

The end of chance, the counterfeiting of chance, and the cut-outs to come

A number of chance governed works follow *One Foot Twelve Inches*.

*The canvas which is behind and around the objects
needs some sort of control of things going on on its surface.*

*Consider making another chart for dice which
chooses things particularly within this area's
scope which the objects cannot deal with.*

*This would mean the presence of two opposing things
within the painting.*

*For a beginning the canvas things would
be behind the objects, but this need not always
be so — they could intermingle as long
as they were both definitely belonging to their
own groups. This would mean the working out
of some means of the 2 systems interconnecting
to provide areas in which background areas
come to the fore.*

*The whole could be split into two
no colour? — The Mind & ————— ideas
The outside ————— objects*

*This would mean the beginning of not having a background at all.
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 98)*

The ideas of this note, it seems, govern such paintings as *15 objects*, July 1970, [fig. 66] where there has been an attempt to control 'the canvas which is behind and around the objects', rather than as in *One foot twelve inches* simply accepting it as the white field on which the objects appear. First, there are the chance-governed conjunctions and overlaps of the fifteen 'objects', whose nature and whose position have been determined by some of the cards used in *One Foot Twelve Inches*, and a few additional cards: ship, ship, pistol, X monkey, monkey, male frontal face, female frontal face, insect, N.Z., aeroplane, chevron, 5, star, gull. Second, behind and around the objects, are what seem the

chance arrangement of 'ideas', for the choice of which cards still exist: triangles, X's, and rectangles, here all painted in pale silhouettes of 'no colour' — of grey.



fig. 66 15 objects, July 1970



fig. 67 *The nature of things*, July 1970

Another example of this setting up of two codes, *The nature of things*, July 1970, [fig. 67] floats its coloured 'objects' (snail, medal, car, record, monkey face, snake, pistol, fish, shark, star, pistol, helmet, gull), some of which are allowed fortuitously to overlap, on the front plane, while pale 'canvas' or 'ideas' things (a circle, a 5, and an X) are floated in a plane behind. Here, however, both planes are set against 'sky', not white.

The 'canvas things', the grey shapes, are still simply 'behind the objects' in both these works: in fact, there has been no attempt to let the two layers intermingle, nor do the grey forms ever come to the fore. Rather, two planes are established: a coloured 'object' plane, and a no-colour 'mind' plane, and the whole 'stays split into two'. It will not be until the cut-outs, and in the grids directly preceding them, that Killeen finds 'a way of not having a background at all'.

Some pages later in the notebook, Killeen seeks a system which does not predetermine the number of 'objects' per painting but instead leaves the number to be determined by him as he goes:

*Number of
objects selected
is irrelevant
to the system.
Select until
object-board relation is right.
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 110)*

Next he wonders whether he should leave *anything* of his image selection to chance:

*Better to select components then position them
by chance? More important what is on board
than where their positions are.
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 110)*

In this moment of doubt he has reached the same conclusion as the cut-outs will finally mark: that while the artist must control the selection of parts, the particular position of any one part is of no real matter.

But then comes the end of chance.

*End of chance
It seems necessary to me that the subjects of the
painting must be chosen by me for each
part, it seems, must be important.
Chance eliminates the belief in each subject*

while eliminating the composition thing.

*It also tends to reduce the whole thing to design making
and pattern making.*

*But I cannot afford to suspend the whole idea of
an object being placed by decision
whatever that may be.*

(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 117) ¹

Chance, as a means, is now rejected — largely, it seems, because the 'subjects', when chosen from among Killeen's pre-specified 'subjects', have come to seem to him a bit too much and too disreputably out of control. For while chance, just as he had hoped it might, has eliminated the composition of images, and has opened a vast disseminative prospect, it has also endangered the viewer's belief in the necessity, and hence the significance, of each image on the painted field — it has threatened painting's reputation for truth. If there is no necessity for the presence of each of the things in the painted world, if each is the product only of chance, in that absence of discoverable cause, there can be no meaning: this is the fear.

