

Chance as a means of ordering, and as the author's simulacrum

Two hypotheses about chance. First: everything is destined to encounter everything, only chance has it that they do not meet. Second: everything is scattered and things are indifferent to each other, only chance has it that from time to time they meet.
(Jean Baudrillard)

Chance contained order, and when order came, it made its way by chance into creation.
(A. Vernet)

Systematic painting as a means of ordering that eliminates compositional control in that you follow up all the alternatives of a given system.

Weakness is that I do not use elements that are sympathetic to this sort of control in that they are themselves not systematic but arbitrary to everything except my own whim.

(Killeen, the green notebook, pp. 73-74)

The above note is the first of many to consider systems of ordering which might eliminate compositional control. Here, Killeen realises that his own iconographic elements, figurative, organic and 'arbitrary' as often they are, will not easily submit to a mathematical ordering. They will not easily produce something like, say, Sol Le Witt's systematic variations on the cube. Yet he is tempted, it seems, by the propagative possibilities that a systematic painting might allow, 'in that you follow up all the alternatives of a given system'. And tempted too by 'an ordering that eliminates composition control', so that the painting might come to order itself, without the interference of an author.

Some pages after that note, there comes, as Derrida might say, the seminal spurt of a throw of dice, the disseminative deal of a hand of cards. Having briefly tried dropping paper cut-outs (silhouettes of an armchair, an arrow, a fish, a snake, a *, an X, a shell and a shark), and letting them twist and fall through the air to land as they might; and having briefly tried 'coin flipping' as 'a system for selecting and positioning elements in a painting

according to chance',¹ Killeen settles upon the throw of a dice or the dealing of cards as his means. [fig. 61]

