

## Foreword

KASPER KÖNIG

One of the unusual features of Matt Mullican's oeuvre is the continuity with which he places each work within the cast of his artistic world-view. His conception of himself is reflected in a system of meaning he has developed that he plays out in a variety of media. His drive is to make his ideas about things and events that determine our lives vividly clear. In the realization, the experimental engagement with his own unconscious since the end of the 1970s plays a decisive role. Not only in his work in the studio, but also in public appearances and talks given under hypnosis, Mullican has repeatedly exposed himself to a limitation of his state of consciousness with the aim of setting a kind of behaving and experiencing in motion whilst largely blocking out all external stimuli.

The initiative for this exhibition goes back to Ulrich Wilmes, who has followed Mullican's work over the years. In 1990 he showed Mullican's *Computer Project* at Portikus in Frankfurt/Main as part of a four-part series of exhibitions that was realized together with the *Magazin* in Grenoble, the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterloo and the Stichting de Appel in Amsterdam. This collaboration also gave rise to the book, *Matt Mullican Works 1972–1992*, an ambitious project which impressively reflects the cosmos of works in a first monograph that has set standards.

Mullican has been working on the current project, *Learning from that Person's Work*, for DC:Saal, for more than a year. His main interest is not so much to draw a fictitious character, but rather to localize its origin in the artist's unconscious. Here he is mainly concerned with approaching the approximate locus of emergence of hundreds of

drawings and collages via a multi-layered complex. For this purpose Mullican has designed a fragile architecture whose borders are composed of bed sheets. These bed sheets function at the same time as the supports for paper works whose authorship he ascribes to "that person".

We owe our thanks first of all to Matt Mullican for friendly collaboration and especially for the design and realization of this project, which is extraordinary in every respect. I am indebted, also on behalf of Ulrich Wilmes, to Matt Mullican's assistant, Annie Hollingsworth, who has been a patient contact person in all the many questions that arose. Our master joiner, Armin Lüttgen, the bookbinder at the art and museum library, Günter Fiedler, and our house inspector, Ralf Feckler, with their respective teams, have done highly professional and very committed work in setting up the exhibition.

As usual, the current issue of *StadtRevue* included an insert under the title, *Publishing Art*, especially designed by the artist. It extends the actual exhibition in Museum Ludwig with a media dimension, thus making it more complex.

I would also like to thank GenRe, especially its vice-chairman, Dr Peter Lütge-Bornefeld, for the financial support for this exhibition. As always, I finally have to thank the members of the AC:DC: circle of sponsors who, under the initiative of Anna Friebe-Reininghaus, are making projects possible also in 2005. Their names are Johannes Becker, Dr Wolfgang Bornheim, Dr Dietrich Gottwald, Dr Andreas Hölscher, Paul Köser, Dr Dieter and Gabriele Kortmann, Andra Lauffs-Wegner, Doris Reimann, Udo Müller (Ströer-out-of-Home-Media) and Lee Weissman.

## That Person

ULRICH WILMES

It began with a slip of the tongue. When we talked about the idea for the concept of our project, I started our conversation with the remark that it would be my part to write “that biography’s person.” At first glance, “that person” is the symbolic character that Matt Mullican turns into during his performances under hypnosis. Thinking about the funny blunder, we soon realized that there was actually something to it which seemed to make sense. “Because it’s like trying to create connections after the person has died. So it is a biography before it is a person. We do it the other way round, we create the biography first. Usually, what happens is that the biography is written after the person has died, in this case, however, we try to create a person from his biography or from the beginning.”

We do not know much about *that person*. He exists, there is no doubt about that. But we do not know who he is. We have a certain knowledge about a number of details that characterize ‘him’ (and when I continue to say ‘he’ or ‘him’, it is because Mullican refers to *that person* as a male, simply for the sake of convenience). “I am trying to patch this guy together from what he has done. And he has done so many different things.” These details can be interrelated in order to create a context that turns into “that person’s biography.”

The information that Mullican has collected seems more or less important for the life of *that person*. Part of the information characterizes his emotions and ideas, other parts of the information tell us what he does. He likes to work, he enjoys everyday life, and he enjoys

working in society. He is a member of the working class who is aware of what is going on around him and who follows the news. He seems to be conservative, probably a right-winger. He is very interested in love and beauty, he writes lyrics about love, defining it as “not to say sorry.” *That person’s* philosophy of life is romantic, it is teaching people to respect themselves. He believes in justice and in God, he is very interested in the spirit of things, and he tries to look beyond the surface for their essence.

