

## 'That Person's Workbook' or Enquire Within About Everything

FRANCES FOLLIN DISCOVERS THE WORLD OF MATT MULLICAN



Joshua Decter, writing in *Art Forum* in 1993, suggested that Matt Mullican 'has always been most interested in articulating the unstable negotiation between the rational and the irrational'.

In attempting this, Mullican (American, b 1951) has created thousands of artworks, a number of imaginary characters (alter egos?) and been repeatedly subjected to hypnosis – not in the safe privacy of a surgery, office or home, but in front of audiences. In all this, he has been exploring the nature of subjectivity, navigating a very detailed imaginary universe that looks like the one we also inhabit, but not seen quite as we usually see it. Mullican's project seems to be to convey his own take or takes on 'reality' and in doing so to make us, too, aware of that 'unstable negotiation between the rational and the irrational'.

In January 2007 Mullican was interviewed by Adrian Searle in the packed basement of Koenig's bookshop at 80 Charing Cross Road, London. In the interview, he recalled creating his first character, 'Glen', in his series of 'Stick Figure Drawings' (1973) as part of an attempt to explore his own subjectivity and even the nature of his own existence. There seems to be a shamanic quality to this: Mullican sees such characters as fragments of himself, but in the form of personalities mined from his unconscious, whom he can meet. Later in the 1970s he first created (or discovered?) 'that person': a human being whose name, age

and sex are unknown to him – Mullican says he uses the masculine pronoun for 'that person' as a matter of convenience.

As Mullican explained in the Searle interview, 'that person' is aware that he is not real but desperately wants to be real, and to that end cuts out magazine pictures of the life he would like to have – a family, work, holidays – and records in a 'workbook' his thoughts, feelings and attempts to construct a life. The domestic,

the sexual, the philosophical, the commercial, the culinary, the horticultural, the sartorial – 'that person' seems fascinated by it all – and given the enormous readership of the magazines from which he has culled images for his workbook, we must admit that this fascination is only a reflection of that of 'real' people. To 'that person' perhaps every 'real' person is a celebrity, yet the only 'real' people (and real lives) accessible to him are those depicted, so unrealistically, in the magazines he cuts up. The irrational cult of the celebrity naturally depends on the rational exploitation of such fascination by the producers of the magazines: 'that person' longs to be real, while thousands (it appears) long to be 'really' like the people in magazines. An unstable negotiation, indeed.

In 2005 Mullican produced an exhibition 'Learning from That Person's Work' at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, with a further development of the theme, 'That Person's Workbook: Pavilion' at Art Unlimited in Basel in 2006. The artist then decided that he should try to capture something of the installation in book format. The book, published by Ridinghouse in 2007, is called simply *Matt Mullican That Person's Workbook*. Having worked in print production myself for many years, I can tell that this must have been a real labour of love for the team at Ridinghouse – you get a lot of book for your money here. It includes reproductions of the magazine images collected by 'that person', and many notes ('that

person' has trouble spelling), drawings, charts, doodles (a few, Mullican says, produced while under hypnosis) – all reflecting a desperate desire to find and express what life is, and then to live it. Work, truth, love and beauty are mentioned repeatedly, as if in these things 'that person' sees the essence of human existence, yet it is all – apparently – unattainable: 'Little did he know the gods where [sic] laufing [sic] at him and not with him!' Nonetheless, he is 'trying to do something but cannot But keeps trying'. The pages of the book, over 700 of them, document the struggle.

Even leaving aside the magazine images, which are numerous although a small proportion of the whole book, the content of these pages is not unfamiliar. Parts of the text seem as if written by a child, while others read like a teenager's diary, full of the struggle for self-knowledge, and knowledge of what life is, that can never be entirely solved: most of us just get too busy with the day job to spend too much time thinking about such matters in later life. For Mullican, thinking about them is the day job, and he has evidently worked very hard at it, though as 'that person' points out 'Play, fun does not exist he has no fun, all he wants to do is work! BUT HE THINKS THAT IS NOT FUN BUT IT IS'. So to work is to play? Work is a permeating theme: 'working day – my perpose [sic] in life'; 'I love working'; 'my work my work my work'. Possibly for 'that person', as for St Benedict, to work is to pray: he does not seem to pray as such but refers repeatedly to God ('God's truth is great, we are nothing'; 'truth is the relationship between spirit and God'). In his essay at the end of the book, Ulrich Wilmes say 'He ["That person"] believes in justice and God, he is very interested in the spirit of things, and looks behind their surface for their essence'.

