Matt Mullican. Untitled
(Study for Hirshhorn WORKS).
1989. Ink on paper. 48 x 24 inches.
Photo: Lee Stalsworth.
In Hirshhorn WORKS—a special exhibition program—invi
ted artists choose a site in the building or on the grounds to create a temporary work of art. The Hirshhorn believes that having artists work on site, using the museum as both studio and medium, not only enlivens and transforms this environment but sheds light on some of the motivations and issues underlying site-specific art—an important aspect of contemporary artistic expression.

Over the past fifteen years, Matt Mullican has developed an elaborate generic sign language, symbols that represent a cosmology of his design. Although first known for his unusual performances, which were done using hypnosis, he also produced colorful banners and postcards in the early 1980s. More recently, he has expanded his vocabulary of materials to include stained glass, oil stick rubbings, etched granite plinths, and for the past year, a supercomputer-generated laser disc. In addition, Mullican has received commissions for public art projects in Atlanta and New York City.

Mullican is interested in mapping the realms of experience, and one aspect of his work has centered on the notion of an idealized city. In an interview with the critic Dan Cameron on the occasion of the artist’s participation in the Bath International Festival in May 1988, Mullican stated, “The City as a symbol is basically an abstraction of my work as a whole. [My work] is made up of five areas, each one representing a different way one could possibly approach any given object or experience. So the City itself is . . . a place abstracted from the way we experience things.”

The following text has been edited from a conversation with the artist on August 3, 1989.

Ned Rifkin
Chief Curator for Exhibitions
Rifkin: Please outline the concept of your recent work.
Mullican: I’m dealing with a planar or architectural rendering of space that is abstract. Like a map—a language for physical space that we all know how to read—my work is about locating yourself within a larger system. Maps condense reality into two-dimensional planes that cover great spaces. That is the nature of signs. When something is abstracted into a sign, its context becomes much broader. For instance, the sign on the men’s room door represents all men, not one individual. It is the archetypal man without color, race, age—just a representation, male. Although the quality of “male” has been reduced, all men can basically zero in on the image. The next challenge is to make a sign of an object in order to communicate personal insight. At that point, the sign begins to become part of a cultural subjectivity, which is to say “objective” because at least two people agree to its meaning. That is one reason why a lot of my work has to do with signs.

Rifkin: Tell us how to read your charts and symbols.
Mullican: At the top of the chart is the Subjective (red), represented by the head in profile and the circle within it—what you would consider personal, pure, or intuitive meaning, the relationship between language and human beings. The next level down is Language (black and white), represented by a circle within a square on a staff—signs, when the object loses its individuality and becomes generic, an icon. The next level is the World Framed (yellow), represented by a schematic image of the world in a frame—the arts, the act of looking, remembering, studying, taking something out of its context as just part of the world and making it into a singular object. It is not a representation of the daily experience of life but a symbol of other things. Personal and cultural language occur simultaneously in defining these areas of subjectivity. With the World Framed, the arts raise things a level, they separate and acknowledge. The next level down is the World Unframed (blue), which is daily activity when you are on automatic—not thinking, half there, in your head. Below that is material broken down into the absence of meaning, the Elemental (green), represented by a square with four circles.

Rifkin: How did your interest in the City as a subject evolve from your cosmology?
Mullican: My charts have to do with placing myself in a larger scheme of sorts. My cosmology is not a real cosmology but a model, not unlike an architect’s model of a city or a chemist’s model of a molecule. The charts always had a place for the City and a place for nature. Ten years ago there was a house in the middle of one chart. Above was meaning; below was material; to the left you had the City; to the right was nature. Since then the entire chart has turned into a City.

Rifkin: Why do you suppose you have become increasingly interested in this subject?
Mullican: It has to do with my interest in architecture. I like the fact that the City is finite. It is an artificial universe brought down to essentials, and the City itself becomes a physical rendition or an abstraction of this chart. When I am working with the City, I am playing with the differences between architecture and art, being that architecture is a manmade reality that we experience unconsciously—we walk through it, we live in it, we are not necessarily aware of it although it definitely directs us in our emotional sense of where we are.

I am very much interested in trying to understand the differences between art and architecture as well as those between fine art and commercial art. How do we distinguish between forms of creativity? How is one form higher than another? Why does a museum show one kind of work and not another? What am I investigating that a designer is not? And what does a designer have to deal with that I am not? Today, people know something is a work of fine art mostly because of where and how it is presented, namely in a museum. Those distinctions interest me because they involve issues a designer must address. Consider the architect Robert Venturi’s design for Independence Plaza [a one-square-block map of the federal district, incised in the paving stones] in Washington, D.C.

Rifkin: Within this context, do you consider yourself a Postmodern artist, and, if so, how do you define that notion?
Mullican: I see myself as a Postmodern artist. My father [Lee Mullican, b. 1919] is a painter who worked in the 1940s and 1950s when there was a prevailing utopian spirit. Somehow the art of his generation was depicting or expressing a “better way.” I went to Cal Arts [California Institute of the Arts] at a time [1971–74] when painting was considered “dead” and Minimalism and Conceptual Art had evolved to pure statement or idea as art object. People at school talked about the impact of photography and making distinctions between empirical or concrete versus theoretical or abstract reality. I think the line between those two worlds has to do with pictures and symbols. I make these things as a person trying to understand the relative importance of pictures in our culture.

