

Projects 18 : Matt Mullican : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, August 24-October 24, 1989

Author

Mullican, Matt, 1951-

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1989

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The Museum of Modern Art

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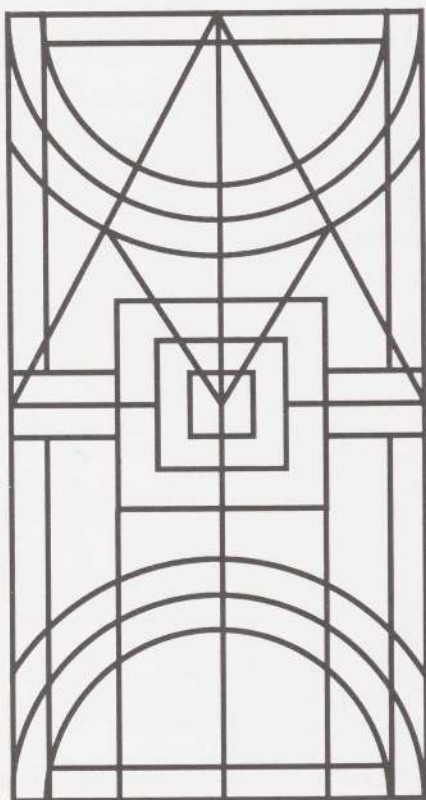
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The Museum of Modern Art
New York
August 24–October 24, 1989

projects: matt mullican

18



Untitled. 1988. Ink on paper. Courtesy the artist
and Michael Klein, Inc., New York

matt mullican

Matt Mullican is widely known for his posters, banners, stained-glass pieces, oilstick rubbings, and etched granite slabs, all of which feature a complex hierarchy of emblematic signs that constitute a personal cosmology. Since the early 1980s Mullican has concentrated specifically on works which describe a model city or "fictional reality"—a grand, multilayered, metaphysical construct. Mullican's model city, never intended to be realized or interpreted as utopian, is largely based on an encyclopedic vocabulary of images, symbols whose forms are reminiscent of the pictographs found internationally in airports, on highways, and at other public sites but that have been invested with elusive, mythopoeic meanings. In Mullican's cosmology, a set of concentric circles signifies not a target, or rather not just any target, but a very particular aim: heaven.

This installation, a multimedia array of images and abstractions representing his idiosyncratic, conceptualized city, is the result of recent work with a supercomputer. In 1986 Mullican was introduced to a group of computer-graphics specialists in California who were interested in working with an artist as a means to broaden their approach to this medium most often used in film and television animation. Optomystic studios gave Mullican access to the innovative Connection Machine-2, a Thinking Machines supercomputer designed by leading researchers in artificial intelligence. With the assistance of technical directors and programmers who entered his initial notebook drawings into the computer system, Mullican integrated his images and ideas with unprecedented flexibility within the three-dimensional environment of the computer. The results, inexpressible in other, more traditional mediums, reflect the compatibility of the internal logic of the computer and the multi-dimensional and hierarchical vision of the artist.

The fullest realization of Mullican's almost Darwinian will to order and classify is his city, which can be broken down into five color-coded levels:

red	the Subjective (pure meaning)
black/white	Signs (in which language exists only as signs and symbols)
yellow	the World Framed (a microcosm of the whole)
blue	the World Unframed (closest to the world in which we exist)
green	the Elemental (nature, raw materials)

Educated during the heyday of conceptual art and influenced by artists such as Robert Barry, Bruce Nauman, and Lawrence Weiner, Mullican focuses on the work of art not as object but as idea. Although Mullican's computer-generated city is a further elaboration of his two-dimensional works, its origins can be traced to his first work of performance art, in 1973. Metaphorically walking into a reproduction of a Piranesi landscape, Mullican converted virtual space into actual space, treating the painting not as a flat picture plane but as a real place.

For this installation, Mullican has created a group of computer-generated works that give varying degrees of information about his city. The map, a basic and

traditional conveyer of geographical information, acts as a master plan or legend. The large-format, black-and-white line drawing on view and the map pictured here describe the city in a straightforward manner, reproducing the entire area in outline, while a richly detailed color printout gives a panorama.

