situation we assumed to objectively exist; that is, we construct our own mental imagery of the house right along with him, in spontaneous response to his words. Again, we must question our everyday beliefs concerning how successfully we may know anything, the evidence for which we receive by way of language, symbols, imagery, and so forth. This is surely an unsettling question—considering that the bulk of what we experience as our "knowledge" is of exactly this type.

The degree to which one's imagination may construct one's experience in situations which are not so unequivocally fictional as those just described is investigated by Mullica in another performance in which he utilizes the techniques of hypnotism. For this piece, a number of actor-participants are hypnotized and given suggestions to perform certain improvisational sketches, such as, "Learning to talk," "Moving into a new house," etc. As is typical of so many of Mullica's performances, in that they involve duration, the cycle of his cosmology is recapitulated in the sequence of these improvisations, which begins with a "Birth" and ends with a "Death" sketch. The suggestions in this piece have been extracted from the list of statements described earlier, except in this case, the list is "acted out."

The difference between an actor performing an improvisation under normal conditions and under hypnotic suggestion is that the latter performer believes his actions are "real," even as he creates them. It is as if his preconscious censoring mechanism, or what Freud called his "reality function," has not only surrendered itself to the will of the hypnotist, but has also allowed his own personal ensemble of unconscious fantasy and memory images to insinuate themselves into his experience of objective reality. For example, if a hypnotized subject is told, say, that a certain box contains something very terrifying—but not told exactly what that object might be—his imagination, working unconsciously, will provide that terrifying object to his experience in full form, according to his particular psychological history, upon opening it.

Whole-hearted belief, then, is called into question as a practical criterion for knowledge of reality in this performance. We watch one of the female performers tremble with real emotion as she acts out a younger version of herself and touches hands with her "first love" (played by the artist in a non-hypnotic state), yet we know her experience is not "real" in any sense with which we are comfortable, or even familiar. In the final improvisation, in which a young actor not only becomes old but changes his sex to perform "an elderly woman dying," we find ourselves truly fearing that—due to his trance state—he might just die himself, through some biological misinterpretation of psychic signals generated from the intensity of his belief.
In a way quite symmetrical to Mullican’s rendering fictional characters “real” to our experience in some of his previously described pieces, this performance has the opposite effect of turning real people into fictions—not only in the sense that we see actors performing in made-up situations, but also, because of their hypnotically induced “belief,” also in the sense that they literally become fictionalized versions of themselves. They believe in the hypnotist’s suggestions and they believe in their unconsciously manufactured circumstances—to the exclusion of all the contrary evidence which is plainly visible to the audience. They become as puppets, or clippers—like the stick-figures in the cadaver drawings. When we consider that the hypnotic state is no more than an alteration of one’s normal, waking state—specifically, a reorganization of one’s attention—it is easy to wonder to what degree we are all “puppets,” constructing our realities according to the wills of others, the suggestions of society, and our own unconscious fantasies.

From the work described so far, it can be noticed that the idea of death plays a large part in Mullican’s work; more specifically, it is the paradoxical notion of a “fictional” death which arises over and over again. While it might seem that the notion of a fictional death should be no more abstruse or disturbing than a fictional “life” or “birth,” it is notable that we cannot experience our own death in the sense that we experience other major events connected with our existence; that is, it can never be remembered or recounted, as is the case with other aspects of our lives—it can only be anticipated intellectually. The contemplation of our own death, therefore, can never truly involve allusion or reference to anything in our real experience, and thus must share the qualities of fictionalization. Fictional characters who are fictionally dead, then, are dead to us in a way that is strikingly similar to the way real people can be dead in reality. In other words, although we may console ourselves in believing that we can know the difference between real life and fictional life, the difference between real and fictional death is more apt to escape us.

Whenever Mullican installs a gallery exhibit or does a performance, he usually reserves a part of a wall to display a sampling of his personal collection of “pictures”—magazine clippings, movie stills, snapshots, sketches, found objects, etc. Depictions of death, fictional and real, are always prominent in these arrangements, and there are two particular photographs that are nearly always mounted next to one another. This pair of photographs, which has at times been shown as a single work, comes very close to capturing the whole of Mullican’s dilemma in his trying to sort out the differences between reality, the representation of reality, and fiction.