This leaves only several hundred pages I have said nothing about.

In his essay at the end of the book Ulrich Wilmes of Cologne's Ludwig Gallery, asks 'Who do we think?' Wilmes examines Mullican's relationship with 'that person'. He quotes Mullican: 'Love has not been a part of my work, yet it is at the centre of this person's work. "That

person's" work is all about love'. He reveals that Mullican himself carries a notebook – or 'workbook' – with him wherever he goes and it is one of these workbooks (or several of them, to judge by the finished product) that has been appropriated by 'that person'. Wilmes also discusses Mullican's use of hypnosis: 'From the very outset, his experiments with hypnosis and his performances under hypnosis seem to deal with questions of who he is, what is inside him and who is a part of him beyond his identity in so-called reality'. He compares Mullican's work to 'an autobiography written and read by someone else'.

There is an interview with Mullican by psychologist and hypnotist Vicente L de Moura. Naturally, de Moura's interview concentrates on hypnosis, a method used by Mullican to engage with 'that person' and other creations. Mullican answers de Moura's questions in great detail, recounting his first attempts at using hypnosis in his art (performances in which actors were hypnotised) and his own later performances, which he found variously embarrassing or terrifying. Despite some long breaks from the use of hypnosis, however, he has always returned to it. The audience reaction can be very negative – he has been accused of making fun of autistic people, for instance – but what seems to attract him repeatedly to these experiments is the chance to explore 'the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious'. He says 'It seems like what I'm doing with the trance state is simply taking my brain apart and looking at it'.

A few days after the interview with Searle in Koenig's basement – a paradise for an art book lover, by the way – Mullican gave a performance under hypnosis at Tate Modern (see TateShots issue 2 at [www.tate.org.uk/tateshots/archive.htm](http://www.tate.org.uk/tateshots/archive.htm)). Writhing on the floor swearing, or sitting at a table of rather unappetising assorted food and drink, Mullican appeared to be in genuine distress, and the genuineness of these performances seems to be something that concerns both the artist and his viewers. In a world of CGI, an almost infinite number of TV channels and their artificial 'reality' shows, and Internet chat lines where teenage Suzy can be 50 and male, audiences are anxious to know that what they are seeing is authentic. Their attitude is a problem for Mullican:

I've used the word fake quite often – I did that to get it out of the way because that seems to be what everyone wants to see. Is this real or is it not real? Is he faking? . . . So it all becomes a test for them [the audience]. It would be much easier if it wasn't a test and they were just like OK this is a body of work that we're seeing and duh duh duh whatever happens happens, but it's never like that.<sup>1</sup>

Before a performance he is hypnotised by a regular associate who asks him what he is interested in, what he would like to do today. They discuss the performance while Mullican is under hypnosis. He says that once the performance begins, he tends to repeat the same actions, such as putting a line of masking tape on the floor between himself and the audience. He is often asked if he is unconscious during the performance, but describes his state rather as being 'hyperconscious'.

As he tells de Moura in the book interview, 'people come up to me after the performances and say, "this is so weird, it's so bizarre". But they can almost always relate to it'. At the end of the interview he asks de Moura 'What am I heading for in all these performances. Is there a goal, do you think there's a goal?' De Moura is not quite sure, but concludes 'I would say the goal is to become oneself'.

<sup>1</sup> Matt Mullican, interviewed at Tate Modern, 27 January 2007, for TateShots (<http://www.tate.org.uk/tateshots>).



UBS Openings: Saturday Live Matt Mullican. Tate Modern, January 2007. All photos: Sheila Burnett. CourtesyTate.

**Editor's note**

Matt Mullican: *That Person's Workbook* Interview: Matt Mullican and Vicente de Moura; Essay: Ulrich Wilmes Co-published by MER. Paper Kunsthalle and Ridinghouse £48.00 744 pp. c 700 colour illustrations; 340 × 209mm ISBN 987-1-905464-06-7.

A show of Matt Mullican's work is planned for October 2008 at Karsten Schubert, 5–8 Lower John Street, Golden Square, London W1F 9DR.