At the center of the installation is a series of striking views of Mullican's cityscape. These vivid images, transferred digitally from the computer to film, are presented here in twelve lightboxes divided into six pairs of vistas and details. Their juxtaposition describes the complex city from end to end, and invites a greater understanding of the overall project. A scene of a foggy, heavily wooded valley and a detail of a cluster of pebbles represent what Mullican terms the Elemental. The World Unframed follows, illustrated by an overview of industrial, commercial, and residential sites. Four images exemplify the World Framed: a monument; a museum and factories; the interior of a house; the "wall of history" and government buildings. Where language is reduced to signs, Mullican has created a series of multifaceted pavilions that showcase his various emblematic images. An abstract explosion of lines radiating from a spherical form represents the Subjective and suggests that, ultimately, we must complete the picture of Mullican's fictional environment.

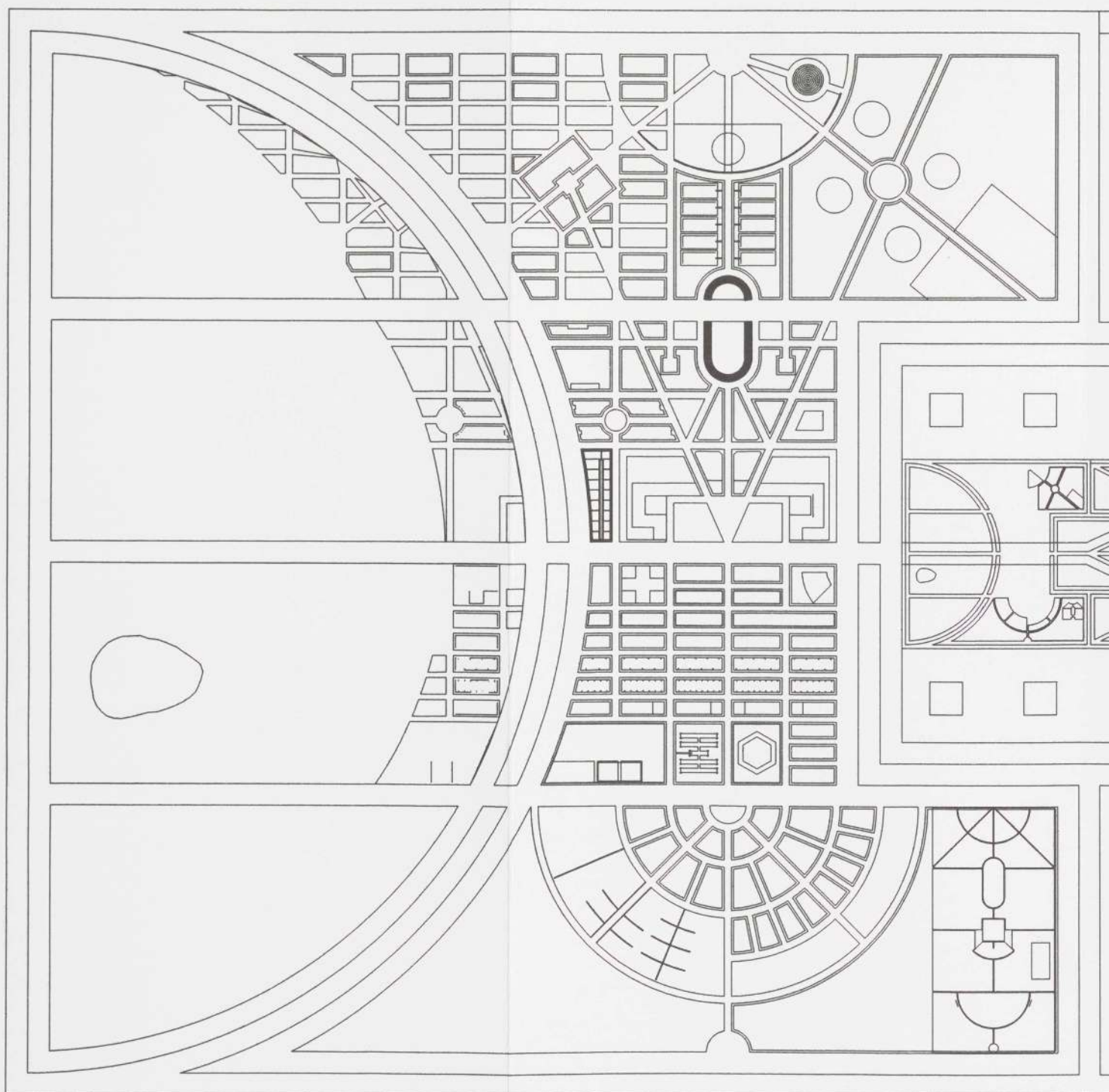
An animated laserdisc sequence acts to connect the twelve views, giving evidence of the massive scale and depth that the computer provides for Mullican's uninhabited, imaginary metropolis. Moving along roads at the speed of a person on a bicycle, the viewer is able to "travel" from one end of the city to another. This component brilliantly exploits the sophisticated technology of the supercomputer, expanding Mullican's eloquent visual vocabulary to a dizzying degree of complexity.

