

AESTHETICS OF MEASUREMENT

Dialogue between Matt Mullican and Patricia T. Clough
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1. From Clough to Mullican

PATRICIA T. CLOUGH: Your presentation made me think of a distribution of yourself. There was something that sounded so wonderfully odd, when you said, "I pinched the cadaver because that's what Glen had done," I see Glen as being alive at the moment. You moved actions from one dead thing to another dead thing because none of them are dead. In my philosophical language, they're on the same ontological plane of liveliness through the art. It is a very interesting idea you also suggested: distance as pain. There was this overall sentence that hung over the whole presentation, which is, "Who feels the most pain?" and, "Who gives the most pain?" There is a notion of pain, but we can never feel anyone else's pain. What is the reality of pain?

MATT MULLICAN: The pain was really a matter of how you define reality. If the reality can actually exert pain, it's more real. The possibility about video games is to hurt you when you get into the game. They can do it financially with money by gambling. You lose your money in a video game, but if you wanted to have something super-virtual, pain must be involved. I used this point of reference with the pictures in reality. One of the first things I did in the studio was sex in the studio, where I traced pornographic pictures and put them in the studio. I couldn't show the studio in various places, because it was not only more real, but it also had to do with the fact that they became hot. When you go online, there's so much sex with different views, as well as violence. Both the sex and the violence are very enticing. We do go into those pictures much quicker than we would with normal pictures.

PC: There's a kind of pain in them. Or, it can be pleasure-pain, depending on your sexual aims.

MM: Certainly, it depends on point of view, but sex is generally about pleasure. When my son was playing Grand Theft Auto V, which is an incredible game to watch, I asked him, "Is there a time when we see what the avatar, or your character sees?" He answered, "Yes. All you have to do is to stop. If you're running through a street through a city, or whatever, you simply have to stop running and stand there. If you stand there for a minute, then suddenly you see what the character sees. You see his point of view." That's first person, and then second person is really the character, because that character is you. What I'm becoming very interested in now is first person, second person, in relationship to this sex and this violence, and in terms of a series of pictures that I'm involved with.

For instance, this is my work about a birth-to-death list: her birth, her family, her home, if I turn that all into "my", my birth, my family, my home, et cetera. The whole list I rewrote forty years after I wrote it, and I wrote it in first person and second person. It totally changes the meaning of the list, because what happens is that I'm jumping into the world. Like the Beatles' song *The Fool on the Hill*, I am the fool on the hill. I grew up as I lived in this world. But I am the guy who is still asking these questions, the fool on the hill, because it always is about me and it all comes down to me. But I am a realist. I'm trying to say that we're all like that, in the big part of our life. In other words, I'm trying to depict the true reality. "The true reality" is a way to deal with my subjectivity. The previous generation of artists before me was represented in the super-rational conceptual artists, such as Carl Andre. For example, his representative work, *50 pounds of steel* is simply "fifty pounds of steel". This was the art that I followed. Fifty pounds of steel as I see it is not the same as your fifty pounds.

PC: There's a history in your history, that is, the history of a certain kind of art. It's very interesting how much you're allowed to tell the story of art as the story of your own work, even though it was mediated through all these wonderful other stories. Maybe the particular art to which you are referring requires you to tell the story as the story of your art. Perhaps this is so because the art itself has become a self-performance.

MM: For instance, Lawrence Weiner reduced the artwork down to the statement: "The work doesn't have to be made." Painting died earlier, and now art doesn't have to be made. I come along with my generation and ask what we are supposed to do. How come we can't beat that? It's done. It's perfect, absolutely perfect. There's nothing to be added. When Mel Bochner put this levelling piece up, I put a pillow, instead. Because when we look at things, we personify much more than we do think. That's what we do.

We project our perceptions and create people everywhere. We can't help but do it, because that's the way we're made. For instance, in a body of my works about a cosmology, I used the concept of God, hell, heaven, birth and ghosts and all these super-strange things which are the opposite of rationality. I took a death's cape into my fictional studio and I tore it up into little pieces and put it on the floor like Barry Le Va, or like Richard Serra. So, I took the material of the allegory and inserted it back into reality. I was saying: "There's no possibility."

