

## Feminist moments in Killeen

Killeen's cut-outs have all tended in a structural sense to be feminist, in that their form does not allow an oppositional posing of the standard dualities -- male/female, active/passive, mind/body, geometric/organic, intellect/intuition, nature/culture, signifier/signified, and so on -- in which the male has traditionally been privileged. There is no place in the endlessly moveable, endlessly dispersed parts of the cut-outs in which those old hierarchies might find their repose. (Only where there *are* dualities present in the form of the painting -- as there are say in the paintings of Killeen's teacher McCahon, with their blacks and whites dividing the world into opposites -- life/death, light/dark, sky/earth, male/female, the transcendent/the merely material -- will those old dualities inhere: they will be immanent in any painting hierarchically organised or opposingly split.

Nor, it might be said, do Killeen's cut-outs ever speak in one voice, the monolithic and malic voice of power, the unified voice of the Father. In their many voicedness, in their disunity, in their preference for plurality, they refuse the Father's name.

*Who knows if this insistence on the plural is not a way of denying sexual duality? The opposition of the sexes must not be a law of Nature; therefore, the confrontations and paradigms must be dissolved, both the meanings and the sexes be pluralised; meaning will tend towards its multiplication, its dispersion ...whose plural will baffle any constituted, centred discourse...<sup>1</sup>*

Such, perhaps, is Killeen's largest feminism. But, in this and the next two chapters, we are concerned not at this level of generality, with the endless dispersal caused by Killeen's 'form', disorganising as it does all oppositeness, and defusing all power. Rather, we will look at three specific occasions in Killeen's work of a kind of feminist deconstruction -- occasions where 'the feminine' becomes a matter of explicit dispute.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, transl. Richard Howard, Hill & Wang, New York, 1987, p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion as to whether, and in what ways, and with what dangers and difficulties a male may be feminist, see Laurence Simmons, "'Language is not neutral': Killeen's Feminism", *Antic* 7, June 1990, pp. 75-94.

