

# The cruel intimacy of looking inward

Matt Mullican's performances under hypnosis produce a crude public exposure of a man's attempt to look inward, intensely trying to turn his back to a stable form of consciousness in order to enter its inhuman<sup>1</sup> double. Inhumanity could here be understood in different ways. In Mullican's words, hypnosis creates a "super-theatre"<sup>2</sup> in which the character that he embodies in the time and space of the hypnotic trance has become a model or cartoon character, and an iconic brain. But "inhuman" could also point to the nature of hypnosis itself and its intricate relationship to death in the work of the artist. In this second proposition, "inhuman" would then designate a state of being that is no longer certain or stable. Mullican describes hypnosis as a "floating situation". In this transient state, he affirms that he has become other to himself, moving toward the inside of his own psyche, which has repeatedly been identified by the artist as "That Person". This impulse to position himself at a distance from the subjective "I" through hypnosis shows his strong-minded will to explore the functioning of a complex association of emotions, ideas, desires and obsessions. Yet the acute estrangement that takes place under hypnosis seems to bring to the surface the question of the irresolvable ambiguity between the conscious and the unconscious, fiction and reality, the body of the corpse and the one of the doll or of the sleeping body.

In a current project that takes place at Hedah<sup>3</sup> in Maastricht, Mullican has put on display the complete pages of nine of his notebooks, which were photocopied and installed using the walls of the space and over thirty boards. While apparently releasing the content of his research and working process, Mullican has crammed the space to a point of saturation, leaving many pages buried behind the large number of bulletin boards. The quasi-architecture produced by the installation takes over the content of the pages, placing the emphasis on an irreducible spatial exteriority in contrast to an otherwise temporal experience of reading. According to Mullican, the selected notebooks bear witness to the intricate relationship between the work of Matt Mullican and the work of That Person. On the page I chose to discuss here, Mullican writes about a work that he was planning to realize, at a time when he had not yet started, or was just about to start, performing under hypnosis.

On this page one can read the following: "*Last night I thought of a piece that would use a dead person, photo of a dead person next to a photo of a mannequin or doll. These pieces would be done while visiting this dead person.*" Thanks to a friend who was at medical school, Mullican had access to a dead body used by medical students in an anatomy class. During his visit on the 14th December 1974, Mullican performed a number of actions on the dead body, conceiving these gestures as part of a performance piece. On another page of his notebook, Mullican described what he did: "*Pinched his arm, yelled in his ear, put my finger on his eyes, put my hand in his mouth, put my hand under his nose. Then when I slapped it what happened was I realized the only thing I was doing was making a sound. Then with my hands I gestured different emotions. My hands were around him and created the mood of the photo. I did one being frightened, being happy, being confused and being angry. Then I did stuff with his skin, pulled it and put my hand in his torso and all that other stuff.*" Mullican mentions being interested in performing the same actions with the doll, and placing photos of both the dead person and the doll on a wall. He further adds: "*It's strange because the dead body can be called the ultimate sculpture, because it implies all the projected ego and is at the same time non functional.*"

Mullican's crude encounter with the dead body, and the piece consisting of both photos – which has been included in many of Mullican's exhibitions since

the seventies, including his most recent shows – discloses an unsettling ritual that invokes the shared concerns of the figures of the scientist, the artist and the shaman. The gesturing of emotions and the production of sounds, on which Mullican insists, produce the image of an incantation that brings to mind Antonin Artaud's pleading manifesto for a chaotic theatre in which spoken language would be supplanted by a "compact mass of gestures, signs, postures, and sounds"<sup>4</sup> that constitute the physical and poetic language of the stage. Nevertheless, Mullican's involvement with the dead body, or in a similar way with hypnosis, does not aim at qualifying art as a mystical and transcendental experience. As Mullican explains, "when I work with That Person, I am unearthing a part of me almost as if it were a found object."<sup>5</sup> The earlier reference to the "ultimate sculpture" as non-functional also points in that direction. Mullican's work is deeply preoccupied with zones of indeterminacy where material and immaterial aspects of our perception of reality become confused, touching upon our deepest desires as well as our deepest fears. His staged encounters with the dead body and with his own psyche through hypnotic suggestion are experiences in which his determination at understanding the functioning of the human mind is inextricable from his aesthetic and poetic productions.

The relation between the corpse and the doll reappears further down on the notebook page with the drawing of a dead stick figure over the one of the dead body. Mullican has superimposed the two drawings as if he was trying to visualize the differences that would exist between the two entities. Their relationship is ambiguous and Mullican would often wonder about the different intensity of our feeling of empathy toward one or the other. This question runs parallel to Mullican's repeated questioning of human ability to invest objects and images with a sense of reality, and of empathy, through an act of personification. The stick figure or doll embodies the fictional character, of which we know that they are not real. Yet the dead body poses a different problem. Through death, the body of the corpse has left the reality of the living and seems to be closer to the world of objects and to raw matter than to the fictional character, therefore rousing feelings of fear and abjection. The doll undoubtedly belongs to the framework of representation. However the corpse sits at the limit of a different phenomenological reality. It seems certain that once he had performed the actions and gestures described earlier, Mullican could not easily go any further in his exploration of death through the phenomenon of the corpse. Thus his shift toward hypnosis might be understood in the continuity of an investigation in which death is a privileged site of speculation.

