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| IF I CAN'T DANCE,<br>I DON'T WANT TO BE PART OF<br>YOUR REVOLUTION               | AND | VANESSA DESCLAUX  |
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| IN CONVERSATION  |     |   |
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On Thursday 5 May at 19:30 hrs. If I Can't Dance presents a lecture by Matt Mullican at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The lecture kicks off the research period of curator Vanessa Desclaux and Matt Mullican in the framework of Performance in Residence.

Since his very first performance in the Kitchen in New York in 1978, Matt Mullican (Santa Monica, CA, 1951) has worked with hypnosis. Over the years, Mullican has developed a practice of being hypnotized in public, which has led to the formation of a character with specific gestures and traits. This character is referred to as 'That Person', and in every performance displays recurring behaviour such as singing, crying, making coffee and drawing on paper and on walls. Mullican describes the hypnotic state as follows: "You feel as if you can sit for hours and examine the world with amazing concentration. That is really what hypnosis is all about: concentration and tactility. When I come on stage in a trance state, I circulate around the area. I put my cheek to the wall. I crawl on the floor. I kiss the corner of the room. I shuffle my feet. I touch things all the time. I acquaint myself with the space and I mark it for myself. It is the weirdest sensation, very animal-like. In that sense hypnosis is really more active than passive, only there is no script, no idea. You do not know what you are going to do." In his lecture at the Stedelijk Museum, Mullican will speak about his performances and his relation to That Person.

If I Can't Dance has invited Vanessa Desclaux to research Mullican's hypnosis performances. The continuous evolution of these over the years makes them a unique body of work in the context of performance history. This body of work raises questions about the singular quality of the performative event as opposed to the repetition and renewal of his performances, questions that If I Can't Dance is interested in exploring through its Performance in Residence programme. The research will result in the development of a new performance with Matt Mullican, to be presented in 2012.

Mullican is at present rounding up a yearlong archiving project, called *Work in Residence*, which can be seen at Hedah in Maastricht until 31 May 2011. At the invitation of the Jan van Eyck Academie, the Edmond Hustinx Foundation and Hedah centre for contemporary art, Mullican made several exhibitions over the course of the year, highlighting diverse aspects of his work. Simultaneously, the video archive of Mullican's hypnosis performances stayed in residence at Hedah and was made accessible for researchers and other interested parties for the whole year. An inventory taker went through the collection and categorized all the actions and gestures that took place in the performances. Mullican is planning to use this inventory as a starting point for the development of his new work. *Work in Residence* originally inspired If I Can't Dance to give the name Performance in Residence to its new research programme, which started in autumn 2010.

Matt Mullican lives and works in Berlin and has been lecturing and performing for many years. Besides his performative practice, Mullican makes drawings, photographs, flags, sculptures, computer generated cityscapes, and video. His multifarious output gives meaning to representation through an investigation of our relationship with the world of images, and looks at how our identities are constituted in the process. A comprehensive solo exhibition, titled *The Encyclopaedist*, opens on 10 June 2011 at the Haus der Kunst in München.

Vanessa Desclaux currently holds a research position at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht, where she is studying the archive of Matt Mullican in close dialogue with the artist. Vanessa Desclaux is an independent curator based in Paris. In addition, she is a practice-based researcher at Goldsmiths College in London on the MPhil/PhD programme in Art.

During his studies at CalArts in the seventies, Mullican began making his first drawings of stick figures. For one of these figures Mullican created a whole life on paper, as he strove to find out what lay beyond the frame of the paper and thought of ways to 'enter the picture' himself. He tried to establish a personal relationship with this imaginary figure named Glen, and set about trying to prove that Glen could feel pain, as a way of thinking about how we approach images empathically. These drawings would develop into a larger investigation into the representation of the world for which Mullican developed a graphic language of signs. In elaborate maps and charts that display a rich symbolism of colours and abstract pictograms, Mullican gives shape to imaginary cities and encyclopaedic structures. They can be understood as a private universe, which the artist refers to as his cosmology. Within this cosmology, yellow stands for 'the world framed', the symbolic world of the arts and sciences; blue for 'the world unframed' of everyday functional objects; green for 'the elemental world' of nature; black and white combined signify 'the world of languages and signs', and red stands for 'the subjective world', which is pure meaning itself. The cosmology is a way for Mullican to study the physical manifestations of things and our subjective projections onto them.

Where can Mullican's hypnosis performances be located within his overall cosmology?