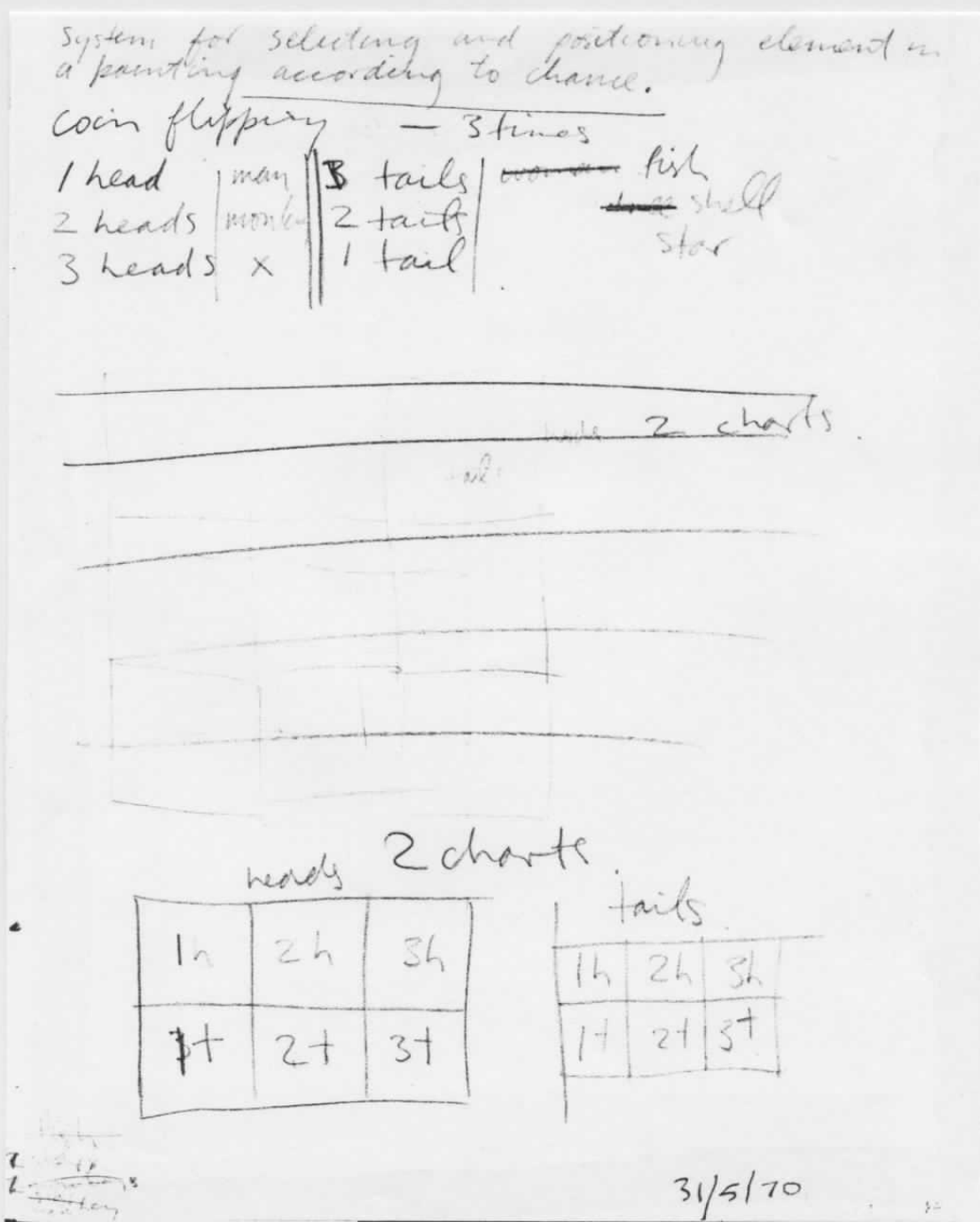


fig. 61 The green notebook, page 84

¹ There are several photographs in Killeen's possession showing paper cut-outs of an arrow, fish, snake, heart, starfish, snail, X, armchair and skull, whose terminal date is established by a stamp on the back: 1-2-70. One such photo shows the title *One at a time* chalked on the floor. For the coin flipping method, see Killeen, the green notebook, p. 84.

Some thirty three pages of Killeen's green notebook are given to investigating systems of dicing and dealing whereby chance may be used to select and to position images in paintings. In these pages, and in the paintings to which they refer, we may watch Killeen coming to see that chance may be used to provoke a potentially endless proliferation, an endless dissemination, something approaching that impossible and longed for prospect — a total account of the world. We may see chance becoming the full force of a painting, the trigger mechanism that starts it, and the power that keeps painting going.

And, most interestingly of all, perhaps, chance now becomes the simulacrum of the painter's determining authority. Its anonymous force dislodges the painting's authorial 'I'. It destroys the theological force of the signature. It offers some part of a perfect answer to Killeen's earlier stipulation, 'my identity must not be cause and must not be present'.²

On the chance of all this, Killeen might well take a chance with chance; and, given its use by such illustrious predecessors as Arp, Cage and Duchamp, he might well have some chance of success. And yet it must have seemed, just the same, to be taking a big chance, since Killeen now risked losing the *art* of his art, that part which is decided by skill not luck. Maybe one *did* need composition after all — didn't Arp cheat with the chance of his allegedly chance based works? Perhaps it was, after all, chancing it too much, chancing his arm as it were, to give up his composition to chance?

Such doubts were, in the end, to win out. Finally, we will see, when he comes to write the note headed *The end of chance*, after for some months having let chance assemble certain prespecified images in unforeseen locations and conjunctions, Killeen will come to refuse any longer to let things go as they may. And the relinquishment of author-ity which chance permits, the abandoning of an authorial ordering of parts, will not again have such a chance until the coming of the cut-outs, until *their* disseminative practice.

The major work of the chance series is *One foot twelve Inches*. [fig. 62]

² Killeen, the green notebook, p. 44.



fig. 62 *One foot twelve inches*, June 1970

*12 paintings 24" x 24" with 12 objects in each
selected from 36 objects by a six-sided
dice*

*2 sizes of objects — one square — two squares
determined by card dice picture cards
ordinary cards*

*All objects the right way up according
to reality — none going out the edge.*

*All dice throws for the 12 will be
made before the paintings starts.*

(Killeen, the green notebook., p. 94)

The procedures outlined in this note allow the painting *One foot Twelve Inches*, June 1970, and a number of other works of mid 1970, in which the images are chosen and positioned by chance. *One foot Twelve Inches* consists of twelve panels, each 24" x 24", stacked in two rows of six, with twelve 'objects' in each. The objects are chosen by chance from the following list of thirty six 'objects'; and their position too is decided by chance, with the authorial proviso only that they be hung the 'right' way up, and that none should be cropped by the panel edge

tiger

cloud

heart

wheel

5

insect

bird

shell

woman's head [profile facing right]

shark

woman's head [profile facing left]

gun

aeroplane

monkey

dog

frontal man's head

frontal woman's head

X

elephant

tree

fish

snake

ship

star

N.Z. [map]

armchair

bulldozer

male head [profile facing right]

chevron

cross

medal

snail

symbol [*]

sheep

hat [steel helmet]

male head [profile facing left]

One foot Twelve Inches is thus composed — to borrow the title of the largest of the cut-outs — at once by *Chance and inevitability*. Thirty six images are chosen by Killeen, of which twelve only must appear in each panel; while each must appear 'the right way up, according to reality', and none may go over a panel edge: such are the inevitabilities. The choice of *which* twelve of the thirty six images should appear in each panel is made by dealing twelve cards from a shuffled pack of the prepared thirty six cards; while the *position* of each image is determined by the throwing of dice: such is the role of chance.