That means we learn about *that person* from what he does, from his behavior and his work. But we know (almost) nothing about this person’s identity, we do not even know whether it is one and the same person that we are learning about. Is *that person* a man or a woman? Where does he live? Where does he come from? He is both young and old, but how old is *that person* right now? So, is he alive or dead? Mullican speaks of *that person* as an individual. All he can say about him comes from him, from his subconsciousness and his memory. Mullican goes beyond the experiences and feelings in a specific context into which the hypnotist has directed him. This is a complicated process. The artist, while entering symbols of a fictional reality, submerges deeply in his own self, his own identity. This raises the question about the relationship of past, present and future. It seems that the fixed sequence of the flow of time is in permanent movement – which in turn makes it impossible to say whether *that person* has lived or is living.

Since the late 1970s, Matt Mullican has been very much involved in performances under hyp-

nosis. He started doing them after finishing his work on the stick figure that he called *Glen*. His intention was to prove that a stick figure leads a life! Hence, it was the symbol of a figure that was as real as he was himself, and Mullican wanted to enter this very image. When he started moving into the fictional reality of this stick figure, he was interested in the relation of life and death. He wanted to work with the dead body of a real person. When he finally had the opportunity to do so, he took photographs of simple actions on the corpse like touching the face, covering the eyes with his hand, blowing the hair at the back of the head, pinching the arm. That means he did similar things as the stick figure had done to itself. Mullican was interested in figuring out at which point the dead body lost its identity as an individual person and became a symbolic person that was represented by the dead body in the same way as it was represented by the stick figure. Mullican once said that the most interesting thing about a dead body was that shift between “him-ness” and “it-ness”, between the personality of an individual and the materiality of a body. In *Dead Man & Doll* from 1974, Mullican presents two photographs, one of the dead person’s head and one of the head of a doll. Neither of them is alive. But while the cadaver once was a living human being, the doll – like the stick figure Glen – lead a symbolic life. By going into that image, Mullican wants to break open what is already in us. So both these bodies of work are about analyzing the border zone between reality and fiction which is defined by symbols. That means they are about the question whether the world around us is real.

At this point, it almost seems evident that Mullican would start to work with hypnosis. He wanted to enter a character, finding himself in a situation in between consciousness and unconsciousness. From the very beginning of his experimental project with hypnosis and his performances under hypnosis, it seems to have been about who he is, what is in him, and who is a part of him beyond his identity in this so-called reality. And that would mean that Mullican believes in the possibility of a fictional reality as real as the world that we perceive.

“The first time he in a sense comes out, is in the very first performance I did with hypnosis. That was in *The Kitchen* (New York), I think in 1978. In the first performance, I had someone else be hypnotized that was not me. I had three people be hypnotized. The hypnotist would put them under hypnosis and they acted out this woman’s life from birth to death and the ‘Details from an Imaginary Universe.’” In the *Birth to Death List* from 1973 Mullican wrote down a symbolic biography. It breaks up a real woman’s fictive life or the real life of a fictive woman from her birth to her death. “But it is not necessarily meant about being a woman, it is about being alive.” It is like looking at one’s own life from the angle of view of another person, like an autobiography written and read by someone else. So it has both the interior view of the individual and the view from outside. Unlike a usual biography, the list places the important and (seemingly) unimportant moments of a lifetime on equal footing next to one another. It includes everyday incidents and random occurrences that live on in one’s memory without any comprehensible reason. Brushing her teeth becomes as important to her as giving birth to a child, smelling the air is as significant as her son’s marriage, kissing her husband is par with her father’s death, etc. Thus, this juxtaposition of events, actions, experiences and states comprises all the different aspects of behavior which had previously applied to the stick figure, the dead man and the doll.