I think it is clear that at the beginning Mullican used hypnosis to go further into the idea of embodying a fictional character. Actors do that all the time; they try to become their character, to assume another identity. The first performance under hypnosis was performed by actors. Mullican however was looking for something more akin to his exploration of images, a mental process of entering the image and questioning its phenomenological reality. He himself became the subject of hypnosis for the second performance. This seems to provoke an essential change in the role of hypnosis in the work. In the first performance, with two actors embodying a demon and an angel fighting over a soul, the structure of the cosmology remains intact; we only see an intensification of a process of research into acts of personification. As characters, angel and demon already belong to the cosmology, to the spiritual realm of myth and belief.

When the person put into a hypnotic trance is the artist himself, something different occurs. The same subject who is at the origin of the cosmology (which stresses Mullican's intense need and desire to produce an ordering and classifying structure to account for his perception of inner and outer reality) is also the subject who undergoes the trance state. It is challenging to know how to define the trance state, but in my research at this stage, I would say that it has a disordering function. It

brings a noise into the system of the cosmology, a disturbance. It obliges Mullican to re-assess his perceptions and certainties. This has led me to initially oppose the model of order of the cosmology with one of chaos inherent to the hypnosis. Through hypnosis, Mullican's symbolic distinction between 'the world unframed', which would encompass the realm of pure experience, and 'the world framed', which would be the realm of human representations, becomes unstable. Mullican's performances under hypnosis are arguably a work of art, thus belonging to the realm of 'the world framed', and yet, central to the dispositif put in place by the trance state is an idea of 'experience' that allows the artist to access 'blind spots' of consciousness, mental states that are at the limit between being asleep and awake, between activity and passivity.

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| PRESENTATION   |
| <i>Lecture by Matt Mullican</i><br>Thursday 5 May 2011, 19:30 hrs<br>Stedelijk Museum<br>Paulus Potterstraat 13<br>1071 CX Amsterdam<br>Bookings: www.stedelijk.nl<br>Tickets: EUR 5 plus museum admission |
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When Mullican is under hypnosis, he is That Person. For the *Work in Residence* project, Mullican's performances spanning a period of thirty years have been inventoried and recurring actions, gestures and character traits have been identified. Is it possible to discern character development and maybe even a narrative that progresses with every performance?

Mullican claims to be That Person when he is under hypnosis. I insist on this idea that he 'claims to be', not to show distrust in the artist's discourse, but to highlight that this continues to be a subjective position on his part. The real nature, in psychological terms, of That Person is an object of wonder and speculation, which is why it is so interesting.

However, Mullican has retrospectively realized that precise patterns of behaviour have emerged during the performances. The emergence of That Person through the performances under hypnosis has not been linear but patterns of gestures and of emotional states are revealed by the recurrence of ideas of love, beauty, health, or work, ideas that appear in his speech as well as his drawings. This construction of a character in retrospect is really important; it stresses Mullican's impulse to gain control over the artistic production, and his need to make sense of this character, and his relation to it. You invent a language and then you try to learn to master it. In a way, the process that is being worked out in relation to That Person is similar to Mullican's approach to the language of signs and symbols that he uses in other works. All the same, I am reluctant to talk about a narrative. Narration suggests a specific linear progression. I would like to bring in the distinction that Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen makes between two sorts of dramaturgy: He describes Aristotelian dramaturgy as a mimetic ritual, of katechis; and opposes it with a Brechtian dramaturgy, which breaks with the mimetic ritual in order to distance itself from theatrical illusion. This act of distancing is carried out in Brechtian theatre through a form of didactic narration. Borch-Jacobsen makes a parallel between Brecht's choice of epic narration and Freud's foundation of psychoanalysis. For Borch-Jacobsen, hypnosis appears as a form of mimetic ritual and he thus considers the exclusion of hypnosis in Freudian psychoanalysis as a rejection of the mimetic ritual in favour of a mode of speech based on narration. This linking of hypnosis with mimetic ritual is very relevant to Mullican's performances where he seems to repeat series of everyday life gestures and actions in the absence of any script. Mullican is not a storyteller but an imitator, an appropriationalist. He insists on the relation between his practices and the practices of appropriation in the 1980s. What he appropriates is his own psyche, but through hypnosis, the psyche is distanced from biography, from narration, and moved into imitation and repetitive patterns of actions and gestures.

You mention Brechtian and Aristotelian dramaturgy. Can you elaborate further on how you connect traditions of drama to Mullican's performances?