Killeen's procedure may be reconstructed as follows. First, on the face side of thirty six playing cards, he painted his thirty six 'objects', in white line

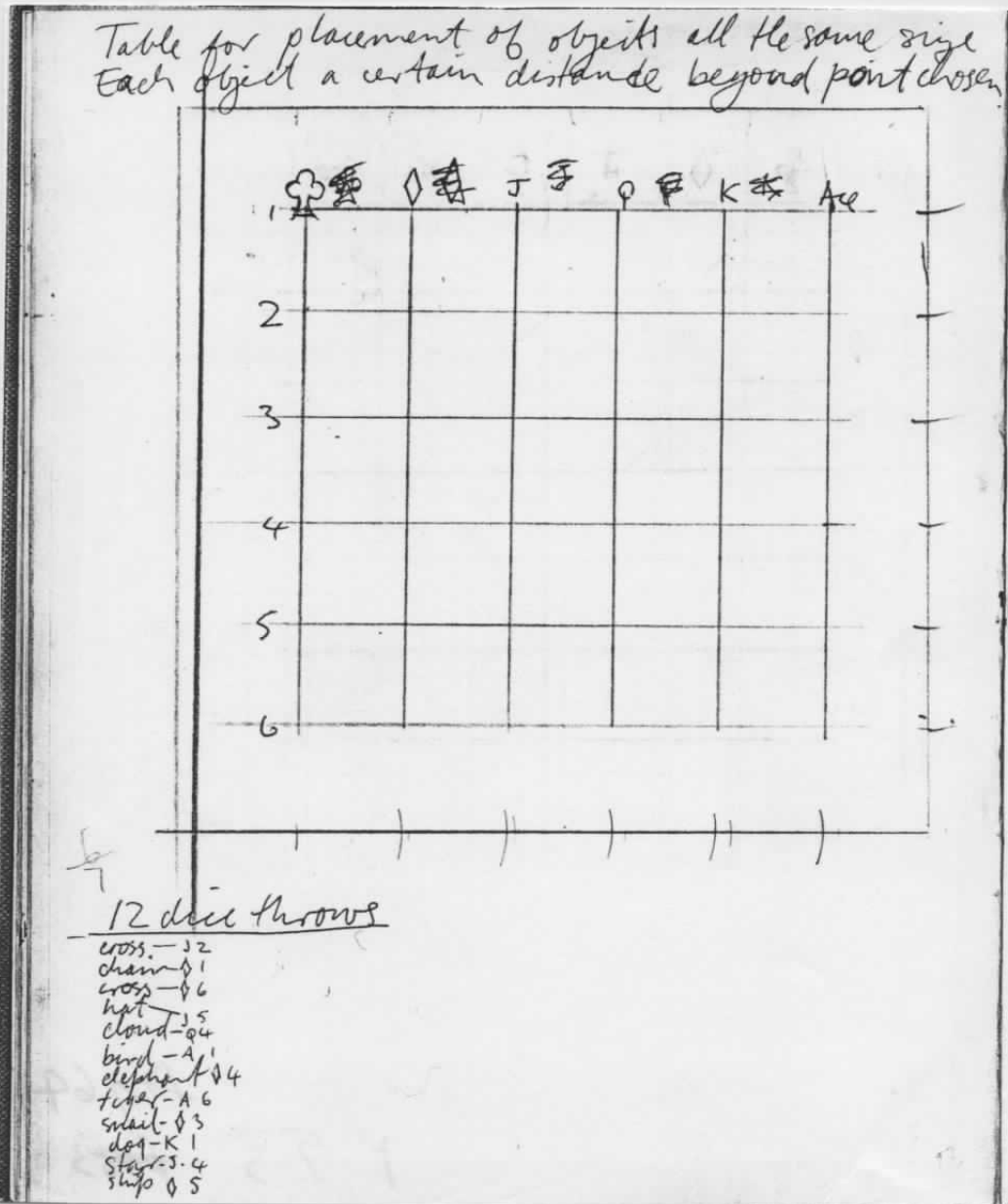


fig. 64 The green notebook, page 93

It is not, evidently, an easy way of (de)composing pictures. You can see, in the following chart for Killeen's throws and deals for the first four panels of *One foot twelve inches*, the effort his solicitations of chance required. [fig. 65]

So, though Killeen chooses the image-stock in advance, he does not compose the work in advance, and then proceed to make it: it makes *itself*, it composes *itself*, through successive throws of the dice. The painting comes out through his acceptance of chance, through him offering himself as its instrument, and making his picture open to any and every arrangement of its elements.

Tabulation of dice throws.
Object - position - size.