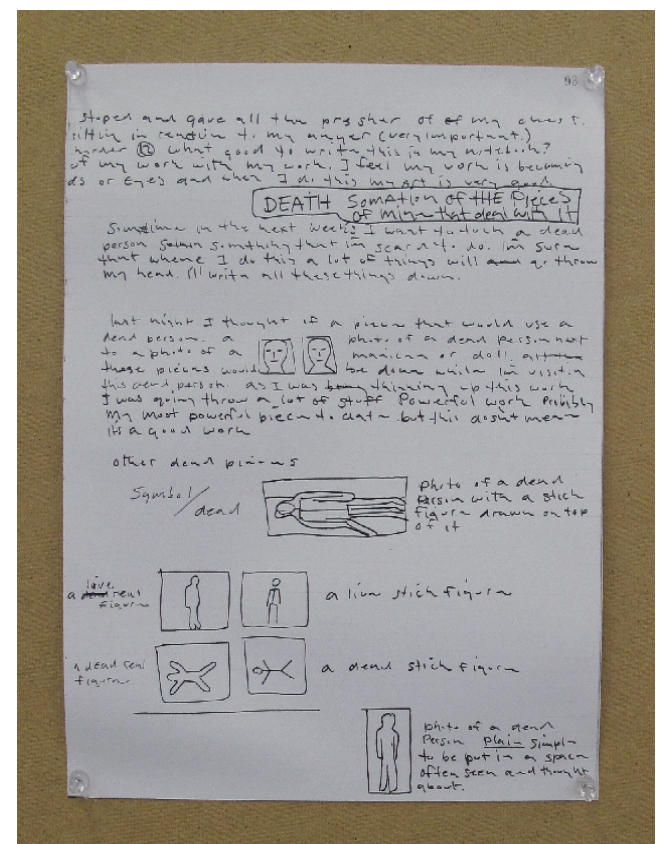
In his contribution to the publication "Hypnosés", which brings together essays by Jean-Luc Nancy, Eric Michaud and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen who collectively propose to take a distance from the therapeutic dimension of hypnosis and to rather consider it as a possible limit of consciousness, of individuality, of power and of pathology, Nancy poses the question of the relation between identity and difference in regards to the philosophical subject. "Where does a different identity come from? From where can B come to A? Or again: what can make A shudder?"<sup>6</sup> Nancy stresses that the subject (A) has her death as a "gaping difference". This horizon of death as difference points toward the unknowable and a "mode of knowing" characterised by Nancy as "sleepwalking" (somnanbulique) – a "sleep-walking mode of knowing" as the horizon of hypnosis. In Nancy's essay, the distinction between the conscious mind and the soul is essential to consider the nature of hypnosis. It is through the awakening of the soul at the time of the birth that the subject accesses consciousness, which is a "state of wakefulness". Yet, sleep –through a cyclical passage from day to

night- will continue to allow the conscious subject to temporarily retrieve from this state of wakefulness, immersing again his soul in the night of subjectivity, in what Nancy calls the "torpor of affective life". Hypnosis is thus positioned in the field of the conscious subject, as a state of differentiation.

"*Through death the eyes turn back, and this return is the other side, and the other side is the fact of living no longer turned away, but turned back, introduced into the intimacy of conversion, not deprived of consciousness but established by consciousness outside it, cast into the ecstasy of movement.*"<sup>7</sup>

The movement from Matt Mullican to That Person, time and time repeated, produces a continuous tension within the work and the artist's own body. In his crude hypnotic theatre, Mullican embodies Artaud's ideal actor who abandoned scripted dialogue in favour of a physical language that differs from speech, a language that summons the unarticulated and the exceptional in the verbal, a language in space and in movement that makes use of the body's "emotional organism"<sup>8</sup>. Artaud's emphasis on the actor's physical use of his emotions, which he compares to the athlete's mastering of his muscular structure, echoes Mullican's constant learning from That Person's work, studying his modes of acting and behaving – singing, screaming, crying, yelling... Mullican seeks to stand outside of himself, turned away from his objective world to look more and more inward, inside the intimacy of the consciousness of a model character, converging toward the unknown space in which there would be neither an inside, nor an outside. His eyes are as if reversed; in front of our eyes he is fully, sometimes embarrassingly, exposed.

-Vanessa Desclaux



Matt Mullican, Residence #3, the notebooks (detail)

<sup>1</sup> The notion of an "inhuman reality" in theatre refers to Antonin Artaud's text "La mise en scène et la métaphysique", in *le Théâtre et son double*, Gallimard (1964)

<sup>2</sup> Interview of Matt Mullican by Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau, *Wiite de Raaf*, issue 143, January-February 2010, <http://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/detail/nl/3497>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hedah.nl/lost/>

<sup>4</sup> Antonin Artaud, *For the Theatre and Its Double* (1931-36), in *Antonin Artaud Selected Writings*, edited by Susan Sontag, University of California Press, 1976, pp 237

<sup>5</sup> Interview of Matt Mullican by Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau, *Wiite de Raaf*, issue 143, January-February 2010, <http://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/detail/nl/3497>

<sup>6</sup> Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, Eric Michaud, Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hypnosés*. Galilée, Paris, 1984, pp 30

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, University of Nebraska, 1982 (Gallimard, 1955), pp 135

<sup>8</sup> Antonin Artaud, *For the Theatre and Its Double* (1931-36), in *Antonin Artaud Selected Writings*, edited by Susan Sontag, University of California Press, 1976, pp 260