Within the economy of meaning, as Killeen now understands it, and given the politics of the viewer's reading, he can no longer 'afford', as he says, 'to suspend the idea of an object being placed by me by decision'. Chance is rejected, too, because it 'tends to reduce the whole thing to pattern making' — to a *mere* pattern of paint. Always, Killeen wants to posit a painting with both 'subject' and 'pattern', and to move in the space between; to operate, in his words, in 'a gap of potentiality', since he has, as he says, 'a feeling of rightness there in my work'.² Chance, so he now thinks, has tended to move him out of that space in which his art seeks to find itself aright, out of that desirable scission between, and onto the side of pattern.³

¹ Note datable c. 25/7/1970.

² Killeen, the green notebook, p. 48.

³ This will not be the last time that Killeen abandons a series, thinking it has come too close to *mere* pattern. He will do the same with the 'Birds and Beasts on Sand' series of 1978.



fig. 68 *Untitled*, August 1970

Chance, according to that note, is now decisively abandoned. Yet, in the paintings which directly follow the chance works, paintings for which, presumably, the painter 'himself' chooses and arranges each image, the images *look* no less chancey in their arrangements. From the beholder's point of view, there is no discernible difference. See '*Untitled*' of August 1970, for instance. [fig. 68] There is the same unpredictable overlapping of images as in the chance works 'proper'. They might easily be mistaken for chance-governed pieces, as they continue to float, spasmodically, over their indifferent ground. If chance is no longer the means of making, it has everywhere left its trace. Still:

*The parts should not be put on the canvas
in a compositional and meaningful
relation to each other. This is out, the
canvas can no longer be seen as an area
in which things can be arranged.
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 99)*

In that untitled painting of August, 1970, a face overlaps a medal; a fish overlaps a chair, which chair overlaps a tree, and all quite randomly, so it would seem: there are also floating, as if in a sky, a ship and a clock telling the time as five o'clock — whether in the afternoon or the morning, who can say? And in all the paintings of August, 1970, the images still seem — as though by a counterfeit chance — to be the product of random dispersal. They are not subsumed, hierarchically, under the governance of a unitary meaning.

So (as now we may see), it is not chance *as* chance which counts (nor was it ever); it is the 'non-arranged' and 'non-meaningful' arrangement of the parts, for which chance had offered but a convenient means.

Chance, one might go so far as to say, was always the author's problem and interest, not ours. The reading was always up to us, whatever the painter's means, and whatever he would have the painting mean. *His* desires and fears are not our concern. If the parts are not put on the canvas in a compositional and meaningful relation to each other, how they may have gained such arrangement as they have will hardly matter to us. And, while for *the painter*, 'it seems necessary... that the subjects of the painting must be chosen by me, for each part, it seems, must be important', for *us*, the mere presence of each 'subject', each image, each 'part' in the painting will be sufficient to guarantee its importance, whatever the means of its arrival there: for painting *is* that in which each part is there, and being there, has meaning — or rather, since such is our belief, that is the mode of our attention to the painting, the way we treat its parts...

In the random dispersal in the chance and chancey looking works, and in their play of images over a blank ground, there is a clear relation with the cut-outs to come.

*These parts are only present because they are
on the canvas and can bear any relationship
to each other and still mean the same thing
and have the same relationship to the whole.
It seems completely irrelevant as to what
positions things hold on the canvas
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 103)*

Cut out the words 'the canvas', and replace them with 'the wall', and how well these words might describe the cut-outs! In the chance works, too, the meaning of the images does not come, as in classical painting (at least in part) from their position. Nor can it, for in the cut-outs there is no ordered collocation of things. In classic painting, the main subject is privileged by a centrality to which all other persons and things must subserve. Here, on the contrary, there is a hierarchy neither of position or of meaning. (So a certain democracy opens.)

And yet, one might say, the fact that chance-works refuse to proffer a hierarchy to the viewer — as more notoriously will the cut-outs — is *itself* an

asserted meaning. Here, there is posited a world whose signs, like spasmodic particles, appear and disappear, in, on, and through an indeterminate void, where meaning may be read, at most, as a flickering against an indifferent space.