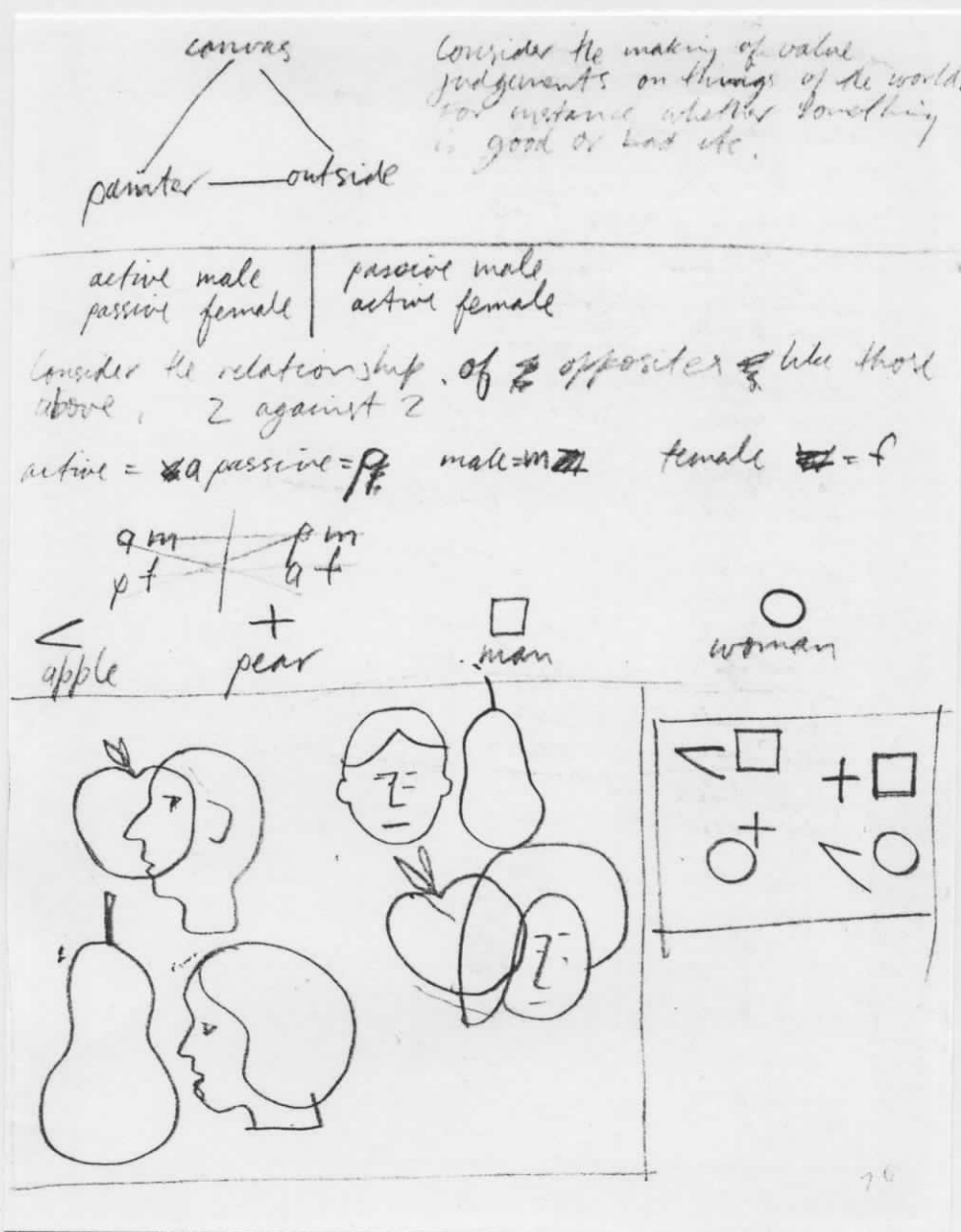


fig. 246. The green notebook, p. 76

The first is a private moment, in words and sketches in the green notebook Killeen worked in from 1969 to 1971. I take (I am granted) the liberty of here making it public. The second occasion is already public, that of Killeen's numbered series of drawings, *Social Document*, first exhibited at Peter McLeavy's Wellington,<sup>3</sup> in September 1984, and exhibited at the National gallery,

<sup>3</sup> The Peter McLeavy Gallery exhibition was accompanied by a public lecture by Laurence Simmons, "Language is not neutral: Killeen's Feminism", later published in *Antic* 7, June 1990, pp. 75-94. Also, though I do not deal with it here, Killeen exhibited two groups of 12 explicitly feminist drawings at the New Vision Gallery, Auckland, in 1984. These works have such titles as *The politics of difference*; *Schmidt's Diatom Atlas and the politics of difference*; *Women as tools*; *Armour & the politics of difference*; *Walking though the dominant culture*; *Female armour*; *The difficulty of drawing women in our culture*; and *The language is not neutral*. They were presented in groups of 3 x 4, in the context of the exhibited 'feminist' cut-out, *The politics of difference*, March 1984.

Wellington, several times since. The third occasion too is public, though far more dispersed. It concerns a number of cut-outs made between 1984 and 1989, including *Language is not neutral*, May 1984; *Time to change male institutionalised war*, in its two versions of June 1986 and August 1986; *About asking when the answer is no*, in its two versions of February 1985 and March 1985; *Time to change the Greek hero*, May 1985; and *Stacks -- Months and Days*, December 1989.

First, in the green notebook, an antithesis transgressed.

*Consider the making of value  
judgements on things of the world.*

*For instance whether something  
is good or bad etc*

*active male            passive male  
passive female        active male*

*Consider the relationship of opposites like those  
above, 2 against 2*

*(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 76)*

On the two pages following this note, Killeen charts the possible permutations of the four terms:

*Active + 1*

*passive + 2            to show how opposites made*

*female + 3*

*male + 4*

*active male            passive female*

*active male            passive female*

*active female            passive male*

*active female            passive male*

*active female            passive male*

*passive male            active female*

*active male            active male*

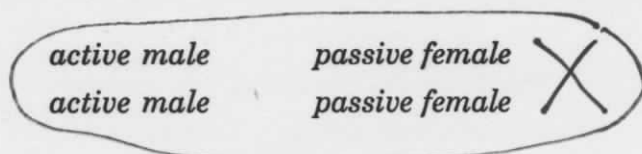
*passive female*      *passive male*

*passive female*      *active male*

*passive female*      *passive male*

(Killeen *the green notebook*, pp. 77--78)

Of all the possible combinations Killeen rejects but one, that in which the historical oppositions, at once rigid and banal, of our sexual code are affirmed. He crosses and rings the rejected one off from the rest, like so:



*dead opposites*

*opposites*

*not included*

*Not dead*

*opposites*

*both sides*

*become one*

(Killeen *the green notebook*, p. 76)

In the rejected arrangement, 'both sides become one'. That is, the qualities arrange themselves so together as to solidify into opposing essences, set face to face. This is a culturally and historically prescribed order: hence the rejection. Note that Killeen does not reject the combination:

*active female*                      *passive male*

*active female*                      *passive male*

although here too opposing essences are set face to face. He does not reject it because it is a culturally proscribed order -- a permutation our culture does not permit. It is only the required orders Killeen wants to refuse -- it is the forbidden he wants to bring into play.

In all the other permutations, the culturally given terms remain unchanged. But male and female change places, and change, in a kind of jerky rush, the essences in which they are adjectivally dressed. Male and female

swap and re-swap attributes, in a cross-dressing process which implies of itself that it might go on *ad infinitum*, and worse, which subversively implies (though it will be some years before Killeen will explicitly speak his distaste for the concept of 'essence') that there is no such thing as an essence of man or an essence of woman, that they are a matter of a cultural clothing, merely.

