

Prints, stamps, and signature

Such signatures as there are in the works of January to May 1972 were put on with a linocut stamp [fig. 102] cut by Killeen for the purpose. (See, for instance, *Leaf within a frame*, [fig. 90] *The hole of the world*, [fig. 91] *Search and destroy*.) [fig. 96]



fig. 102

For the moment I shall simply observe, and not open out, this prospect: the signature, the very mark of bourgeois individuality, that which determines authorship and value — the whole bourgeois function of individuality and commodity — is here reduced to a stamp: a somewhat derisory practice.

The stamped signature, like the paper cut-outs used to compose some of the realist paintings of 1969, the paper cut-outs used to (dis) compose the chance paintings of early 1970, the card images chosen by dicing and dealing in mid 1970, and the stencilled images which will be used for the Combs, the Grids, and the Birds and Beasts on Sand, was a form made *before* the painting, a pre-fabricated sign, which might appear, or re-appear, in any position, in any painting. Such a stamping, established first in his own signature, and extended then to other marks on the ground, was to become an important (non) compositional tool for Killeen.

In the Vistula series of December 1972, the monoprinted figurative images were already somewhat reminiscent of the imprints of children's stamps — I mean the kind which used to reward 'good behaviour' at schools. They were similar to children's stamps at once in their size and their subjects. As monoprints, they were, in a sense, literally stamps — and with the same blurs and bleedings of pigment as one gets from stamps, and the same unequal adherence to ground, depending on inequalities of the stamping pressure.

With such monoprint 'stamps' as in the Vistula series there was already implicit the possibility of 'arbitrary' placing quite unembarrassed by frame. Then, relieved as they were next of their symmetry, in the works of February to July 1973, the monoprinted figures came to seem all the more detachable from ground. It is at once a perseverance and an extension of this principle of detachability that the ground should now come to be printed with linocut stamps cut by Killeen for the purpose, and that the mark they provide may be repeated any number of times from one painting to the next. A 'hook' hangs in twenty places in *Hooks in the sky*, March 1973, [fig. 103] in six places in *Shoso In*, April 1973, [fig. 101] and in four in *Past and present*, January 1973.



fig. 103 *Hooks in the sky*, March 1973

Such a use and re-use of the stamp constitutes yet another way of breaking and of refusing the bounding power of the frame. If the individual painting is already a 'weak unity', in that its figure refuses unity with ground, and refuses the unifying embrace of the frame, so too does the stamp refuse it, in that the same stamp escapes the singular painting's ground and frame, to appear in another, and escapes that, to appear in another, and so on, potentially ad infinitum. The stamp, as the following diagram of Killeen's various stamps [fig. 104] makes clear, has no permanent place, no conclusive ground or frame.



fig. 104

It is, it should now be clear, one of the amenities of stamps that they are an object intrinsically estranged from the ground, and that their imprint maintains, at least on the level of connotation, some trace of this estrangement. And it is the sustained address of such estrangement from ground (a perseveration not so much of the literal fact of the stamping technique, as of its alienating principle), which will come, after innumerable instances through the years, to the cut-outs themselves.

There is this quality too of the stamp which persists until that culminating time of the cut-out: it makes impossible any too vivid agitation of paint. It makes

paintings, as it were, into reproductions — into *prints*, much as Rauschenberg and Warhol had. It is a low-tech version of that Killeen the photocopier and computer-grapher we will see in all the cut-outs from October 1986 on. It refuses, thereby, the self-constituting mark of the *hand*, even as the stamping of Killeen's signature derisively had, and as the photocopying and the computer graphics of the cut-outs will. It denies the brushmark, that stock sign of expressivity. It is the connoting mark, rather, of a certain *impersonality*.

The brushmark, at least since the expressionists, has served as an intensifier, as the conventionalised mark of an invested passion, signifying, metonymically, that passion which purports to have caused it. It is now conventionally taken as the spontaneous utterance of a powerfully moved soul. It serves, then, at the very same moment as it asserts its own evocativeness, to constitute, and to dramatise, an impassioned artistic self. It is the self constructing act of an artistic persona. Cut out, and contrast all this with Killeen's earlier note: 'My identity must not be cause, and must not be present'.¹

So *that* too, that refusal of an asserted and dramatised self, that estrangement of mark from self, must have been for Killeen one of the stamp's finest amenities. And this, even though — or rather, especially since — Killeen first makes of the stamp a signature, the place of a juridical posing and marking of self...

