

## **CLASS OF MASTERS WITH MATT MULLICAN**

**If I Can't Dance – 22 AND 23 JANUARY 2012  
FRACATI THEATRE, AMSTERDAM**

### **Report on the masterclass by Vanessa Desclaux**

#### **1. General presentation of the contexts of the masterclass**

Nine participants from the fields of visual arts, performance, dance and theatre attended a two-day masterclass led by the artist Matt Mullican, in collaboration with three other artists: Suchan Kinoshita (visual arts and performance), Nicole Beutler (dance/choreography) and Joachim Robbrecht (theatre).

At the heart of this masterclass was the ongoing performative work of Matt Mullican, which has made a specific use of hypnosis in the aim of producing a body of work that engages with ideas of fiction, virtual space, altered states of consciousness, empathy and the creation of characters. In the context of Mullican's performances, the masterclass specifically set itself to look at textual fragments written by the artist since the mid-sixties that reflect the fictional construction of actions carried out in daily life, which appear as central elements of the gestures and movements performed by Mullican during the performances under hypnosis.

The masterclass was divided in moments of collective work with closed doors and moments open to the public in order to share the initial research outcomes and to trigger a broader discussion.

#### **Public programme**

SUNDAY 22 JANUARY, 8 PM

Conversation Vanessa Desclaux with hypnotist Veronica Fyland on hypnotic practices  
Matt Mullican performs under hypnosis

MONDAY 23 JANUARY, 8 PM

Initial outcomes in practice  
Roundtable with highlights from two days working in the theatre.

#### **2. Description of the different moments of the masterclass**

##### **a. Day 1 – masterclass**

The first morning allowed Suchan Kinoshita, Nicole Beutler and Joachim Robbrecht to introduce themselves and their initial approach to the masterclass and possible outcomes. Matt Mullican introduced himself and the elements of the masterclass, more specifically the theatrical set which consisted of the schematic representation of several rooms of a house: bedroom, bathroom and kitchen. Two additional and more abstract zones were simply represented on the stage by white rectangles drawn on the floor with tape. Mullican also talked about the character of "That Person", who he becomes under hypnosis. He introduced key concepts of patterns and of cartoon reality to explain how he conceives the essential characteristics of That Person, and how this can be the point of departure to connect with the production of characters in other artistic fields such as dance or theatre.

Following this initial introduction, a textual fragment proposed by Mullican was selected and each artist went off to lead a group of three participants into discussion and group work. Following this group work, each of the three groups presented the first results of their collective endeavour.

### **b. Day 1 – public programme**

In the evening, I briefly introduced elements of my research on Matt Mullican and his performances, and more specifically my investigation of the hypnotic fact in the different contexts that it emerges (theatre, therapy, art...). I then led a conversation with the hypnotherapist Veronica Fyland who has twice collaborated with Matt Mullican and was invited to take part in the masterclass in her role of hypnotherapist.

The questions to Veronica Fyland intended to help the audience to understand the nature of the relationship between the hypnotist and the person hypnotized as well as the nature of the hypnotic trance. We discussed what hypnosis claims to act upon and the level of agency that the person hypnotized has over his/her actions. We also talked more precisely of Matt Mullican's own behaviour under hypnosis and the nature of his artistic investigation in this particular context.

Following the conversation, Matt Mullican was put under hypnosis by Veronica Fyland, away from the audience, and came back on stage. He appeared to be in a deep state of trance, walking through the set used in the masterclass and looking very tense and worried. Matt had organised with Louis, one of the actors, that Louis would come on stage once Matt would sit on a chair. The next day Matt explained that as soon as the actor spoke, it was like putting a syringe of adrenaline in his heart, which made him explode. His world was going to collapse as soon as the words were flowing. Matt did not want to hear Louis speak. Matt also explained that in the discussion with the hypnotist, the suggestion was that Matt would be able to handle it; that he was brave enough. Other elements of the suggestion were that fear is what makes Matt an artist, and that the core energy of the performance was running around. Matt kept asking the actor to stop talking and seemed to get more and more disturbed. The performance ended after about 20 minutes.

