Michael Rees and TG
August 2009

TNG: Intro

ITERATIVE:
Function: adjective
Date: 15th century
involving repetition : expressing repetition of a verbal action
(Merriam Webster Online Dictionary)

GENERATIVE
Function: adjective
Date: 14th century
having the power or function of generating, originating, producing, or reproducing
(Merriam Webster Online Dictionary)

CROTCH
Function: noun
Etymology: probably alteration of "crutch
Date: 1563

1 : a pole with a forked end used especially as a prop
2 : an angle formed by the parting of two legs, branches, or members
(Merriam Webster Online Dictionary)

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[not sure I like beginning this way. It's so Warhol]

TNG: You called me and said you wanted to talk and put it into a conversation or interview because, and let me get it right, you wanted to talk about "the crotch between the iterative and the generative" which is what this show is about.

MR: Yes.

TNG: That's a bit of a mouthful.

MR: Yes. (laughing) but that's it exactly: I was eager to get into this idea of the work being in the crotch (I would get into the crotch) between the iterative and the generative.

TNG: Both?

MR: You have to have both.

TNG: Right. I guess so. They are two different actions. Two different verbs. I guess you just confuse me by mashing them up in one language gesture.

MR: But thats the way it works. You can't just iterate and iterate - there's no change in that. It has to generate to. If you do nothing but generate then there's maybe a lack of continuity. The process happens together, between works. Say out out of 4 iterations you generate another 4. You play on themes and ideas, and gestures but only two are any good. So, let's take this one and that one and combine them together. Use that combination to generate more variations. Judgement takes place. YOu know when something good or not but you broaden it. We could just say iterative-genrative is short

hand for a process of mutation and choice. But in this case the organism doesn't have to be formed or real. They are fragments of things. What takes place on a biological level is now taking place in my hands or in between the hand eye cerebral framework. Its very easy to do this in the sketch book with drawings. [relates to picture

TNG: It's the act of generation, that's what is important. The process and the product and then what gets iterated from that on and on, like language.

MR: Actually it's the way the brain works. It's the way we learn things. We say something then say it again then again, and again and again. Then we say it twisting ever so slightly Add a different word and then that word becomes something playful.

TNG: Well, it's what they call plasticity in term of the brain. It's how we learn. It's how conversation happens. [Bill Berkson quote][1] So when you say the "crotch" between the iterartive and the generative what *specifically* do you mean? It's a loaded word.

MR: Well the crotch is great because it's where the action is. You can think and think all you want but it's only when you commit the thought to being physical that it really exists. So the crotch is a metaphor for the physical. Or for commitment. Or or for reification. Its also the Y branch, binary in the extreme.

TNG: The joint.
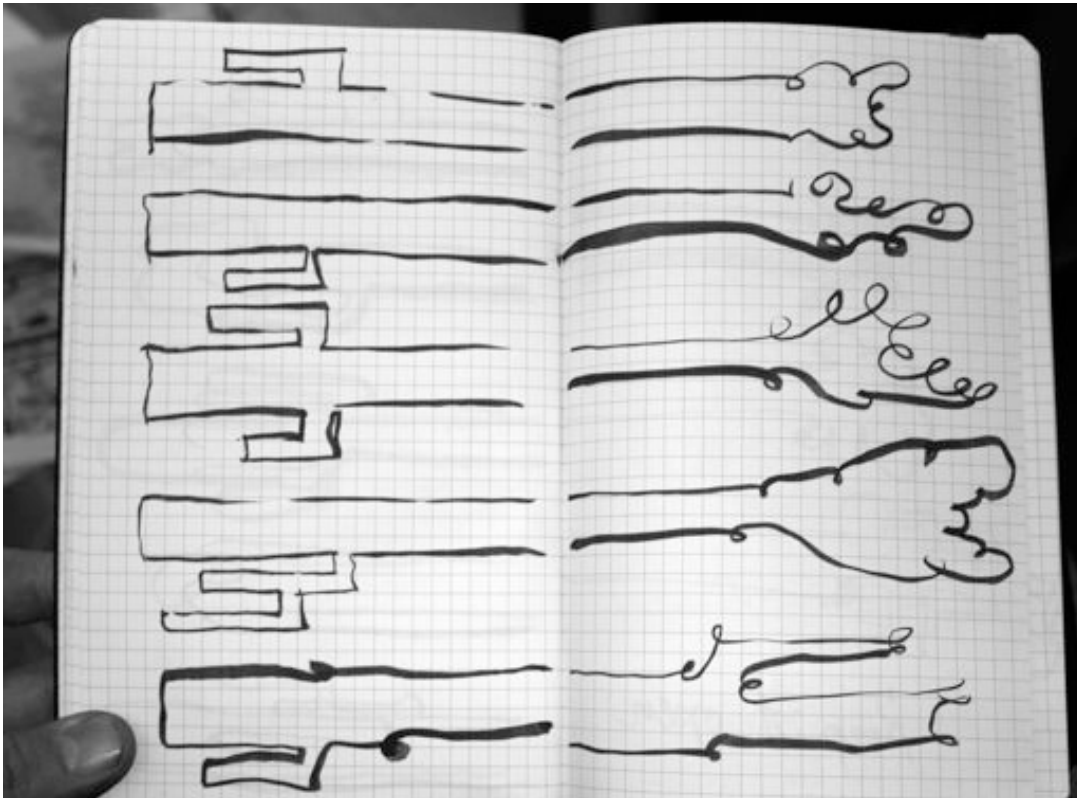
MR: Right. but the crotch is neither male nor female...