I have already spoken of the institutional requirement of the monograph that it 'inscribe unruly objects within an institutionally acceptable position, to recover from a heterogenous practice a unified ego — the subject of a signature'.² I have spoken of 'the institutionally organised desire to recognise a unified subject in the artist's work'.³

Signifying the essential yet imaginary identity of a unified ego, the proper name establishes the subject as such, in language, under the law. Through the proper name, individuals are inscribed within power relations and come to be identified by positions therein. The conventional organisation of art practices around a

¹ Killeen, the green notebook, p. 44.

² Andrea Fraser, 'In and Out of Place', *Art in America*, June 1985, p. 128.

³ Andrea Fraser, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

signature — everything which allows a work of art to be identified as a 'Pollock' or a 'Warhol', etc. — institutes the proper name as interior to the art object; thus, artists are locked in a structure of institutional subjectivity. And the institutional exhibition of proper names, designating the authors and owners of objects, defines that subjectivity in terms of consumption and ownership. (Andrea Fraser, 'In and Out of Place')⁴

The painting's signature is the place where the proper name is most clearly made internal to the artwork — it is the place where the artist proclaims authorship, according to the code of the proper name.

The individual artist, in all conventional accounts, is presumed to stand outside but in close proximity to the oeuvre, commanding its gestures as if from above or behind. The oeuvre, then, acts to represent the artist as a figure, and each of its works serves to prove the truth of that representation. For such an account, the self-portrait will be all but essential. It is the place where the oeuvre is signed with the requisite proper name, where the figure of the artist, usually regarded, except in the most naively expressionist accounts, as standing somewhat *outside* the oeuvre, as its author, vindicator and referent, is brought for the moment demonstratively *in*.⁵

In this thesis, I began not with the artist's self-portrait — that typical inaugural gesture of the monograph, and instituting and authorising effect of the oeuvre. Killeen — as we saw in his Chance works — does make occasional guest appearances to the oeuvre which is no longer quite his. But he is not the frontispiece to the oeuvre, its first and title page illustration; nor is he the oeuvre's frontispiece in its architectural sense, the principal face of the building, its decorated entrance, the pediment over its door. He is merely one of its effects among many.

⁴ Andrea Fraser, op. cit., p. 127.

⁵ It is the figure, isolated outside of any chronology, that determines and serves to organise the oeuvre. The oeuvre, in turn, is reconstituted from that angle as a vocabulary whose representative effects [the] work merely serves to confirm. Not surprisingly, the self-portrait begins the list, since a figure must be assigned to the artist's name if we want to valorise the name as the signature of representative effects'. (Marcelin Pleynet, 'Mondrian 25 Years Later', *Painting and System*, p. 83.) The figure of the artist is a useful way of putting it. It gets us away from the artist as biographical person -- a list of tastes and events presumed as coherent, liking to walk in sandals on country roads, say, and the fact that one's father died in a bombing raid over Germany when one was two -- and makes structurally and analytically distinct the artist *as* artist -- the artist in the fact of his or her professional role. The signature, in relation to the artist as a 'figure' in this sense, might approximate, in the cottage industry and highly individualised commodification of art, to a trademark.

I began with the signature, another of the monograph's favoured frontispieces. Or, rather, I begin with the signature as *posed* by Killeen.

This signature — shall we call it a fake? Shall we claim that its truth is killed by Killeen? It is a lino-cut signature — a print, a reproduction, stamped by the artist on a number of works in 1972, a practice he was intermittently to continue until 1978. Perhaps, as I suggested earlier, this is a derisory gesture. (As if to say, 'well they want a signature, they think the work can't do without it, let's give them *this*'.) Yet, even in its very act of derision, Killeen's linocut signature might be said to act like the Governor's signature on a banknote — to serve at once as a verification and guarantor.

Let us imagine a whole line of Killeen signature's — a sort of chronological row.