The next stage for Mullican was to be hypnotized himself. His first performance under hypnosis took place in 1979 in *The Kitchen* in New York. “I wanted to have myself hypnotized and I had myself hypnotized to be basically a five-year-old. And so the five-year-old had this kind of clumsy body and he kind of moved oddly and he had everything that I still have, although the person I am now is not a five-year-old. He acts like a five-year-old, but he is not a five-year-old.” In another performance in the *Foundation for Art Resources* in Los Angeles, Mullican acted in four different stages of age: as a three-month-old, a five-year-old, a thirty-five-year-old and an eighty-five-year-old, which covers a whole lifetime. That means when he is being hypnotized, the hypnotist puts him in a trance with the re-

quirement of turning him into someone of a certain age. "I ask the hypnotist to say that to me, so it is something I am interested in, because it is so subjective. You know, one's age is very subjective as to how one acts. I remember when I was the infant, the most impressive memory was light. I was just looking up at the lights and they hurt my eyes. That was the most impressive thing. And I was playing with the lights of my hand, I remember that. That's my memory. Who knows whether I did or not? And then the next one was the five-year-old, and I drew a picture. In the book, there is a picture of me as a five-year-old, doing a drawing of a cat, and when you look at the drawing, you think I am actually seven. I looked like a seven-year-old. My posture is perfect for a seven-year-old, and I ask people, how old do you think I am in the picture, and people think I am a child, but then I tell them, you know, I was twenty-eight. They can't believe it."

In the following years, Mullican developed the concepts for these hypnosis pieces, moving deeper and deeper into the research of life as a historical construction that is built from our memory and imagination. He uses hypnosis to challenge the relation between the subjective and the objective. The hypnotist tells him things which he then works out. It is not a psychoanalytic process meant to teach you something about yourself by using your subconsciousness. So when Mullican is hypnotized to be *that person* at a certain age, he isolates this character from a context of meaningful symbols that we put around us in order to be able to understand the world. "These people were me. They were absolutely me. I have done a performance once at *The Kitchen*, and this was in 1982, in which, when I went out to introduce myself to the audience, I said very clearly that I was not a man nor a woman nor young nor old. I was both a man and a woman, and I was an infant and I was young as a child and I was very old. So, I stood in the center of all those concepts."

In 1983, Mullican stopped doing performances under hypnosis and shifted his major focus from an introverted exploration of a personal life to the public aspects of his works. In 1996, he picked up the project again with a series of 15 performances that were produced in Brussels

and published as a video edition. Mullican admits that the development of his hypnosis pieces has become "very vague", in the sense that he "put[s] absolutely no age onto the character ... no sex, no situation onto the character." Thus, when we are talking about *that person* now and we are thinking about him being a character, we cannot be sure whether it really is a person. Mullican calls it a person, simply for the sake of convenience. Although he is convinced that he is dealing with somebody, we cannot be sure that it is always one and the same person. "It is not necessarily a *who*, it might be a *what*, it might be a situation, you don't know. ... Because of the fact that it is free-forming and that it changes from minute to minute, it could also be a situation and could be anybody in a particular room. And I go and I jump from one person to the next and thus, it's a context of a place rather than an actual individual in that room."

It is obvious that in his recent pieces, Mullican's interest has shifted from the idea of finding an individual to finding a situation or a place. "When I am in the trance, it's like you're a radio, an AM radio, and I'm moving it around the room. I'm receiving different kinds of information. And they don't necessarily make sense, you know. If I have an AM radio and I'm on the dial going from one channel to the next, it's chaos, there's no information. You have to stay on one channel for a while, but if it's a kind of free-flowing thing, then there's no rhyme or reason." That means, when he is doing what he does, he is less interested in who he is, but rather in where he is when he will go there. Because Mullican is convinced that when he enters this process, he will be going somewhere. This unknown location or state lies between his consciousness and his unconsciousness. So it actually does not make sense to speak about *that person*, because he is like a *modus operandi*. In this advanced understanding of his working under hypnosis, Mullican looks for a way of being, rather than being an individual. But he refers to that way as an individual, he personalizes an abstract notion so to speak, again for the sake of convenience. He calls it *that person*, because it is rather an anonymous person that can be anybody. And so we return to the confu-

sion of "That Biography's Person", as Mullican really tries to create a person from the bits and pieces of elements that he picks up when moving into that image. He knows this and that about the person, but he does not know how these details are connected. "I know that he wants to work. I have a pretty good idea that he does not work, that he cannot work. But I don't know how old he is, I don't know where he lives, yet these things may not exist, simply do not exist in his life or in my relationship to him." In a session with his hypnotist some weeks before I wrote this article, Mullican wanted to track down the reason or purpose of what he was doing in the museum. He asked why he was doing that thing in that museum? What was he doing when he was building those tents? Why was he making those walls out of bed sheets? Why was he using bed sheets? The answers that Mullican found revealed a wide range of connotations. "I said, well, it is like a skin, when you sleep, it is like a skin that covers you, that keeps you warm. It is interesting how it functions when it is put up on a wall. When it becomes a wall, it is a transient thing. As a child, one plays with bed sheets, one builds tents. In your bed, you're huddled. The beds are soiled and they are sexy, they are also unconscious and they are body. And they are death."

