

Matt Mullican: Banners

When you enter the Matt Mullican exhibition at the Skulpturenhalle, you are immediately surrounded by huge, colourful banners of nylon fabric – suspended from the walls and the roofbeams, spanned across the ceiling and spread out over the floor. Visitors find only a narrow pathway between these hanging screens, meandering from the entrance through the hall, and have to follow it in order to walk deeper into the forest of banners. The first impression is that of entering a constructed world rather than just another exhibition. For the colours and signs repeat and seem to relate to each other according to some law of their own. At the same time, this is no real, tangible world presented in an exhibition space; it is an abstract world to be deciphered. It seems accessible, because the signs appear familiar, and yet at the same time hermetic and legible only to those who know the code.

The banners were designed by Matt Mullican. Although Mullican originally comes from California, his art is not bound to any one place. In fact, he grew up in a world that was steeped in the art of every epoch and continent, for both his parents were artists whose own work explored a language of signs connecting reality and dream. The question of how we perceive reality is one that has occupied Mullican from his earliest days as an artist, addressing the unbridgeable gap between the objective, material reality that is directly perceptible to the senses and our own subjective perceptions of that reality. How can the one convey the other in terms of portraying reality? Images and words are signs that represent reality, and when we use them to create a narrative, they create, in turn, a reality of their own. “Life exists in our subjective experience, in the senses. Therefore, pictured reality is equal to reality. The fictional is equal to the real. Or at least, such was my premise. Everything is abstract and it is only through our history and culture that we construct a reality.”¹

Mullican became fascinated by the pictograms that guide us, as universally legible signs, through the labyrinths of airports and cities. They are a potent distillation of history and human knowledge. At the same time, he understood what it meant to deploy signs in different contexts and, in doing so, to lend them authority and connotations beyond the scope of the artistic expression found in, say, a painting. After all, a sign does not stand for itself alone. Instead, its meaning is conveyed by the place and context in which it appears. “So, a sign on an envelope is very different from a sign on a flag, because of its different intentions. And I could put all my language into

all these different situations, representing all different ways of looking at them.”²

Accordingly, abstract signs may take on a particular gravitas if they are hewn in stone and raised on a plinth, rather than being scattered like boardgame pieces across the floor of some interior space.

Initially, Mullican used the medium of the poster as a form of expression aimed directly at the public. But instead of carrying universally binding messages, his posters propagated the idea of a subjective reality. Some of these posters can be found in the exhibition room next to the reception, Mounted in close proximity, as is so often the case in such wall-hung displays, they feature pictograms that symbolise music, theatre, film and painting, all of which are immediately recognisable, while some others have been invented by Mullican to represent elements of his own world of the imagination. By placing the name “Mullican” alongside the signs, his endeavour to meld elements of reality with his own subjectivity, or even to superimpose the latter onto the world, becomes evident.

Mullican discovered one particularly striking vehicle for visual signs in the form of the flags and supersized banners that are often displayed on buildings as a means of presenting a symbolic message to the people in the street. Under the motto “flags are faster than paintings” Mullican summed up why these fluttering fabrics suited his needs better than painting: the visual syntax of the banners is simplified to the extreme and is both direct and instantly legible. In 1982, Mullican was invited to Ahmedabad, where he was given the opportunity of having his signs and motifs embroidered locally onto cotton banners. But when he designed large-format banners for outdoor exhibitions and presentations, he had them produced in nylon because it is a less delicate material whose colours do not fade so easily. Clearly designed and visible from afar, Mullican’s banners differ from official carriers of national symbols, battle insignia and value systems in that they present only the sign as such and so, paradoxically, convey a subjective idea.

For Mullican, these signs represent elements of cosmology – a model of the world. In his thoughts, speech, writings and signs, Mullican does not aim to make a definitive statement, but rather to build a model and to outline possibilities. His first cosmology was based on ideas that had come to him as a child in a bid to explain his origins and his place in the world: “it deals with what happens before birth and after death.”³

Mullican deployed a variety of means to demonstrate this model. On the one hand,

there are black figures on red banners representing god, the soul, angels and demons; on the other, there are illustrated glass models, reminiscent of scientific instruments, illustrating the closed cycle through which beings move between the extremes of life and death, heaven and hell.

Instead of a narrative, Mullican's second cosmology presents a structure: "It tries to break down and decode the universe."⁴ In this cosmological plan, five interrelated worlds are distinguished from one another by different colours: first, there is the green elementary world in which unused objects exist in their own right, on a purely material level; then there is the blue of the "world unframed", i.e. the instrumental world in which usable tools have been developed out of the materials. At the centre of the model lies the yellow world, or the "world framed", which is the realm of art that creates images and forms out of objects, while in the black symbolic world, objects are described and written of in abstract signs. Above all these is the red world of the subjective in which everything, object and sign alike, takes on a direct significance – the world of pure meaning. What distinguishes this cosmology is not the way in which reality is split into separate areas, for that would conclude the plan. Instead, the five areas are conceived so that they relate to one another and so that each of them represents a position from which the other areas can be deciphered.

The banners display the five colours and, with that, the five worlds. A simple, circular sign in the centre of the banner, representing the world as such, is allocated to each of the colours. Four circles represent the elements, while a single large circle stands for the utilitarian object. The circle within the square indicates the framed or designed object. The circle within the square in combination with the carrier that makes it a banner represents the symbolic sign, while the silhouette of a head that later morphs into an abstract circular form represents subjectivity. The banner to the left of the entrance unites these five worlds and their signs in a summarily two-dimensional presentational form. This can be interpreted in a number of different ways, which Mullican has continued to develop not only in the form of a diagram, but also as a playing field or an urban plan.

In earlier exhibitions, Mullican presented his banners in a row, aligned next to each other, so that they could be read individually and as a sequence. Now they form narrow canyons through which the visitor must forge a path. Banners touch and overlap, forming an interactive context in which the combination of signs perceived by the

observer becomes unpredictable, Fiction takes on a life of its own, the every-changing array of signs leads to unexpected conclusions, and the cosmology demonstrates a complexity rivalling that of the real world. What now becomes clear is that Mullican's cosmological model is not static, but that it generates a potentially endless combination of signs and meanings. Going beyond anything the artist himself might have envisaged, they are capable of opening everyone's eyes, including the artist's.

Dieter Schwarz

¹ Matt Mullican, Conversations, with Koen Brams, Dirk Pültau. Dumont, 2011 (=Dumont Dokumente), Cologne, p. 154.

² Matt Mullican, cited in Matt Mullican: Works 1972–1992 edited by Ulrich Wilmes. Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne 1993, p 92.

³ Matt Mullican, Conversations (see note 1) p. 152.

⁴ "Ibid.