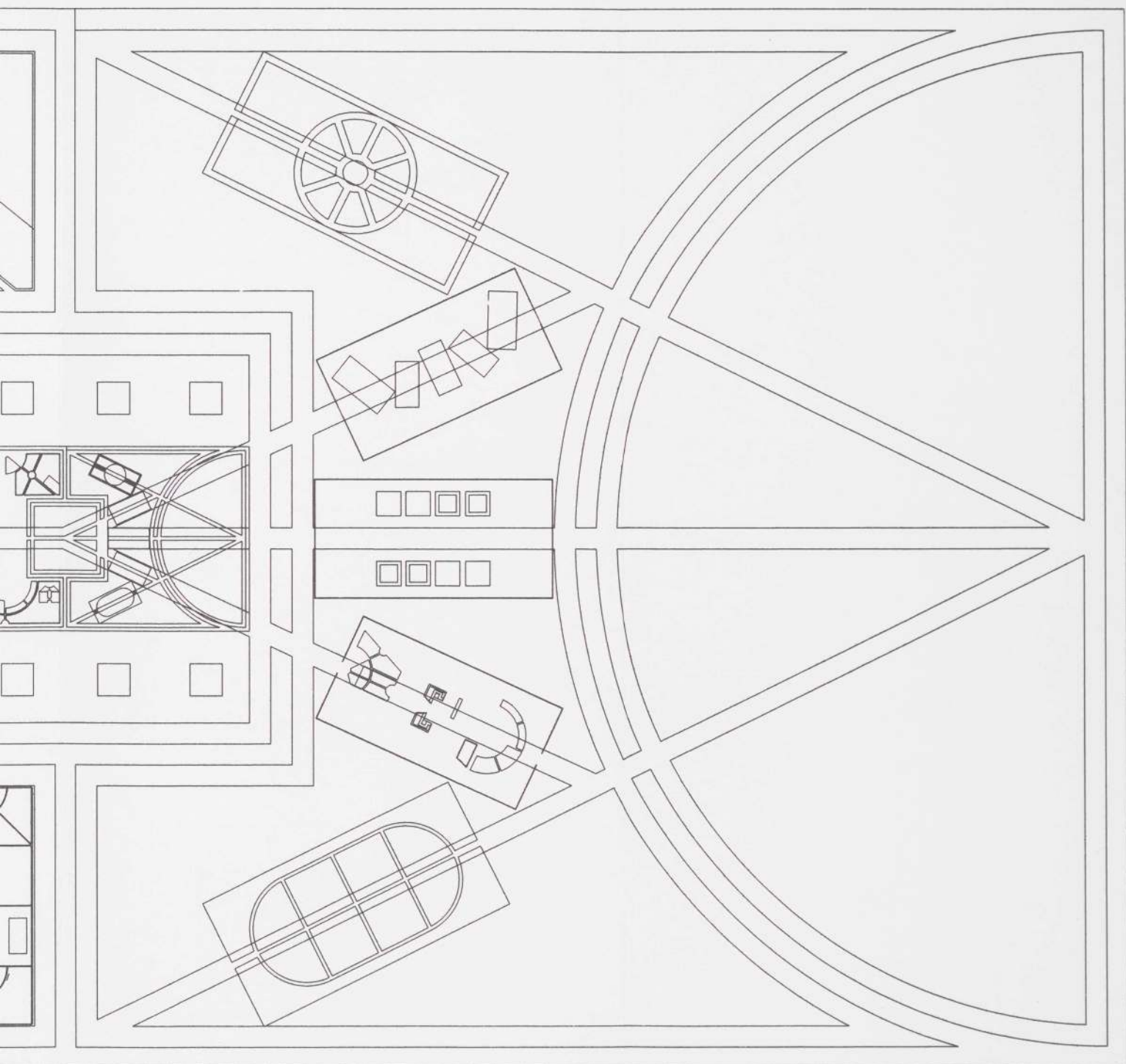
Using a medium still relatively untapped by artists, Mullican creates images that enable him to explore the anatomy of his simulated environment. Fascinated not only by what the computer represents but by what it empowers him to express, he sees this work as part of his ongoing scrutiny of the theoretical city. Independently, Matt Mullican's project bridges the gap between the vanguards of two disparate worlds, art and technology, and reveals the potential of future collaborations between the two.