I think our culture has recently gone through the mirror. By that I mean our culture deals with a statement or an object as it becomes a symbolic representation. The mass media and TV have played an important part—one reads the world through
the image of the world, so if one makes images of the world, they are another step removed from the real thing. I have seen men on the moon, but it's always second-hand. Postmodernism accepts as truth that you do not receive anything firsthand. I believe for many artists that is what Postmodernism really is.

Rifkin: You have recently completed a lengthy project working with a supercomputer. How did this concept evolve?

Mullican: I had an idea: Let's make my chart into a physical place so one can go from the realm of the Elemental to the World Unframed to the World Framed to Language to the Subjective. In simulated three dimensions, the chart becomes a walled City and abstract again. For me, within the context of the City, walls represent a way of defining space—and meaning. Nothing exists outside those walls.

I also have roads that go through gates in the walls. The roads function as points of access between spaces and, therefore, meaning. They become channels of communication within the chart of the City. The road represents a jump in thought and definition that one can call "inspiration." The jump from the conscious to the subconscious and back again has been abstracted into the metaphor of the road.

Rifkin: What in particular about the Hirshhorn's Lerner Room caught your eye?

Mullican: It is a room full of art with a great view of the planar architecture of Washington, D. C. The architect used the window to say, "Hey now, look at this! This is the real thing." Basically any vista framed like that becomes a picture, especially within the context of a museum. You look at pictures throughout the building. Generally speaking, the design of the space—the couches, the museum walls, the view—is curved like a Cinerama movie screen.

Rifkin: Please discuss your WORKS project.

Mullican: The project at the Hirshhorn grows out of a map I began working on ten years ago and have concentrated on intensively for the past three or four years. When I first saw the window in the Lerner Room, I thought that if I wanted to do anything with my City, the subject of my maps, this would be the obvious room for it. You can compare, you can say, "Look, this is concrete reality and this is abstract reality." But the reality that you are looking at is so staged. And it's all manmade, all artificial. It's fantastic!

Initially, I wanted to have three objects, including a rug, in one of the lobby areas because no one expects to find art on the floor. A rug almost automatically becomes an architectural element because generally an architect would design one for a space before an artist would. I thought this was a very public situation, perfect for giving me an opportunity to work with a new material and, yet, in the tradition of artists doing rugs.

Rifkin: What associations do you hope the rug will evoke in your viewers?

Mullican: In all my work, I employ a variety of materials, including stained glass and stone. When I use granite for a piece, I do not do it casually but rather with a very specific kind of message implicit in the material. Putting my sign language in granite automatically contributes to how it will be interpreted. That is the first level of language.

When people see the rug, they will undoubtedly make immediate associations that are going to inform what I am saying regardless of what imagery I use. Some people are bound to think that I wove it. When people look at my stone work, they say it must have taken a long time to do, and I have to tell them it was produced by a stone company, but that I designed it. In that sense, I want the rug to be challenging for viewers.

Also because I used images on the rug, I obviously do not want it to be an object that rests on its material alone. I am interested in surprising people, and I want to raise the question: "Is it art?" Yet whether it is considered art or not does not really matter to me. I think some people will see a humanist aspect because of the woven fabric. It is warm, humble—placed on the floor, not on the wall like a tapestry. It is something that people are familiar with and live around—it is homey. It is unusual to see a pictured rug. You can walk on it, and walking on pictures might be an odd experience for many.

I hope some viewers will think I am a carpet maker with a purpose or at least not think of me necessarily as a contemporary artist. Perhaps viewers will see that the rug has an overall order or story going that happens to be about a City. Then they could think that I might be an architect or a designer. Maybe they could hire me to do their carpet, which is happening to me now. People want to commission me to do their kitchens or patios—artist as artisan—again, a very old tradition.

Rifkin: Do you think of the rug as an object or an installation?

Mullican: It is an installation because of the way it fits into a very specific piece, because it is a panorama of my City, a fantastic context, because it is basically laid out very much like Washington and because it was also designed all at once. Planned cities have more of a chart-like, emblematic look to them than cities that grew organically over time. In my City I have located the government buildings all in one place, with a courtyard—an obvious reference to Washington. People may say, "This looks like Washington." But it's not; it's my place.
BIOGRAPHY

Matt Mullican (b. 1951) was educated in his native state at California Institute of the Arts. He names as influences his teacher at Cal Arts, John Baldessari, and such other Conceptual artists as Robert Barry, Bruce Nauman, and Lawrence Weiner. Five years after Mullican's first solo exhibition in New York, at Artists Space (1976), he began showing internationally with exhibitions in West Germany and Italy. Since that time, he has had solo exhibitions at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva, Switzerland (1984), Moore College of Art in Philadelphia (1987), the Dallas Museum of Art (1987), the Winnipeg Art Gallery in Canada (1988), and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1989). Among the numerous recent group exhibitions in which his work has been included are the Skulptur Projekte in Münster 1987 in West Germany, the Bath International Festival in England (1988), the 1989 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (1989).

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


MATT MULLICAN
WORKS

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