Mullican says that he had not until recently done any serious research into traditions of drama. However he acknowledges being fascinated by different director's methodologies and by the exercises actors use to get into character. He says that these exercises have something in common with his own experiences of entering pictures. In his current exhibition at Hedah, copies of nine of his notebooks are on display, filling 35 bulletin boards and the walls of the gallery space. We can read in these notebooks about early ideas for performances that consist, for example, of sitting on a chair and looking at a doll, or looking at a painting and imagining different scenarios that take place in the picture or around objects. To quote from one of these notebooks, "I at a certain level can work with these problems but it doesn't seem to be using written words. I work better with 3D and 2D examples of the ideas, illustrations that illustrate themselves. I feel a great advantage in not being too explicit and not getting too far from the action I'm working with." Although Mullican does not talk directly about narration - he talks more generally about using language - I am interested in his use of the term 'action' and its relationship to Aristotelian *katechis*. Through hypnosis, and despite the construction of character that has been taking place in retrospect, performance after performance, over the years, Mullican prevents himself from indulging in a simple linear narration of the fictional life of That Person. Mullican instead appropriates his psyche. The work resists narration because That Person is the place of a suspension of individuality, of time as chronology, and of the conscious mind.

In his performances, as you described, Mullican lets go of a narrative structure. There is no predetermined action, only repeated gestures, and he is just there, on the stage, ad infinitum. His performances do not have a fixed duration and can last for over an hour while nothing really 'happens'. At the same time, by doing this, Mullican displays an enormous drive to push the act of personification of That Person to the limit. How do these two poles - the kind of slowness of 'being' and the drive towards a 'transgression' - work together in his performances to create a tension?

This is an interesting question. Once Mullican becomes the subject of the hypnotic trance, the question of personification shifts. In his early performances, the act of personification was still very central, with suggestions that made him embody a young child or an older woman, or his future self - he describes this very intense performance, of which there are no records, during which the character under hypnosis was Mullican in his early thirties. In later performances, Mullican focuses through the suggestion of other aspects, which seem more to do with space, with general emotional states, with the audience itself. That Person seems to emerge more clearly in these later performances. I would argue that it is the process of letting go of the act of personification that allows That Person to appear, and that That Person is a void, a suspended presence. This idea comes out of my reading of Jean-Luc Nancy's essay in the book *Hypnosis* : Nancy positions the state of hypnosis within the framework of the conscious subject, yet defines it as a state at the limit of the subject, a sleepwalking state. Nancy sug-

gests that it is a state of passivity, not understood as inaction or submission. He writes: "passivity is only this: that something happens, from another place, from the other. That something different happens. Passivity is not the property of being passive, and for example letting such and such mark be given or inscribed. Passivity does not do anything, not even in the mode of 'doing' that would still be the mode of letting do (laisser-faire)".

This state of passivity, not understood as apathy, but as a kind of internal condition that is brought about by the encounter with the other, is this what you suggest takes place between Mullican and That Person? Can you also elaborate on the role of the audience in this constitution of identity?

I am interested in using Nancy's positioning of hypnosis within the framework of consciousness rather than the unconscious. The idea of passivity offers new ground from which to think through the relationships between Matt Mullican, That Person and the spectators. By suspending his presence, Mullican allows a void to open and be filled by different encounters. The event of hypnosis is multiple and engages the hypnotist as well as members of the audience, but also the space, and memories of things that happened to Mullican that day etc. It is difficult to say exactly what the role of the audience might be in the construction of the events that take place on stage, but it is certain that Mullican is interested in their reactions; in many performances, That Person directly addresses the audience, trying to get them involved.

For the audience it is not uncommon to experience aversion towards That Person, caused by the childlike, autistic behaviour and by the duration of the performance. At the same time, the audience might become a little 'entranced' themselves in watching the hypnosis. Mullican is interested in exactly these audience reactions, which are partly shaped by affective responses and partly by imaginative projections. Mullican examined this already in his early work, when he came up with Glen, the stick figure. Can you say something about the role of empathy in his work?