From these bed sheets a kind of labyrinth is constructed. It has six chambers and a connecting corridor that leads from the entrance along the complete width of the space. Behind the corridor, the space is divided into two halves with three chambers on each side. The width of the bed sheets is the module for the grid of the floor plan. Each of the two halves is four sheets wide and six sheets long. They are separated from one another, so that one cannot go directly from one section to the other. The entrance to the left is two sheets wide, and it is centered. To the right there are two entrances that are separated off by two sheets. This contrasting structure is mirrored by the placement of the walls inside the chambers. Thus the walls have a complementary structure that leads us on to a concave and a convex path respectively. The architecture is built of 84 sheets. On each of them, nine pictures on paper are glued onto the fabric, the combination of the pictures then forms a

kind of image. Each chamber is dedicated to one theme, so that we have some major themes *that person* seems to be particularly interested in. These are truth, beauty, work, and, in the first place, love.

Mullican once mentioned that love has never been a subject of his own work. "Love has not been a part of my work, yet it is at the center of this person's work. *That person's* work is all about love. Love is the most important thing. Nothing in human experience is more important than love. It represents everything. And yet, it is very abstract. This is a word that I never used, and it is curious that this information comes with this character." This means, he needs the *modus operandi* of *that person* to bring up this information. It obviously exists in him, and that is why he said: "Learning from that person's work." Mullican digests his work subconsciously, demonstrating that we are in control to a large extent, but that our reactions are not. "It's all about how we see things intuitively, how we know things without knowing them. When you are walking and you have a very quick glance at someone, you know what they are, who they are, what their intentions are. We read more than we know we read, we pick up on the body, on facial expressions, and we pick up on details we don't realize."

Hence, the most interesting question for Mullican when he is in trance: "Where am I?" His concern is to understand what happens when being in that state of mind. He knows that the audience who is watching a performance or is looking at the pictures wants to make sure whether he is in a trance or not, because it proves that the information that is brought up is legitimate. "Fifty-eight sheets, each with my pictures. So it's nine by 85, that's more than 750 images, you know. Seven hundred and fifty of these pictures. That's a lot of work, a lot of information that might be more or less real to people. And here they are going to say, if he is unconscious, then it is really interesting, but if he is aware, then it is not interesting. But the pictures are the same. They do not change. There are just there."

From his experience with working in a trance and the reaction of the audience to it, Mullican knows that most people have a wrong idea of

what a trance is, because they relate it just to a state of mind that one reaches under hypnosis only. But for him, bringing yourself in a trance-like state is a commonness. "When you do any kind of meditation, for instance, when you do yoga, you really put yourself into a trance-like state. It is a trance state. When you are dancing to music, when you are playing a football game, you are in a trance, because your consciousness has changed. It is not just the adrenaline, but it has to do with concentration. It is like you are acting subconsciously when you are preparing yourself to do what you are up to. You do not act the way you did earlier. You are getting yourself prepared." Therefore Mullican relates his notion of trance to its incidence and significance in our everyday life, which in another part of his work he calls "World Unframed." It describes the second of the five states of being from pure material to pure spirit. In this simple model of an explanation of how we perceive the world, the "World Unframed" symbolizes those actions and processes that we do not realize, because in most of what we do, we are 'set on automatic'. "And all I am doing through

trance is to demonstrate this. It is a fundamental part of the art making process. (...) It is very much like putting yourself into the consciousness of working which in a sense is putting yourself into a trance-like state. Because when I am in the studio, there are no windows. I listen to the radio, I put headphones on, and I listen to music. I am here working, and the *modus operandi* of my work has to do with this character, this other kind of character that I am trying to unearth. *That person* who believes in truth, beauty and love."

Thus, Mullican sees the biography "as a sense, as a feeling. (...) For instance, I am reading this book about a man who lost his brain. He lost his mind, he could not define what things are, he would look at this object and he could not tell you what it was. He would tell you what it did but he could not tell you what it was. He had no sense of it. But when we think, I do not believe that we think in words. I think we believe in feelings rather than thinking in words. I think you could say that thinking in music is closer to the way we think than writing."

All quotations are taken from conversations of the author with Matt Mullican on December 7, 2004 in Cologne and on February 19, 2005 in New York.