Jennifer Wells
Curatorial Assistant
Department of Painting and Sculpture

This exhibition is supported by a generous grant from
NYNEX Corporation.

Designed to present recent work by contemporary artists, the new **projects** series has been based on the Museum's original **projects** exhibitions, which were held from 1971 to 1982. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments in a process involving an active dialogue and close critical scrutiny of new developments in the visual arts. The **projects** series is made possible by a grant from the Lannan Foundation.





Untitled. 1989. Plotter drawing. Courtesy the artist, Michael Klein, Inc., New York, and Optomystic, Hollywood. Produced by CalComp

Archive

MoMA

1528

biography

Born Santa Monica, California,
September 18, 1951. Resides in New York

education

California Institute of the Arts,
Valencia, California. BFA, 1974

1988

selected individual exhibitions

Winnipeg Art Gallery, Canada;
Manufrance, St. Etienne, France;
The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn;
San Diego State University, San Diego.
*Untitled 1986-1987**

Artsite Gallery, Bath International
Festival, Bath, England*

Michael Klein, Inc., New York

1987

Kuhlschmidt/Simon Gallery, Los Angeles

Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas.
Concentrations 15

Moore College of Art, Philadelphia.
*Banners, Monuments and the City**

1989

selected group exhibitions

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York. *1989 Whitney Biennial
Exhibition**

Museum of Contemporary Art,
Los Angeles. *A Forest of Signs: Art in the
Crisis of Representation**

1987

Münster, West Germany. *Skulptur Projekte
in Münster**

selected bibliography

Clothier, Peter. "Sign Language," *Art News*
(New York), vol. 88, no. 6 (Summer 1989),
pp. 142-147

McCollum, Allan. "Matt Mullican's World,"
Real Life Magazine (New York), no. 5
(Winter 1980), pp. 4-13

O'Dell, Kathy. "Through the Image Maze,"
Art in America (New York), vol. 76, no. 1
(January 1988), pp. 114-122

*A publication accompanied the exhibition.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following individuals and companies for their cooperation and participation in this exhibition: CalComp, Digital Harmony Foundation, Karl Sims, Sony Corporation of America, Thinking Machines Corporation, Jerry Weil, John Whitney, Sr., John Whitney, Jr., and Mark Whitney.

This project was produced at the studios of Optomystic, Hollywood, California.

The artist would like to dedicate this exhibition to the memory of Edwin Janss.