Reality is not like that. They're creating a fiction in there, but it's a wonderful fiction in the way they are defining the object. When I started, I stated my name and gave myself the gift of being twenty-two. This is a piece of mine, and I was identifying who I was, as a real person. I had a fictional person, same sentence, but only with a person that doesn't exist. The thing about this person is that: There is that distance. I'm here, but I'm not here.

Audience 1: You accounted how you were accused of being a fascist in the performance with the three actors, and later hypnotised yourself. Does it stop you being a fascist?

MM: That's an absurd word to use in that context. I was accused of being a fascist in L.A. because I showed flags. Fascism is not "flags", it's the style. It's an art issue. There was a letter to the newspaper, because this was a review, because I was involved with virtual reality. I had a virtual environment that I had with the cameras going into this landscape that doesn't physically exist, that we were going through, in which I had flags, diagrams, everything else. The reviewer who wrote about my show used the word "fascist" as an aesthetic term. A nasty bunch of letters reacted to say: "You are demeaning the term, you're making the term into something for which it shouldn't be used; the term should not be used in this instance."

When I say that, and it shouldn't have been used in describing my performance either, because it's a lot that's real. That's the style. But it really has to do with the relationship "to" the actors. If I put myself into the hot seat and I start crying, am I a fascist to myself? Am I abusing myself? Once I gave a lecture at the Skowhegan School, and showed a performance of myself in a trance, where I'm acting very weirdly and laughing at myself, and acting like I'm autistic, or schizo, just not acting normal. A woman said, "How can you make fun of the mentally ill? You are making fun. You are representing the mentally ill in an incredibly negative manner. You should be ashamed of yourself for doing this!" I wondered where that came from. I was in a trance state, which means that it's a part of me. It's part of everybody. We are built in this way, we can go there with ourselves. This is a part of life. The woman says, "No, but you were laughing at yourself." I was laughing at myself acting, so making fun of myself was therefore making fun of them. She had broken me into two people and I was doing what a fascist did to myself. In any case, that is an odd word.

Audience 2: Space and spatiality are really prominent in your work, which came out explicitly. I would be interested to see if there's also an issue of time: temporality and temporalities. Could it be described as compartmentalisation, and yet, maybe they "are" different temporalities?

MM: The interesting thing about time is that Glen lives in time. There's a calendar on the wall, there's a clock on the wall, and he does things at different times. Like you would see in any kind of a comic book, there is a comic-book time. What's the difference between Glen and that person? In that person's life, time doesn't exist. Experience exists, but in a true sense, time doesn't exist in that person's life. I cannot identify fully what I'm doing, where I am, how I'm feeling; my sense of time is totally from the inside out, without references. To a large extent, time exists in references. And when I am in that, becoming that person, they don't exist anymore. When I come out, in a trance state, into this, and generally, I'm with the hypnotist in the back room, and I'm led out into the performing area and there might be 200 people and lots of lights, so as soon as I get into that room, I feel the humidity of all the people in there and the bright, hot lights and I don't know what to do, I don't have a specific subject that I'm supposed to do, so what I do is, I start crawling along the wall and feeling the wall, because it's a very sensual experience. And it then just evolves from there, but there

is no sense of who I am or what I'm doing. Only experience in time, and even time changes. So, in a way, that is really the expression of time in an experiential sense, whereas Glen, with the clock, that's in a funny sense, another way of defining time, another thing, but I do think that the experience of that person is a truer definition, if I was to define it, because it's not even about space, it's not about time, it's just about feeling, I don't know how to contextualize it. I will discuss it and try to figure it out.

I used to say: "I am an artist, I'm not a doctor." My whole idea about pictures and image could be totally wrong in an academic setting, but it's the way that I'm doing it in art.