TNG: A part of the body. A male body. Let's talk about the body, the way the body is configured by you in your work, because the body was has been SUCH a theme in contemporary art since the 60s, first through feminism and performance art Carollee Schneemann, then video and performance art and Vito Acconci and then as an object of politics in the 80s with AIDS and identity politics in the early 90s where it was about a queer, sexed, or black body. The body in your work is a hysterical body, a hysterical *male* body, hysterical masculinity or something.

MR: Why would you say hysterical masculinity? I like that.

TNG: Well, because, look at it, it's fragmentary, it's not upright. You have this big toe which reminds me of Bataille's essay about the big toe in Visions of Excess. Annette Michelson had us read that essay in relation to Bunuel's L'Age D'Or when the protagonist is sucking on the statue of the big toe. You know Bataille's all over your work.

MR: (nods his head and smiles). Bataille's all over my work.

TNG: Have you ever read Melanie Klein?[2]

MR: No.

TNG: Melanie Klein's all over your work.

MR: But I want to get back to the crotch, to the bifurcation, to the fact none of my sculptures can be just one. They balance equivalencies so it has to be both. To achieve the iterative generative, you can't just have one option you have to have two options to breed them, right? Each sculpture has two sides, or two things. For instance… Finger Flag.

There are two sides of the same thing (two toes) and one is up and one is down. Its obscene how fast your mind goes through the options and experiences looking at this piece. Same toe, different feeling, slippery slope. It becomes difficult to resolve it. It reveeals something to you about you and then you cast it back onto the artist.

Or in Helicopter and Ah.

Its difficult to understand how these can be together. On the one side are two toes almost identical except for size which stuck in my head as the blades of a helicopter, or a helicpoter feel or like the seeds of a maple tree that are called helicopter as they carry the seed away from the tree to new ground. ON the other side is a string from the sculptural user interface, software I developed along with Don Guarnieri and Chris Burnett. Typing makes form and as long as I've developed this program I've not really used it. I thought it would be awesome to type long winded sentences and things into it. That was a bust In the end. The things that were most interesting were short letters combined and played over and over again. Liminal little phrases like ah (ahahahahahah) or um (umumumum) or ew (ewewe) uh (uhuhuhuhuh). This little knot (ah) reminded me of the visualization of string theory and it seemed to fit and seemed obvious that language (culture) and nature are parallel. the one reflecting the other. An equivalence of sorts. Now back to the

toes, the one toe reflecting the other: an equivalence. Its slippery and slip shod and my thought process which I've decided to own…

TNG: So crotch , iterative/generative moment is that tension. It's like stop motion photography.

MR: Well, I'd put it a little differently.

TNG: You *should* put it a little differently. (laughs)

MR: It's interesting you would want to see the iterative-generative directly in a piece, because the iterative-generative, as a process, is not *in* the piece, or in any one piece, it's in all the pieces made in multiple.