There are gaps here — whole periods where Killeen does not sign. Or rather, periods where the work signs itself *otherwise* as a Killeen, as in the high tech, the 'impersonal' flatness of the grids on aluminium of 1978, for instance, or as in the high tech, 'impersonal' flatness of the earliest cut-outs, where the stylistic conventions of the work allow no place for the literal signature, or for the labelling inscription of the artist's name.⁶

We know, anyway, if we know the art scene in New Zealand, that these grids and cut-outs are 'Killeens'. Given that we know we here see 'a Killeen', the literal signature is in a sense superfluous, a tautology at best. What is it, then, to speak of a work as a 'Killeen'?

Suppose that, somewhat as Derrida has said, the works which are most singular, works like say Killeen's cut-outs, are those which are least in need of a signature.

And so you certainly must sign, but it is as well also not to sign, to write things that, finally, are worthy of going without your signature.

⁶ Abstract painters commonly do not sign. (It might spoil the canvas's blank affirmation of itself.) McCahon's signature on *Painting*, 1958 (Fletcher Challenge Collection, Wellington), so Killeen once remarked to me, makes it look odd, naive and provincial, in high modernist terms, though it was in its time one of New Zealand's most modernist paintings. And yet has the signature -- in the sense of signature style -- ever been more important than it was to the modernist?

(Derrida, *Signsponge*)⁷

The artificer must make things worthy of autonomous being, that is, things which may go off on their own. Like that man so powerfully dreamed, created organ by organ, in interminable nights of labour, by Borges' magician, who is thus enabled to die, leaving his work to live on by itself...

I have said that Killeen makes a stamp of his signature - a linocut stamp. A signature merely *reproduced* — as if it were of no proper authenticating value at all. A derisory practice, I say. Yet it is there. The signature is there in Killeen, always, stamped throughout the oeuvre, but complicated, made, and offered as, complex. His is a complicating practice of the signature. Killeen does not *avoid* the signature. Neither, therefore, shall I. He does not make a *void* of the signature. He makes it, rather, uncertain.

It is, regardless of what Killeen might wish to do, and regardless of what I might wish to do, a condition of our seeing art today that we see it under the sign of the signature. It has been like this at least from the Renaissance on. Art is, in our culture, invariably signed by the proper name.

All this is made possible from the restricted perspective of a cultural model that is in fact capable of functioning solely at the level of its 'verification' and whose specular system (the work/author) assumes, under the name of [the artist], a singular totality (the oeuvre of...) only the better to censor the contradictions that might eventually disturb its order.

*Marcelin Pleyne, 'Mondrian 25 Years Later'*⁸

I do not hope, I cannot hope, to undo the vast authority of this cultural model — as old as the antique Greeks, and revived from the Renaissance on, in which the artwork constitutes, and is constituted by an oeuvre, gathered under the veridical authority of the proper name. All I can do is to try not to censor the contradictions which might disturb the oeuvre's order. And to introduce this little insurrection into the space of a monograph, the oeuvre's very palace and garden.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Signsponge*, transl. Richard Rand, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984, p. 34.

⁸ Marcelin Pleyne, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

And so I start with a signature which might be called a fake, a fake of himself, faked by the artist himself. Not with a self-portrait, the portrait of the figure of the artist, but with the oeuvre's self-constituting mark — its signature.

A signature which is already various, which is hardly the same each year. Various, even if its referent might seem to be the same. If it is a chronological row of signatures I speak of above, in the sense of a number of things, successively posed, in a more or less straight line, it is also a *row*, perhaps, in the sense of a disturbance, a dispute, a shindy, a row in which the calm, unquestioned unity of the oeuvre might be perturbed...

Those signatures, I mean, might seem simply too different from each other to be true to one person, much as Killeen's paintings, over the years, in the extraordinary variability of their style, seem the works of a group of various and inimical artists.

This is important. The signature is meant to be taken seriously. In Jonathon Culler's words: 'It is in appending a signature that one can in our culture most authoritatively take responsibility for an utterance. By signing a document [or artwork] one intends its meaning and seriously performs the signifying act it accomplishes.'⁹ To raise doubts about it, to mock the signature is a somewhat serious matter, therefore.

The question raised by the difference of Killeen's painted signatures one from the other, and the question raised, contrariwise, by the too total similarity of his lino-printed signatures one to the other, is the question of the signature as citation.

'Can one counterfeit one's own signature?', Jonathon Culler has asked. 'What, in sum, is a signature?'¹⁰ It is conventionally meant, he answers, to prove a signifying intention present to consciousness at the moment of signing. And yet:

In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached

⁹ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1987, p. 125.