### **c. Day 2 – masterclass**

The second day of the masterclass began with a group conversation about the first day and an assessment of how the second day could be structured differently, in order to avoid falling into stereotypical mechanisms of representation proper to each discipline, and more particularly to dance and theatre.

One important question that came up from Matt's perspective, which is informed by the specific method of hypnosis, is how it is possible to act without acting, in the sense of the awareness conveyed by a trained actor? Another key question that emerged during the collective discussion is "what creates the fiction?" And "what do we use to create a character?".

Masters and participants discussed the character that is constituted by "That Person" in Matt's work. What we know is that "That Person" is desperate to be a living being. He/she wants to be real. The questions that were brought up are:

- *Is That Person always the same?*
- *Who is That Person?*
- *Why is he brought up?*
- *Is the trance an abhorrent behaviour?*

The group looked back at the different elements brought to the table by Matt, including the Typology of Gestures – which is a work that consists of fragments of all the performances under hypnosis organised into categories of gestures – and different textual instructions for actions that can be considered as schematic “scripts” about how to act (but not how to speak).

A discussion about the role of hypnosis was triggered looking at the archetypal split between the field of the rational and the irrational, the body and the mind, demon and angel. Matt defines the feeling of being under hypnosis through the concept of voyeur and passenger. He insists that for him That Person has to do with the specificity of contemporary time – a contemporary relationship to time – in connection to virtual reality. He makes a parallel between virtual games and empathetic projection, which is activated by mirror neurones in activities as diverse as watching movies, looking at pictures or reading comic books for example. The trance state, which is the state under hypnosis, can be defined as a way of looking inward and deep into one’s subjective reality.

Matt read out loud the statement “I am for an art” (1961) by Claes Oldenburg.

Discussion about where to start again with the actions:

**Two key questions emerged:**

- Can we act out the actions without hypnosis and see where it leads us?
- Should we address, as a group, the practice of hypnosis as a key element to produce a performative situation entirely distinct from theatre and dance as forms of representation?

Three persons expressed a desire to be put under hypnosis. It was agreed with the hypnotist that she would put them under hypnosis as a group, using the actions selected by Matt as hypnotic suggestions.

**3 narratives/actions were proposed for the work in the afternoon:**

- Waking up, it’s very cold, moving very carefully, quietly because of sleeping baby, going to the bathroom
- Drinking a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper; it is the last cup of coffee so you’re savouring it sip by sip
- First day of work. Trying to wake up and not going back to bed, it’s difficult. You’re scared of going back to sleep

**3 groups were formed:**

- The first group was constituted by 2 trained dancers
- The second group was constituted by the 3 trained actors
- The third group was constituted by one trained dancer, one visual artist and Joachim Robbrecht

Group 1

The two dancers were performing the three tasks together. They followed each other, trying to make identical movements. They were assigned by Nicole Beutler to take some distance from the single/unique gesture and work collectively.

Matt commented on their movements stressing that synchronicity creates a pattern, which he thought was interesting. He was also interested in the space in-between 2 actions.

It was suggested to the dancers to do a second trial, and to try to separate the tasks more, to work with duration and expand the movements. For their second performance, the dancers were both sitting at a table with a newspaper and some coffee. They were drinking the cups for very long, slowly, then frenetically, trying to get the last drops – as if this was an addiction.

### Group 2

The trained actors decided to work with the task “looking for the keys”. They began sitting together on the bed. They assigned themselves to embody different degrees of exaggeration of the movement implied by the task.

One was very manic, looking frenetically everywhere, stripping down and breaking the set. The second looked like he was normal, calm and thinking this through rationally. The third looked sad and powerless, the loss of the keys triggered crying and a feeling of despair.