TNG: Ahhhhhh. I see. I was thinking of each individual piece. And listen to how different your language is from mine. For you this is a "series", for me it's a "show". I keep it static, which demonstrates I am not listening! I am "thinking" your show (in a very non-Heideggerian way which is not how I think about thinking actually!) but not physicalizing it as a process, if that's the right word. Or taking the concept of the iterative as an action. It reminds me of something I want to talk to you about someday—the position animation plays in your work. How you've tried to work with concepts of animation in a medium that by definition is supposed to be about singular objects, not iteration.

MR: But let me go to what's important about these works. They are set up as equivalences. So there is always one thing and then another thing. An equation but because of the vagueness of language they will never have the precision of mathematics, not a real equation. An equation of ambiguity maybe. So what is this thing Blob and then what is this other thing foot?

[He points to the two sides of one of his sculptures.] Historically, I've worked this method a lot. First in DoBeDoBeDo from 1990-93.
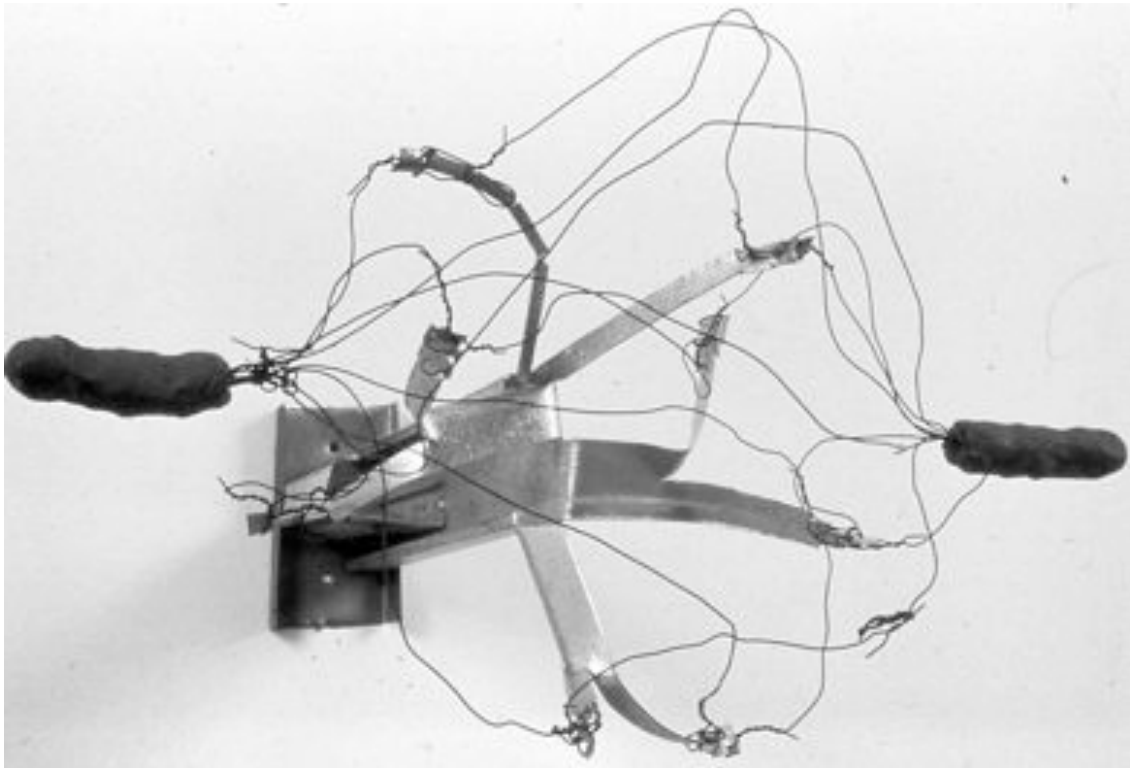
It's an interesting terrain for me. I put two things sort of in comparison to one another. Contrast. or something. Its not about an obvious or straight forward thing like, "I'm going to compare this thing to that." By putting these two things in a state you experience them together. You experience them as unified. You experience them as against each other and in other positions and propositions. You experience them in all the various levels of their thing-ness. But their equivalence may only have to do with a single thing that they share. Like the String and the Toes. They share something, not just their spatial juxtaposition but enhanced by it.

TNG: Could you talk more about what you mean by "equivalency"? I find that an odd word within the context of these works. But I like it.

MR: Equivalency suggests something of an equation in that "this" equals "that" but of course in language the word "equivalency" is incredibly slippery when you try to specify what is equivalent.