¹⁰ Jonathon Culler, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

from the present and singular intention of its production. It is its sameness which, by corrupting its identity and its singularity, divides its seal.

(Derrida, Marges,) 11

As an example of the fundamental iterability of signatures, Culler gives us the stamp. 'It is part of the structure of a signature', he says, 'that it can be produced by a stamp or a machine'.¹² It is as though Culler has been looking at Killeen. Perversely, one might say, and Killeen's lino-cut signature might suggest, every signature, as the citation of another, is also, and already, its copy, if not its *counterfeit*...

One might — and this would be closer to what you are meant to do with an oeuvre — read Killeen's signature effects another way. One might proclaim the *vastness* of the signature's appearance in Killeen's oeuvre, rather than its undoing or uncertainty. Killeen's is (at least) a double faced art — it is no accident that the double face, computer composed and printed, is a sign several times used by Killeen, as in *Mask with a lateral view*, no. 3, 7 August 1986 [plate 145 & fig. 105]



fig. 105.

Killeen's whole oeuvre, one might say, is an 'immense autograph'.¹³ In it, perhaps, the world's signs become, in a sense, 'a bit of signature' — signature.¹⁴ The already depicted depiction of the thing Killeen 'takes', from say an encyclopaedia figure, and puts into his work, also 'becomes, while remaining the thing it is, entirely other, a consigned part' of his work. Killeen

¹¹ Derrida, *Marges*, cited Jonathan Culler, *ibid*, p. 126.

¹² Jonathon Culler, *ibid*, p. 126.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Signsponge*, p. 34.

¹⁴ Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

might well say here with Derrida: 'This is also the condition allowing my text to escape me and fly like a rocket along the path of its own trajectory, freed up, in my name, and in the laws of my language, from my name and my language'.¹⁵

There is, perhaps, everywhere in Killeen's art what Derrida calls 'the signature effect'. If at times it is as if Killeen would kill his own signature, as if to kill the 'Kill' of his own name, yet in Killeen's oeuvre there is also, as Derrida would say, an 'overflowing' of the signature, the possibility, intrinsic to the stamp, of stamping it throughout. The signature is a double bind, as Derrida has characterised it, or a double band.

Killeen's practice of the signature induces a veritable spasm of questions... Is reproductively to imprint a signature not to sign? As with a fake, or duplicate merely? In contracts a photocopied signature will not do, even if the print of the contract is itself photocopied. A photocopy signature may serve as a *record* of a signing, but not *as* a signing. (A printed signature may serve as a trademark — as in Goya's — but not as a signature.)

Is painting a signature like painting a banknote? Is it (only) to depict one? But isn't the Governor's signature printed on a banknote sufficient warranty of worth? Isn't that its precisely its purpose? And aren't all signatures in a sense a reproduction? It is of the very essence of the signature that it be imitable, that it be recognisable, iterable, and so, therefore — fakable. The Killeen signature is already, and necessarily, Killeenesque — like or akin to Killeen, a work in his manner or school.

It is not, evidently, an easy matter.

We are here caught up in the double bind — what Derrida calls the 'double band' of the signature. The signature is the subject of an inescapable paradox: 'the signature has to remain to disappear at the same time, remain in order to disappear, or disappear in order to remain'.¹⁶ The work has in *some* way to be signed 'Killeen', in order that Killeen's signature be marked as absent. We must know it as 'a Killeen', in order for the disappearance of the literal signature from its surface to tell. It is 'a simultaneous and double demand', a

¹⁵ Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

¹⁶ Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

'double and contradictory postulation, a double obligation, a *double bind* which I have translated into the *double band* of the signature...' ¹⁷

Derrida offers in *Signsponge*, as a 'first and insufficient approach', 'three modalities of signature'.¹⁸ Derrida's three insufficient modalities may be sufficient to introduce some order into our spasmodic questionings.

First: 'The one that we call signature in the proper sense represents the proper name, articulated in language, and readable as such'.¹⁹ It is an authenticating and contracting act. It is that signing you do on a cheque. In a painting, such a signature might say: 'It is indeed I who here paints: this *is* a Killeen — certified. Affirmed on my honour'. It is a performative gesture, seeming to say, 'I hereby...'