1	tiger	J4	0	gun	J2	P
	cloud	C5	P	ox	Q2	P
	heart	D2	P	elephant	A1	P
	wheel	J5	P	tree	D6	0
	tree	A6	P	insect	D1	P
	insect	J2	0	teeth	D2	P
2	bird	K6	P	X	D3	0
	shell	J6	P	X	C5	0
	wom. head L.	Q5	P	snake	J1	P
	shell	C5	P	insect	D6	P
	shark	J4	0	ship	D2	0
	wom. head S.	K3	P	star	A5	P
3	NZ	Q6	0	snail	A4	0
	tree	C2	P	medal	D2	P
	shell	C5	0	fox	K6	P
	chair	J2	0	gun	Q5	0
	Man's head S.	A3	0	snail	C3	0
	symbol	K5	P	shell	Q2	P
4	snail	Q5	0	hat	K3	P
	hat	Q1	P	bird	Q1	P
	eye	K2	0	shark	C3	P
	hat	D2	P	heart	Q1	0
	W. head L.	Q3	P	hat	Q3	0
	eye	C2	P	bulldozer	A5	0

fig. 65 The green notebook, page 95

The procedure merges with the work: it must be foreseen — as the way of beginning — for the work to be unforeseeable... In order to bring forth the painting, we see him accepting — better still — arousing — the risks of the pictorial process.

(Jean Clay, 'Ointments, Makeup, Pollen')⁴

Without it being possible in advance to decide the limits of this sort of propagation, a different effect is produced each time, an effect

⁴ Jean Clay, 'Ointments, Makeup, Pollen', October 27, Winter 1984, p. 28.

that is therefore each time 'new'; a game of chance forever new, a play of fire forever young — fire and games being always, as Heraclitus and Nietzsche have said, a play of luck with necessity, of contingency with law. A hymn between chance and rule.

(Derrida, Dissemination) ⁵

The work... is not at all to invent interconnections, relations, meaning — there is too much of all that from the beginning. It is, on the contrary, to fabricate the neutral, the indifferent, to demagnetise clusters, inseparable configurations, to make of them erratic elements thereafter consigned to wandering about at random... Change — that is the very impossibility of the indetermination of elements, of their mutual indifference and finally of their freedom — results from this dismantling.

(Jean Baudrillard, 'Fatality or Reversible Immanence') ⁶

In the resulting overlaps and contiguities of objects, there are, in 'Derrida's words, 'repercussions set off among the signifiers, which are in no way dictated or decided in advance by any thematic intentionality',⁷ for what intention there is, is only to have this unintentionality. See, for instance, the pistol which points at a man's head (thriller); the human head which replaces a bird's head (Surrealist); the human head covered with a monkey's (origin of species); the male head covered with a medal (head full of war); and, again on the 'theme' of the male and war, the steel helmets which intersect a male head — and can it only be chance, as they say, that a heart should twice intersect with helmets of war?

... we all know that, in writing and speech also, because writing and speech have the same compulsion, when one allows them free play, to come into order as if destined, the whole language can come to be swallowed up as if in a single sentence, by an effect which precipitates the floating signs towards a central interconnection.

⁵ Derrida, *Dissemination*, transl. Barbara Johnson, the University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981, p. 277.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, 'Fatality or Reversible Immanence: Beyond the Uncertainty Principle', *Social Research*, vol. 49 (2), 1982, p. 279.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

(Jean Baudrillard, '*Fatality or Reversible Immanence*')⁸

Of the frontal male heads, five, the bearded ones, are self-portraits, or rather, portraits of the artist. In panel five the self-portrait head is nearest to a snake (one might think of Gauguin's self-portrait with a snake), and to a star and apple (the Nativity and Fall of the eye, one might say, sign of sight, the sense by which we make sense of paintings). In panel twelve the self-portrait is crossed out by a military medal (one might well think of Killeen's anti-war paintings, the series immediately preceding the chance series).

Chance companions, chance meetings... Chance makes conjunctions, sets off repercussions among the signifiers, from which the spectator will, much as I have done here, willy nilly make meanings. The spectator makes meanings. These thematic relations of meaning are the product of the viewer not of the painter. Much as in the cut-outs to come.

And by these self-portraits it is marked too that chance has taken over the painter's power and place, displaced the 'I' of painting, that 'I' which authorises meaning. Chance has given back to the painter such a place that he is dislocated, dis-placed, re-placed, played with, featured now as a mere pictorial effect, to be distributed, arranged, scattered by chance's whim all over the painting's place. He might well now say, like Philippe Sollers, that 'this game was using me as one figure among others'.⁹ Chance, by so introducing the artist's face to the picture, has made him a spectator, as it were, of his own absence, like Proust's traveller, 'in the brief moment of return', present only as 'the witness, the observer, with a hat and travelling coat, the stranger who does not belong to the house'. He is now no more than a mere *visitor* to his 'own' painting, one image chosen by chance among many.

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

⁹ Philippe Sollers, *Numbers*, cited Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 292.