MY: To summarize the first session, I would say that the works by Matt are all about measuring the world. The distance you made to yourself, to see everything as light patterns, the invention of Glen, another state of mind such as hypnosis, et cetera, are all an attempt to measure the mental reality, and a collection of pictures in different media function as the ruler for the measurement. The pain – being things that are comfortable, or not – is a measure of where the boundary between life and death is. I would say that these notions – pain, mental reality with the different states of mind, this person, that person, "self" – suggest a new conceptual approach to measurement to us. From such an aesthetic point of view, I would say that the end of measurement hasn't come yet.

2. From Mullican to Clough

MM: I respond back from a different point of view, which is this whole issue of movies and numbers. Movies are defined by numbers now more than they ever were when I was a child. Numbers are somehow more real than the movie itself. What the movie makes is content. It is actually the content of the movie that has been replaced. Movies are not talked about regarding what they say, but regarding the numbers involved. It is reception. My children know all about this. My wife works in a museum. It's the numbers destroying the museum. They have to have numbers. *When attitudes become form* (Kunsthalle Bern in 1969) is considered a landmark exhibition today, however it didn't have the numbers. It didn't matter. It didn't expect such things like numbers. But now they do. Therefore, what the numbers create in terms of the future and expectation is something that gives me an idea of what you said.

PC: My goal is to give a proper place to numbers. We always produce this fear that they're destroying something. However, now, I believe, it's the other stuff, the poetry and the trauma that must sit alongside the numbers. I believe we are certainly looking at a near future where quantity isn't seen as something that's reductive, and that is going to change the relationship between quality and quantity. That's really where I'm going. Of course, there are these other uses, of what you just said of numbers.

MM: Yes, I talked about other uses, other ways of defining them through experience.

PC: We need a richer feeling about these numbers, because they're all over the place, and if we just think of them as reductive, we're going to miss their poetry and what possibilities they bring. Just as other forms both scared us and brought us possibilities. They do have fearful aspects attached to them, but part of bringing my own machines and numbers from my childhood into play is to remember that numbers were probably there before us. They're not just now, right?

MM: I did like the shifting in your presentation. The shifting was really between this place that you're describing with your family and that blood on the piano keys in relationship to calculative aesthetics.

PC: It's my way of situating myself and the work.

MM: Yes, that's understood. It is not only the shifting, but also the timing of the reading, that is, the way that you read it. There are the numbers in your tone of reading.

PC: They are in me.

MY: There are different ontologies of numbers.

WENDY CHUNG: It was really interesting how the two talks came together. It was the struggling with the question of sameness. There is a great phrase, "We're all the same when we're dead." When Matt said that we're all the same by dealing with dead things, but saying as a dead thing, "Who feels the most pain?" This is a struggle with individuality: your

singularity within this thing, that is, the saying. Patricia, your way of dealing with numbers is considerably the same. Through the intensity of it, getting to somewhere else. There was a really interesting way in which they came together. However, Matt's was so distant, it was close, and Patricia's was so close that it was in the distance. This was very intriguing, to see those two arts together.

PC: That's the play between us two, as you put it, Wendy. But I would say about us both: everything is lively, especially the undead.

MM: That's a good word, lively.

Audience 2: Is this the thing as an incomputable number and incomputable quantity? What's incomputable about a number? Isn't it equivalent to a failure to compute a number because it's so big? Isn't it just a matter of the fair amount of time, growing a machine, or keeping the machine until it is completed? Is there really something such as incomputable quantity in that sense? Another question is about the idea of the incomputable. It's quite powerful in the relationship to the idea of expanded experience, the idea of encountering the worlds, the idea of the objects, things, and non-direct experience, et cetera. Would you say that the idea of the incomputable offers beyond-ness? Obviously, if the incomputable is in fact computable, if it's sheer quantity, we already know the quantities. Then, how do their units come about? Does it make sense to say there's an incomputable quantity?