TNG: What's strange for me is that it's the last word I would use because your sculptures seem so *un*equivalent or nonequivalent, or unbalanced, not in weight, but in … I guess their thingness.

MR: But that's what I love about the word "equivalency", it's so slippery. [ANOTHER WORD?]

TNG: Yah. I'm thinking literally equivalent and you're thinking more abstractly.

MR: Like how is that blob equivalent to that foot.

TNG It's not but yet…

MR: It's not but if we look for the places that are or might be, or if we look for the equations and equivalences…

TNG: It's funny.

MR: Yeah, there's a humor to it.

TNG: It's hysterical.

MR: Yah, it's the place of the joke.

TNG: The crotch. But here's what's interesting, what I like. Where you come at it using the word "equivalency" I would be more wrote (rote ?) and less —sigh—inspired, relying on the language "juxtaposition" (probably because surrealism is so close to me). "Equivalence" would never cross my mind. When I hear that physics or mathematics comes to mind which is nice.

MR: Well, may I say I am not a mathematician nor have I played one on TV. (Laughter)

TNG: But there it is again, our language and the words we choose and the way we use them "around" the objects as you would say, to put valences around them. And anyway, "equivalence" is really so much more complicated than "juxtaposition" isn't it?

MR: It really is. There are strains of complete continuity and strains of complete disembodiment and of complete discontinuity -- the whole bit— all within this term equivalence.

TNG: Yeesh I just realized. "valence" is in "equivalence". !!!! I guess that's obvious to you.

MR: And I didn't even have to make a word up!

TNG: Well here's an equivalency I don't know what t do with because I find that blob —
that's your word for it, in the title—completely unreadable.I'm always interested in how
someone who isn't one of us enters a gallery and do they see and read the art. This is a
loaded question because in some ways I know what you are going to say based on your
essay "Words Around Objects: The Metaphors of New Media" (1999 Palais du
Luxembourg). But let's play naïve here. You as a working artist are presenting these
objects within the context of a process of evolution from one body of work to another
over time, that's one level of your iterative in this show we can say. So the blob, THIS
blob, means something to you. What about that viewer who doesn't know anything about
what may have come before? The blob is just there.

MR: Yah, I got blobs from the early 90s, I got blobs from this week, I got blobs from
2000 I got blobs blobs blobs blobs

TNG: Okay exactly, so here you are on the verge of describing what this blob next to us,
right now, is at this very moment but…

MG: Well, I think the blobs are this perfect sculptural condition, the place to start.

TNG: Right there you, Matthew Barney, and Michael Grey all have the same primordial
orb form and sculpture creation myth thing….

MR: Yah, well for me it's just physical, you take a lump of clay and you pull it out and
you throw it down and there it is a blob and it's always curious and interesting and you
bring it back up and you turn it into all these things and do something else with it. The
thing I love about a blob though is it can only be representative of itself. It has no
metaphorical purpose, it is a thing. All the way up and down. And that is something I've
always been interested in in sculpture. Sculpture is always an object. It always has an
element of being what it is.

TNG: But I have to play devil's advocate here, it's just as easy to see the blobs as a
bouquet of testicles or a bundle of rocks, or blobs as giant mutant grapes. I mean to see
them *as* something, as representational. It's your essay! Our generation. I remember
Molly Nesbit saying to me about her goal as a teacher at Vassar , "To me it's all about
getting them to understand representation." Why am I arguing this?!?!

MR: But that's why it's so beautiful because on one level it's just what it is—a blob, an
inarticulate blob. YOu might even call it a blob as in "that blob over there." Its inert and
then the mind starts working on it. Then, later it got richer because of the computer
programming use of that term. when they say blob they mean a Binary Large Object,
which I love. It fits right in with equivalency and small to large correlations.

TNG: Blob is such a specific word. I should start singing The Blob theme song from that 50s film.

MR: I mean I was doing a tour of a group show once and this sculpture was in it [*A Blob, A Foot, and Two U's*, (date)] and someone who didn't know whose work was whose was visiting and so I took him around and when we got to this piece I stopped and asked what he thought of the show and you know what he said? He said, "Some of it is quite nice but this guy —pointing to my sculpture- he's gotta a lot of trouble." And he's pointing to the blobs!!! LAUGHTER … So on one level it IS just a blob. It is what it is. On another level it's all those other things as well. And this gets to something that is extremely important to me, which is the valence of objects. As an object, that thing has a phenomenal presence. It is what it is but our little brains can't help but throw little things on top of it. but it also has things within it.