One photograph, usually hung on the left side, is a portrait of the cadaver of an old man—the same cadaver used in the piece described earlier. The cadaver appears slightly deteriorated, with its eyes quite permanently closed. It is clearly dead. On the right, reproduced to about the same size, is a portrait of a hand-painted, antique doll—possibly the same age as the old man, in the literal sense, although the face is that of a child. The doll’s eyes are wide open, making it look remarkably alive.

At first glance, the juxtaposition seems to make perfect sense—the pictures represent life and death. But the question inevitably emerges: which represents which?

The doll, which looks alive, is certainly not, and never has been. It is made of inert matter, and is surely further from life than the cadaver, which is a real human body. Yet on the other hand, the doll is staring right at us in a very lively, if uncanny way, whereas the cadaver looks as dead as dead can be—and is dead, for sure. The cadaver could represent life compared to the invariable inertness of the doll, but, then again, the doll is certainly not dead, since it was never actually alive in the first place. Is a dead body more dead than “dead” matter? Or less dead? Is a living fictional person more alive than a real dead one? It begins to dawn on us that neither the doll nor the cadaver may be described as being more dead or alive than the other; what we are left with is an intensely provocative pair of photographs on the wall, and a perfectly appropriate pair of concepts, “life” and “death,” which should describe the opposition depicted, but can’t. The truth, of course, is that we are trying to compare beings from two different worlds: the doll, which is alive only in a world of fiction, and the cadaver, which is dead in a world of fact. As simple a truth as this is, however, it is a difficult one to hold on to.

The strength of this piece lies in the strong emotions it arouses; it really feels like we should be able to compare the two pictures on the same ground. This feeling, I believe, arises from our powerful wish to locate death—“real” death—within the realm of fiction. Who of us wouldn’t wish that death were only a fiction, and that this old man, who in spite of a life of work and suffering never wanted to die, could open his eyes again and deny the reality of his death? Is it fair that this little wooden manikin, who has come by life so easily through the skill of a dollmaker and his paints, should continue to live on indefinitely when the old man must succumb to such a sordid and permanent death? Shouldn’t we be able to give this poor cadaver some of the doll’s life, when the doll has so much to spare?

It is no surprise that the wishes which arise in response to this pair of photographs are like the wishes of a child: in the face of death, we are all children, unable to understand. The child that each of us was, who found the difference between the objectively real and subjectively non-real to be so confusing, is the child that endures within us throughout our lives. In this piece, Mullican has traversed the entire span of his cosmology: from the pre-subjective, unconscious desires which bestow life upon the inanimate, to the harsh, objective facts of material death.

The wide scope and sheer amount of Matt Mullican’s work makes it difficult to treat in a single writing—I’ve only described a small portion of it here. His subject matter is not simply his feelings about life, but his coming to terms with the whole of his existence; in order to understand himself and the world he inhabits, he is working to reconstruct it in every aspect, piece by piece. He has embraced a project that demands not only that he be Mullican the Artist, but also Mullican the Scientist, Mullican the Theologian, Mullican the Philosopher, and so on, until every bit of his knowledge, conceived from all possible angles, has somehow found its way into expression.
The world he constructs through his art is complex, poignant, frightening, and sometimes wondrous—but no more so than any of the worlds each one of us constructs, from moment to moment, as we create "reality" for ourselves. The difference is that Mullican is able to translate the particulars of this intimate, deeply personal process into such a clear and communicable presentation that he not only constructs an ascertainable place for his private world in the realm of public discourse, but also proposes to deconstruct our own personal realities as he does so.

3 Claude Lévi-Strauss, Totemism (Boston, 1962), 101.
5 The signs date from 1976 to the present.
6 Peter L. Berger, A Rumor of Angels/Madness Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural (Garden City, N.Y., 1969), 56. I would also like to acknowledge Berger's The Social Construction of Reality (Garden City, N.Y., 1966) and The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion (Garden City, N.Y., 1967) as having been extremely helpful to me in formulating some of the basic themes of this essay.
7 First designed in 1978, with occasional modifications since then.
8 First designed in 1974, with periodic modifications up to the present.
9 William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York, 1902), 331.
10 First drawn in 1976.
12 First performed in 1973.
14 Performed at The Kitchen Center, 1978.
15 First shown at Artists Space, 1976.

This text, written in 1979, was first published in Real Life (Winter 1980) 4-13.