As too in the cut-outs:

In order for there to be chance, there must be a vacuum — that is, some point where all substances and forms collapse, an interval where there is literally nothing. And this, for all thought other than our own, or modern thought, is unthinkable. It is not an accident (!) if the invention of chance and that of the vacuum came at about the same time, in the seventeenth century, with Pascal and Torricelli. Modern man has literally invented these neutral concepts, these simulations of absence, chance, emptiness — a universe without relation, without form, without destiny, a space without content.

(Baudrillard, 'Fatality or Reversible Immanence')⁴

In the chance works, as in the cut-outs, the images are, as it were, *spaced*. One might usefully counter the prospect of meaninglessness, the Baudrillardian nihilism which such a 'space without content' might seem to open, by thinking here of Derrida's radical concept of spacing, which has it that spacing is not in a relation of exteriority to meaning. Rather, in order for there to be meaning, there *must be* spacing. Spacing is the very precondition of meaning as such; it 'invaginates' and so in a sense constitutes, the very condition of the 'inside'.⁵

Rosalind Krauss, in applying the Derridaean concept of spacing to Dada photographic montage, remarks that:

the experience of blanks and spacing is very strong, for between the silhouettes of photographed forms, the white space announces itself as the medium that both combines and separates them. The white page is not the opaque surface of cubist collage, asserting the

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, 'Fatality or Reversible Immanence: Beyond the Uncertainty Principle', *Social Research*, vol. 49 (2), 1982, p. 280.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, John Hopkins, Baltimore, 1974, p. 18.

formal and material unity of the visual support; the white page is rather the fluid matrix within which each representation of reality is secured in isolation, held within a condition of exteriority, of syntax, of spacing. The photographic image, thus 'spaced', is deprived of one of the most powerful of photography's many illusions... Photography's vaunted capture of a moment in time is the seizure and freeing of presence. It is the image of simultaneity, of the way that everything within a given space at a given moment is present to everything else; it is a declaration of the seamless integrity of the real.... But spacing destroys simultaneous presence: for it shows things sequentially, either one after another or external to each other — occupying separate cells. It is spacing that makes clear — as it was to Heartfield, Tretykov, Brecht, Aragon — that we are looking not at reality, but at the world as infested by interpretation or signification, which is to say, reality as distended by the gaps or blanks which are the formal precondition of the sign.

(Rosalind Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism')⁶

With the help of that cut-out from Krauss, we may also now more clearly see why it is that the 'sky'-like backgrounds of some of the chance and chance related works are something of an embarrassment to Killeen, forming as they do a sort of unwanted 'Surrealism'. The Surrealists, who rarely used photomontage, sought, rather, a 'seamless unity, with no intrusions of the white page'.⁷ It is this seamlessness which is inappropriate to Killeen's sense of the image as sign, and it is this which the cut-outs will definitively reject.

(We should perhaps note, too, that the overlaid transparency, or double-printing which the Surrealists practised, and which in its own way served to undo the sense of the unitary moment of the real, was also to find its place in Killeen's cut-outs of 1989, and in several earlier series of drawings, in *their* transparent overlays. It is only the unifying presence of the *ground* in Surrealism, a retrogressively realist space, which Killeen's painting finds it necessary to reject.)

⁶ Rosalind Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 1987, pp. 106-107.

⁷ Rosalind Krauss, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

To return to the relation of the chance works to the cut-outs. In the chance works, already, this principle of the cut-outs is observed: arrangement and meaningful relations are out, for the work is no longer an arena in which things can be arranged: the parts are such that 'they can bear any relationship to each other and still mean the same thing and have the same relationship to the whole'; and their position has therefore become 'completely irrelevant'. And clearly, and already, as in the cut-outs, there is — in the words of the title of the largest cut-out — the play of *Chance and inevitability*, the play in the fissure between chance and rule, between contingency and law. And here, for the first time, there is the possibility established of the image's ground being a white and indifferent field. Symptomatically, the chance-governed works simply *look* closer to the cut-outs than anything Killeen had done before 1970, or will do again until the invention of the cut-outs themselves

There is however this (crucial?) difference: in the cut-outs, it will be the spectator, and not chance, determining and fixing the position of each part; and those positions will be open to a perpetual change. So a new freedom will be signified — a certain freedom in the spectatorial role.