TNG: Would you define valence.

MR: Valence is [I WAS GOING TO GO BACK AND GET THIS but why don't you do it here] ..chemistry around nucle 7:49 2 molecules bond

there a beauty to this word because it reflects two different disciplines. On the one had chemistry, where valence is used to describe features of a molecule and the way it bounds to other molecules. I'm probably off on this but electrons orbiting around the nucleus form shells that can bond with other atoms and molecules. These bonds are valences. But it also plays with something else which is valence and how it is applied to language. In a technical sense its the number of arguments a verb can take. The beauty of this is that you have this sort of core and then there are all these branches of what thing can be and its based on the verb.

tng: which is iteration.

mr: to me what is fascinating to me is that these things, language, verbs, valences, objects nouns, are like nature. But it doesn't become like nature in a visual sense or in a formal similarity as in reproducing nature. Its not like that, rather the nature part is the molecule and their bounds and the culture part is how the language works, so similar to the physical reality. States within states within states all reflecting one another. There's a correlation between the two.

TNG: I love the way you physicalize language or better the way you actualize your ideas as a sculptor—what you say in "Words Around Objects". How you manifest your imagery as a sculptor. I mean you just make the metaphor a perfect physical, biological form. It's the way biology and art share so much. What I learned from studying with Donna Haraway.

MR: That's precisely it. So to me what's fascinating is these objects *are* like nature. But they aren't like nature in that we go on a lovely tour of nature through the trees and the plants and the birds and the bees but they act the way molecules and atoms work. And the culture part is the way language works. The correlation between them is in the fact that both of these are concurrent systems, not metaphorical. Both of these behave in a similar way, almost by mistake [accident?]…So I feel like that object, that blob has both it's thingness in and of itself —we can interpret it, we can ignore it, we can fall over it— and we can have it be this beginning point for the iterative and the generative.

TNG: This show is significant because you are going back to pre-computer sculptural processes: casting, using the hand where as what you are known for is the opposite, making sculpture completely without the hand. Why do you suppose you are doing this now?

MR: If you are our age, in our 50s, we have gone through so much change. ~~Before email and the internet. I now answer my phone. I never answered my phone before cell phones. [He leans over] And you know what the problem is with these things, there's no place to listen to the message while someone is leaving it. [He sits back up.] I am just so much more open to the communicative processes than I used to be. In a way it almost doesn't matter how we've changed but just that we have changed so much.~~ So it's important to go back and see what it is exactly that we've thrown away. What did we have to give up to get where we are? But I still use computers and in this work too.

TNG: I'm glad to hear it. I think everybody who knows your work is glad to hear it. (laughter)

MR: But at the same time there is a different kind of meaning that comes from the process of making something out of a physical process than there is an electronic or electrical place. There is a different meaning.

TNG: Do you see my eyes are tearing up! (Laughter) That's so ridiculous!

MR: I know!! When I started using computers everyone told me this and argued with me.

TNG: Oh god it's allllll we read and wrote about.

MR: And when I started to try to make sculptures with the computer people asked me "why would you do such a thing ? And I said I have to do it. I got a lot out of it too. I had to go that far out. So much of that work got very involved in what I called "work flow". There's a woman Ursula Franklin she calls these technologies that are work flow oriented "prescriptive technologies." I might be reading a little more into it than she meant, but to use these technologies one must adhere to rigid rules and if you deviate from these paths

you fail. So what happens is specialization, managers are needed, rigid time frames and work flows. That is the computer. When artists use it we start to do this to ourselves, we colonialize our minds with computers, with prescriptive technologies. I found myself so locked in that the initial thing I was attracted to in computers was lost. I was attracted to this alien thing in an alien land, prescriptive technologies at one artist's control. Then I needed other people because I couldn't do everything. Then I'm managing, adhering people to schedules, producing and art directing. It's a utopia/dystopia thing, what had been utopia had become dystopia. One could imagine this to be the case before starting out in it. But I'm literal in all the wrong places. I would never have known this had I not gone there. I lived it. I didn't just read the book. In that sense its mine. Few sculptors have as much experience in this as I do. It has an obvious technical application but it also became the way that I understood what computers are, how they work. This expands into content and I've used it in my work.

