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Matt Mullican's World

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> 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 as 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 differentiation proceeding from natural law. If we were to articulate and divide the continuum of experience in a different way — as

anthropologists 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. 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 slap-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 forgot 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.[4]

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 those 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-knowledge. 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 intermixed. 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 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 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.[6]

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 common-sense 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 — culminate 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?[9]

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 heroics 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 attached 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 drawing 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 erase 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 Iying 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, "pricking 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 Mullican's works, in this case a performance,[12] 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 life 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 Mullican himself in another brief performance.[13] 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 Mullican in another performance in which he utilizes the techniques of hypnotism.[14] 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 Mullican'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 ciphers — 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,[15] 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 sad 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 presubjective, 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.

Allan McCollum,
New York, 1979.

Footnotes:

[1.] Alfred Schutz, "On Multiple Realities." 1945, reprinted in Alfred Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, University of Chicago Press, pp. 252.

[2.] Melanie Klein, "The Development of a Child," 1921, reprinted in Melanie Klein *Love Guilt and Reparation & Other Works/1921-1945*, Dell Publishing, pp. 4.

[3.] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, 1962, Beacon Press, pp. 101.

[4.] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1973, W. W. Norton & Co., pp. 20.

[5.] The signs date from 1975 to the present.

[6.] Peter L. Berger. *A Rumor of Angels/Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, 1969, Doubleday, pp. 56. I would also like to acknowledge Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (Doubleday, 1966) and Berger's *The Sacred Canopy; Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Doubleday, 1967) as having been 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*, Mentor Books, pp. 331.

[10.] First drawn in 1974.

[11.] Shown at Artists Space, 1974.

[12.] First performed in 1973.

[13.] Performed in 1973.

[14.] Performed in 1973.

Performed at The Kitchen Center, 1978.

[15.] Performed in 1973.

First shown at Artists Space, 1974.

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