PC: I like what you said, if you don't expect me to answer your question. Everything in the piece is drawn from various sources, and this is what I meant about conceptualisations that, in time, might not hold, or might have given us something we wished we hadn't wished, a direction in thought we wished we hadn't taken. What I understand is that algorithms have within them incomputable or incompressible information that can suddenly start to make itself felt in the algorithm, and it's partly what allows the algorithm to change its parameters on its own, without a pre-plan, or without human pre-planning. Without pre-planning of any kind, the algorithm can be grasped as quite lively in the way we're saying, and makes it interesting to think it as temporal-physical object. The media taken as a temporal-physical object, rather than them just being a channel through

which things happen, have complexity, have potential. It's a theory: it's a theorising back to where algorithms might be going in the ones that they're developing for parsing big data. That is the incomputable. That is the condition of the possibility of the thing working.

But if we switch our head to something political-ish, because I don't know what politics is anymore, but political-ish, you said an interesting thing: If we're already seeing in mathematics that they can work with the incomputable, the incomputable as any sort of beyond is already lost. You can start thinking of all the capitalists that might find that useful, or how it's used in the derivative economy. It's frightening and fascinating. What matters to me besides that is the demand in that for us to think differently about quality and quantity and supplement. A lot of my thinking comes down to sociological methods that are not thought about enough in the arts. But these methods really affect how we live. These statistical populations and the singular figure made for them or the person – individual and population – is what we live. But that – individual and population – is going to change with big data, and perhaps drastically. There's a lot more to say about big data, too, but the way we conceive of individual and population is not going to survive.

MY: You demanded that we think of quality, quantity and supplement in a different way. Would it make sense to add a notion of "direction" to them? Thinking has a direction. Mathematics has its own direction of thinking. Art has one. Aesthetics of a computation has one, too, no matter how big the data that it deals with is. It may go beyond immeasurability, or initiate changing the relationship with quality, quantity and supplement, but as long as the thinking develops in the same direction, it remains in the same space. It can expand endlessly, but it cannot transform itself to get out of its own space of logics.

PC: You mean the algorithms are directed? Recently, I was at a conference where I had an encounter with a computer scientist. He said that we once knew what the algorithm delivered, but today once the algorithm delivers, they can't go back and find out exactly how they got there. It screws up the notion of direction, and of intention. But it gives a certain quality to quantity. So the phenomenological intentionality that we usually assume to be human-based and consciousness-based is getting screwed up by the quantity. There's work to be done here. We can't just deny it. Somehow, the jinni is

out of the bottle. Therefore, an aesthetic approach, and maybe an ethical approach is needed. There might be many new approaches that we have to develop to give in to the capacity of quantity. And, on the other hand, my father really was that father and I really wanted to know about the numbers in his head. When I first read in Luciana Parisi's work about the intimation that all living things are at the base quantity, I thought, I'm done. I found you, daddy, because you're obviously at the base of all things. It's funny, but I really felt a certain joy, so I lean in the direction of trying to rethink what we mean by quantity. I bet all these words might have to be different, because we're used to hearing them a certain way. So, that's why it's important to also make poetry out of our present condition of numbers.

MY: Because we have to pinch our brains.

Audience: My question is whether these instances really work within the discourse of science today. I was rethinking the body – the body as an individual from the 19th century until very recently. Now we get this bacteria-are-us paradigm, which is an epic-genetic line that has a much larger effect on who we are, and we are less the individuals than we thought we were. And here it is decisive for the entire time from the 19th century until today what we knew about the bacteria, we knew that bacteria were on us in masses and in vast numbers. But only recently have these numbers seemed to make this kind of sense.

PC: Yes. It has a great deal to do with the speed of digital technology, which now allows us to capture the bacteria by number and then layers of presentational styling to bring that experience to our consciousness, an experience that we could never experience ourselves directly, and never will. And, yet, we will change our understanding of ourselves through art and the like. I think something is happening in science and technology that is giving us non-conscious capacities, that machines are allowing us a realisation of our own non-conscious capacities. The other important thing is, referring to Mark Hansen in my paper, that the body as organism is going to give way. We're so interpenetrated by technology, and the situation is intensifying more and more. It's hard to think that we're in a bounded system, like an organism, so my presentation was my critique of the system.