TNG: And you went the whole way. You not only made the sculptures by computer but invented the software with your friend. You wrote the code. You can't get more non physical than code. What was that line Larry Rinder said about you in that Fifield article…. About the beauty of code. Lawrence Rinder, curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art says, "Michael Rees possesses an unusually subtle appreciation of the beauty of code and its various physical manifestations. His holistic perspective enables him to conceive of art in a radically fluid way."I wonder, there are people who really don't understand what code is. What it takes to write it. That it is what makes everything work. How computer matter and meaning is made via computer through code. It's insane!!!!!! Nothing physical.

TNG: You know, that's actually one of the things people miss in Haraway's cyborg manifesto. Everyone focuses only on the technological/human breakdown when she laid out three blurred boundaries in 1984 (before the internet was ubiquitous mind you): technological/human;organic/non-organic,AND the breakdown between physical and non-physical).

MR: And so now I say, let me go back into my past. And that is why I am including these photographs from 1990-93, the performance photographs. Here I will have these early 1990s photographs with these late 2000 sculptures and the point will be: why are you really doing this?

TNG: Also the photographs and the sculptures are another of your equivalences, a kind of bifurcation, or I guess *the* equivalence?

MR: Yes.

TNG: And that's what I was getting at in the beginning. When a viewer walks in and they see these and they go what's going on here, what do they see? How does it register to them? Or how do we read the foot versus these nubs which you call blobs. And notice, I now say "versus" (not to mention "nubs"). But then I was also thinking, historically for you, what is it for you to go back to this process of casting with the hand, working with the material. Fashioning in the truest sense of the word. Why now. I mean is it just "I want to get my hands dirty"? Okay you want to get your hands dirty.

MR: No I don't want to get my hands dirty. I don't enjoy getting filthy. (laughing) I like this bourgeois computer life style checking my email and shit. I'm doing it because I want to find out what got left behind.

tng: so what got left behind?

mr: I wouldn't say what we've lost. Its a way to point to this area in all of our lives and consider it. FOr me its this physical process. Computers and CAD or Photoshop preference sight rather than preference intellectual processes. Your mind is always busy on something. Physical working clears the mind. It is suspended and clear. I imagine this to be the state that Artaud craves in the nerve meter, " I really thought you were clearing a space an impossible space that you were opening up a space to allow me to exist..." Working is rote and must do while we prepare to move into the pieces. It is less visual, less cerebral. What did I discover there? that meaning evolves in action. There is something intellectual about a virtual space. The virtual space in some way is uncommitted, un-doable. Multiple things can take place non destructively. It can play out and be played out endlessly. Authored endlessly. Physical space and its processes demand a commitment. ITs not an endless resource. Doing something to a sculpture can ruin it and take weeks to get back to, or never. You are in a process that is an experience not a point along a work flow. And so on.

Inventor for the Sui is probably too strong a word. Its really a play upon ideas that are assembled. Other people participated to organize it and write code in it. What it is is kind of mysterious to me. ITs a font machine, its a language generator, a sculpture maker, a gesture device and so on. Its starting to take a new role as I use it to generate physical objects. this is a big topic that we could discuss a lot. The way I found to use the SUi for my own purposes is to simplify the words or letters and to repeat them. IT was then that I realized I continued to utter sort of liminal areas in language. things you would say or use in between coherent sentences. I would repetitively write uh or ah or aha or om or um. Writing that instead of sentences seemed to open something up in the framework. The results were like strings, letters strung out there, speaking in between speech. I kept thinking about DNA and how scientists would say there's so much garbage in the data, non sense, maybe lots of ums and ahs, ahas and so forth.

TNG: In your earlier writing and statements you talk about "intentions" a lot. We're both supposed to be utterly suspicious or disregarding of the artists' *intentions* . When writing about art, discussing an artist's intentions is one of the things to stay very far away from yet, it's precisely what everyone always invokes or, as in interviews, is curious about. It's why we like interviews although in them when big metaphysical concepts like "truth", "soul", "intention" are brought up I always understand them post Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" and Derrida as "under erasure". In other words, with a slash. Like they are there, we'll use them but we also know they've been deconstructed.[3] Have you ever been questioned about what you mean when you use the word "intention"?