### Group 3 (under hypnosis)

Joachim walked slowly around the baby, then took a pillow and a blanket (representing the baby) and tried to find a safe place for him. He kept moving the baby around the space, away from the noise and movement of the others.

Aimée looked for keys, emptying everything thoroughly, very calmly and decisively. Benjamin tried to wake up. He was laughing and yawning. He was avoiding the bed and sat on the floor. He was the only one who seemed aware of the two others on stage, passively looking at them moving.

The three of them, put under hypnosis, did not interact with each other. Joachim and Aimée seemed very focused on their task – if not obsessed by it. Benjamin seemed both confused and very amused by the situation. Their movement suggested an uncanny sense of slowness, disconnection and distance.

## **d. Day 2 –public programme**

In the evening, the three groups presented similar experiments as the ones produced in the afternoon.

The participants alongside Matt Mullican, Suchan Kinoshita, Joachim Robbrecht, Nicole Beutler and theatre director Johan Simons discussed together, and with the audience, the experiments that were presented as outcomes of the masterclass. The group who performed under hypnosis captivated the audience’s attention and became a central subject of the discussion.

### 3. Initial outcomes and further questions

The masterclass emphasized the specificity of Matt Mullican’s relationship to performance in contrast with the traditional framework of theatre and dance. The characteristics of Matt’s performative approach are located in the absence of script and of narration, and in the use of hypnosis as a tool to produce actions and movements within a specific context.

The parameters set up by Matt Mullican for the masterclass, which consisted in the set described before and in the list of actions presented by Matt as examples of movements and

gestures that repeatedly emerge as patterns in his performances, proved to offer a challenging context for the participants who experienced a strong feeling of confusion in relation to how they could work with this material within the time and space that were offered to them.

- The actors appeared to experience difficulties in appropriating the space and the suggested actions without a clear definition of what character they should embody. They seemed very disturbed by the idea of performing without being given a clear reference in relation to identity and without a verbal script. Interestingly, this lack of pre-given identity is very specific to the construction of "That Person", whose personality seems to be determined only in retrospect in the work of Matt Mullican.
- The dancers seemed to be challenged by the nature of the actions proposed and the limitations these actions may have imposed on their movements. They appeared to be concerned with occupying the space and expanding their movements rather than exploring the possibilities offered by repetition and contraction.
- Two of the three visual artists participating in the masterclass retrieved to the position of observers.
- The participants who were willing to experience hypnosis, made the comparison between their behaviour under hypnosis and Matt's own behaviour in the hypnotic trance possible. The contrast between these different behaviours appeared very important and was explained by the hypnotherapist in relation to Matt's long-standing practice of hypnosis and his ability to go very deeply into trance. Nevertheless, the quality of movement and of physical presence of the three participants who performed under hypnosis proved to be radically different from what the other participants produced. Despite the differences within the group, a common quality of concentration on the tasks or actions they were told to perform emerged, and the general indifference towards the surroundings qualified their performances in a very interesting way. As a consequence of the hypnosis they focused very specifically on the suggested action. They deployed their energy and attention to this task only. The essential consequence of hypnosis was a loss of the sense of duration: the participants under hypnosis could have continued to perform these simple actions for much longer if the hypnotist had not intervened to bring them back to their normal state of consciousness.

The masterclass confirmed the idea that hypnosis allows to produce a quality of movement, of concentration, and of behaviour that does not seem immediately available through traditional theatre or dance training. However, it also revealed that the way hypnosis affects someone's behaviour is very specific to each individual. The hypnotherapist appears to have an impact on the impetus of the individual to perform a certain task, and yet, each individual has the freedom to decide consciously the way he wishes to achieve this particular task or action.

The masterclass opened a very interesting space for Matt Mullican to broaden his investigation about the relationship between hypnosis and performance. The experimentation within the timeframe of the masterclass allowed Matt Mullican to consider new possibilities to expand his use of hypnosis and involve other performers in the context of his own work.