(The difficult differences between writing or mechanically printing out one's proper name, as Killeen sometimes does, on the back of a painting, and signing it on the front, are here ignored for the moment. As are the differences between writing or printing out by hand one's proper name on the front, and signing it as a *signature* there. As are the differences between the handwritten inscription of the name, and the signature 'proper' on the canvas front — both of which are conventionally called signature in the art world.)

'The second modality, a banal and confused metaphor for the first, is the set of idiomatic marks that a signer might leave by accident or intention in his product'.²⁰ This is what we call personal style, 'the inimitable idiom' — say Killeen's style. (If we see Killeen as disjunctively discontinuous and multiple, his 'style' might be the 'style' of any given one of his disjunctive series. Or, if it be insisted that there is a whole Killeen, 'isolated outside of any chronology', his discontinuity and multiplicity *is* his style — his overall 'signature'.) A musician, says Derrida, whose work gives him no space to sign, may still sign in this sense. Killeen's characteristic acompositional mode of the cut-out is known by his audience to be his, and is in this sense signed. We do not here

¹⁷ Derrida, op. cit., p. 56.

¹⁸ Derrida, op. cit., p. 52.

¹⁹ Derrida, op. cit., p. 52.

²⁰ Derrida, op. cit., p. 54.

need to read the literal inscription of the proper name (though, as with the signature 'proper', this kind of signature too is — of necessity — fakeable).

The third modality, which Derrida calls 'the general signature, or the signature of the signature',²¹ is that where the work of painting designates itself as act, inscribes itself as if to say: 'this is painting', or 'I am painting'. It is akin to what I have elsewhere here called 'the level of depictivity', or the level of representationality.

The three modalities are, in principle at least, structurally distinct. In Killeen however, you cannot help but notice, each modality of the signature tends to be stamped into the other. The signature in the first modality, for instance, that of the common sense meaning of the signature, the flourish with which you sign a cheque, is made by Killeen into a stamp. Yet that very bringing of the signature into doubt *is*, in a sense, Killeen's signature, his signature in the second modality of the signature, the very mark of the Killeenian mode. It is typical of Killeen, you might say, so to bring the signature into doubt. So to do is the very mark of his idiom, the identifying inscription of his personal, signature, style.

Again, the signature in its first modulation is cut in by Killeen to its third. If the painting is, by definition, that which is made of paint, there are Killeens where his signature is, in fact, one of the few marks made of paint other than some slight and translucent washes — the rest of the 'painting' is made mostly of photocopying ink, by a photocopying machine. So Killeen's signature is, in such cases, a moment where the painting, by its paint, most proclaims itself as painting.

There is also the fact that the signature is today *itself* a typifying gesture of the art of painting, for painting *is* the commodity that is signed. (A car, for instance, is not.) So to sign a painting — to use the signature in its first modality, as if personalising a cheque — is already for the painting to sign itself in the third modality, in which painting designates its own presence.

I have said that Killeen does not avoid the signature, and that he makes it uncertain. And yet he makes it, and re-makes it, constantly, in each of its three intercut modalities. He remakes it in his constant returns, for instance, as

²¹ Derrida, op. cit., p. 54.

when, in what I will call his 'Samplers', he turns, as if over his own shoulder, to examine his own signature effects, the various idiomatic effects of his past. In *'Painted over'*, for instance, of 1975, we will see a Comb of the kind he painted from 1973-74, the Grids which directly followed them through 1974, his circular Laces of 1975, and the more solid, less lacy circular Laces which preceded them — and so on.

Killeen's returns. If Killeen is, as I say, a multitude, a multitude of signatures, he (it) is also a multitude looking back over its shoulder at its own past signatures, a multitude which returns to itself sometimes, which knows and recalls parts of itself, reflects its own signature particles, making of itself its own mirror.

The zig zag comb in the cut-out, *Tracing the lines of my face no. 1*, May 1985, [plate 134] is an instance of such a retracing of the lines of his signature — it rehearses the combs which were the very signature of Killeen's style in 1974. [fig. 9] Or the man in a cut-out with a landscape in his head, [plate 140] who mirrors the man with a landscape in his head in a notebook sketch drawn in 1969. [fig. 35] So the oeuvre signs and re-signs itself.