MR: I think it's very interesting. I might be misreading what you're saying and I might not always have a clear idea of what I mean when I use that word, but, for instance, this show is called *Model Behavior* and it's got an image that goes with it. The image is of a sign— an actual road sign. It is green with white arrows that go right or left and then right behind the sign there is a telephone pole, and right behind the pole there's a tree, and the tree does exactly what the sign does! And of course the sign is about the road, not the tree but it's almost impossible not to see that sign either describes the tree or it was predicting the trees behavior. So in terms of intentionality I would see it exactly like that. Because intentionality is really a bizarre thing based on what I'm about to say about it because what you say about reality is what the reality is. I mean I can't say it's a rainy day if it's not a rainy day.

TNG: But if you did and it was printed then people reading this would think it was (until they went and found out what the weather was).

MR: Yes, but what you say about reality—that social construction of reality, that reality AS a social construction has everything to do with this bizarre intention. That is a form of intention. Right? And that has nothing to do with whether it is a rainy day or it isn't. Someone was talking to me about the correspondence theory of truth the other day. And what I thought it meant, which is not what it does mean… let me see if I can get this right. What we take to be true is our best correlation between what we project to be true and it's pragmatic [empirical?]result.

TNG: That's good.

MR: The fact is there's no getting there.

TNG: It's Zeno's paradoxes again, especially the one about the arrow or the tortoise and Achilles. You talked about Zeno's pile of sand in 1999. His point being that you can never have a pile of sand because in geometry the distance between two points is a line so if you have two points of sand and add another and another you just have an infinitely long line.

MR: Exactly I mean we don't know enough about reality to create a real model of reality and even if we could we can't make a second reality that mirrors the first reality and on and on and on, right.

TNG: And yet I got a little concerned in reading the early stuff that you didn't come down as one of those who take Baudriallard too far (like Baudrillaurd does himself!!) stomping around saying silly things like there's no reality at all, we can never know it, etc etc. I mean there is such a thing as experience.

MR: What I would say about that is in Consciousness Theory[4] the Mysterians,,,

TNG: What a great word.

MR: You don't know about the Mysterians?

TNG: No!

MR: I think they're called Mysterians. People who feel our consciousness and how it's made up *is* ultimately unknowable so there's no sense in studying it because we'll just never be able to know it.

TNG: Well that's depressing.

MR: No I don't find that depressing.

TNG: Oh really?

MR: I find that fabulous. Actually I'm sort of a Mysterian.

TNG: Okay. (Sounding suspicious)

MR: And the reason I'm a Mysterian is because there's an infinite amount of experience out there. There's an infinite number of things to experience. There's an infinite number of ways of going about experiencing, and to even begin to try to put it all together, to know it, when you get down to it, I'm sort of about experiencing it rather than knowing it.

TNG: I see, but it's still fun to try and figure it out?

MR: Of course, and I wouldn't want to take that away from anyone else. Most people who study consciousness don't take this position seriously, what can you do with it anyway? For me it opens up possibilities. Its the crotch at the edge of the iterative and the generative.

[1] Bill Berkson gave a public talk called "Divine Conversation: Art, Poetry & the Death of the Addressee" at The School of Visual Arts (sponsored by the MFA Art Writing and Criticism Program) in the fall of 2008. It began:

> My theme tonight is conversation – conversation and its disconnects, you might say -- or discontents, of which I am maybe one, so tempting it is to become a scold (but I'll try to avoid that). Conversation may be the intense, extended talk people generate among themselves, but also a kind of telepathy between the things some people do and those others who don't but find them interesting to confront, and then the things that follow from that, and so on, everywhere. I mean, the ongoing exchange, like of gasses in and out of the body, that you hope never ends and know to be brief, unruly and meant to be enjoyed as such. In substance, conversation is made of words that occur and flow in circulation to form what is at times momentarily, and otherwise quite timelessly, a discourse, and to that extent, a company. [Manuscript provided by the author.]

[2] TNG: Describe Melanie Klein briefly.

[3] Derrida takes this from Heiddeger calling it *sous rature*, literally "under erasure". It refers to the process where the word stands written graphically but with a slash through it to signify how the word is not completely adequate but it is all we have. It is "both/ and" , it is "it" and yet it is not "it".

[4] TG: add footnote