I think the question of how much empathy human beings can feel towards objects - through acts of personification - or towards fictional characters, is an essential element in Mullican's research. It is a key emotional aspect of the impulse of Mullican to make art in the first place, as a possibility to create situations that provoke empathy and question the limit between fiction and reality. It goes back to exploring experiences from childhood and the relationships that children have with objects and cartoons, and their impulse to draw pictures, without clearly distinguishing between the representation of imaginary situations and real situations. Empathy in my view also relates to the relationship between life and death. We empathize with living human beings, with life as opposed to death. I make a parallel between this strong investment in the idea of empathy and a cherishing of life in contrast with the fear of death. In an important essay written by Allan McCollum in 1979, he talks at length about a piece that has been a seminal work in Mullican's oeuvre. This piece was shown recently in Mullican's exhibition at STUK in Leuven. It consists of two photographs, one is the head of a doll, and the other is the head of a cadaver. The two photographs are hung next to each other, sometimes on their own, sometimes included on a bulletin board. This piece for me embodies Mullican's ongoing questioning of empathy. McCollum writes: "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 presubjective, unconscious desires which bestow life upon the inanimate, to the harsh, objective facts of material death."<sup>5</sup>

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| LECTURE   |
| <i>Matt Mullican by Vanessa Desclaux</i><br>Friday 27 May 2011, time to be announced<br>Performance Studies International conference #17<br>Camillo 2.0: Technology, Memory, Experience |
| CBK Utrecht<br>Plompetorengracht 4<br>3512 CC Utrecht<br>Registration: www.psi17.org  |
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Mullican's performances and his other works seem to be endlessly amazing, while being in a constant state of recreation or reproduction, making his cosmology expand while it reflects and mirrors upon itself. How do you think this working process relates to the singularity of performance, for instance when you look at the repeated gestures that return in all his performances?



There is no doubt in my mind about the originality of each performance and its ability to produce something new. However, these aspects of reproduction and repetition are essential to understanding that the work follows a sort of twofold process. On one hand, certain structures are put into place to formulate and materialize essential elements of Mullican's concerns. Among these structures, we may list of the cosmology, the birth to death list, the stick figure, the use of hypnosis, the colour codes, or the bulletin boards where different types of documents are collected. However, new elements are constantly introduced, and new articulations are proposed to read through the work. In the performances, it is quite consciously done. Each new performance will challenge the previous ones in order to make something new appear in the 'language' of That Person. But the emergence of the new produces in turn a ground for research and investigation. Self-reflection seems very important to Mullican. Perhaps there is an element of wanting to be in control, but it might also be about considering that the work produced is not an end in itself. It needs to continue to generate new work and new thinking, thus the necessity to look back.

Over the years, it has slowly become more difficult to distinguish between Mullican's lectures and his performances. Is it still possible to say where Matt Mullican ends and That Person begins and vice versa? Where Mullican originally used hypnosis to 'get into character', has this method now become obsolete?

It is true that when Mullican talks in his lectures about the work under hypnosis, something close to the hypnotic trance becomes visible again, almost as a residue that resurfaces through the memory of the artist looking at the documentation. But in the lectures, we see Mullican embodying the same urge to classify, order and make sense that his work constantly stages through structures like the cosmology. In the performances, this is not visible. Hypnosis takes away his ability to be the full subject of the work. That Person's work is contingent and filled with indeterminacy, vulnerable to the particular situation of the event. The merging of the two bodies of work happens elsewhere, in the folds of the brain, and in the labyrinthine space of the exhibitions.

I would not be able to say if Mullican feels that hypnosis as an approach to making work is becoming obsolete. I doubt he

would take that position. I am more interested in observing how the role of hypnosis in the work has evolved and can be questioned, and how it can be thought of in relation to other approaches such as the writing of scripts to be acted out. The work has never been about hypnosis as such. Hypnosis was always a process put in motion in order to invent a language and produce new work. I do not think Mullican has exhausted its possibilities, for the very reason that hypnosis opens a void, an empty space that will always have to be filled, in the context of situations that we cannot predict.

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| PARTNERS  |
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| A series of three interviews with Matt Mullican was published in <i>De Witte Raaf</i> (in Dutch, 2010) and can be accessed online at <a href="http://www.dewitterraaf.be">http://www.dewitterraaf.be</a>  |
| Endnotes  |
| 1. Brams, K., Piltau, D., 'Matt Mullican and <i>hypnosis</i> ', in: de Witte Raaf, ed. 143, 2010.   |
| 2. Borch-Jacobsen, M., Michaud, E. & Nancy, J.-L., <i>Hypnos</i> , Paris: Galilée, 1984, pp. 30-31  |
| 3. Borch-Jacobsen, M., Michaud, E. & Nancy, J.-L., op. cit., pp. 77-80  |
| 4. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 39v McCollum, A., 'Matt Mullican's World', originally published in <i>RealLife Magazine</i> , New York, Winter, 1980.  |