Nor was this the green notebook's first examination of the antitheses in which men and women, *as* men and women, are imprisoned as essence by culture. On page 76 of the green notebook, Killeen had made a sketch in which apples are (somewhat but not entirely arbitrarily) designated as the symbol of the 'active', and pears as the symbol of the 'passive'. [fig. 246] Active apple is made the attribute of the male head, and passive pear the attribute of the female head -- a stereotypical attribution. However, in the same drawing, a passive pear is attached to a male head, and an active apple to the female head -- a non-stereotypical attribution.

I say that Killeen's symbols are not entirely arbitrary. For, while questioning culture, they are of course culturally formed. Quite apart from sharing its first letter with 'active', the apple is hard and dry, while the pear, apart from sharing its first letter with 'passive', is soft and moist, traditional attributes of the male and the female respectively. With his use of the apple and the pear, as with his use of + and the < in the accompanying diagram, Killeen is at once inside and outside of the cultural system being deconstructed: he accepts its terms, if only to dislodge them from their customary usage.

Next to the apple and pear sketch is another, in which (again not entirely arbitrarily) a square and an < are made the signs of the male, while a circle and a + are made the signs of the female. [fig. 246] *Not entirely arbitrarily*: the circle is 'soft', the square 'hard'; the < is active, and the + less so, a kind of passive reconciliation of opposites. And the 'scientific' sign of man is an active arrow, and of woman the passively reconciled cross: another purely cultural code, wearing though it does the expressionless mask of 'objectivity'.

Both the apple and pear and the square and circle sketches are brief (half serious, half humorous) attempts to deconstruct one of cultures seemingly 'natural' opposites, to defuse the *doxa*, that body of ideas, that orthodoxy, which is so powerfully established that it seems to be without origin, to be simply a given of nature, not culture at all.

These drawings and their accompanying charts were made at the time of the chance based works, or shortly after -- in other words, at a time when Killeen was submitting his images to an order -- or disorder -- in which they 'function like signifiers, unhooked, dislodged, disengaged from their historic polarisation'.<sup>4</sup> It seems that a conscious deconstruction of sexual oppositions coincides with the coming of a form to his work which radically dis-locates, disorganises and deconstructs, conventional pictorial orders. Already, then, and at the very moment when he submits the old compositional orders to the a-compositional play of chance, Killeen is coming to see that the dreams of our culture, those old dreams in which we are imprisoned, are become solid in a rhetoric whose figures are such as Barthes has spoken of, 'a labour of classification intended to name, to lay the foundation for, the world.'

*Among all these figures, one of the most stable is the Antithesis; its apparant function is to consecrate (and domesticate) by name... the division between opposites and the very irreduceability of this division. The Antithesis separates for eternity; it thus refers to a nature of opposites... The Antithesis is the battle between plenitudes set ritually face to face like two fully armed warriors: the Antithesis is the figure of the given opposition, eternal, eternally recurrent: the figure of the inexpiable. Every joining of two antithetical terms, every mixture, every conciliation -- in short, every passage through the wall of the Antithesis -- thus constitutes a transgression.*

*(Roland Barthes, S/Z)<sup>5</sup>*

This, one of Killeen's first clear transgressions of the antithetical rhetoric of male/female, is hardly catastrophic -- not yet (if indeed the transgressions of art ever can be). It is doodled, privately played with merely: yet its little outrage is there. It may be but a sport (in both acceptations of that word -- a diversion and a deviation), in which the sacred oppostions of our culture are turned into a game, but it is one, nevertheless, in which those oppositions are subjected to irony, and so brought into question.

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 236.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, transl. Richard Millar, Hill & Wang, New York, 1974, pp. 26-27.



The meanings culture imposes, its oppressive codes of the opposites, may as here in Killeen's little sketches be transgressed with seeming lightness; but, should it feel itself threatened, all of culture's force (linguistic, grammatical, legal, moral) will be marshalled to render mute the questioning of its antitheses. The paradigmatic parallelism of opposites *must not meet*, for it is by these opposites, seemingly so natural, that a culture's orders are made and maintained.

This simple play with opposites has some importance too in that it is the first sketch of a deconstruction which will later appear in Killeen's work in a far more complex and richly elaborate form. It may now grant us, for those later occasions, something of a gate and a guide -- an easy way in.

The square and the circle, for instance, will in 1990 and 1991 appear in the cut-out, *Destruction of the circle*, in all its sixteen versions. There, following upon our reading of these green notebook sketches, we might venture a reading in which the male order, the Patriarchy, is seen historically to destroy the female order, the Matriarchy, and, correspondingly, geometry to struggle with the organic. [fig. 5]

Killeen's present consideration of opposites ends with a page and two further lines of writing. Here we may see him coming to see that the antithesis, that classic figure of the opposites, is an effect not of nature, but of language, of the language by which Nature is constituted for us:

*natural opposites? male female -- life death  
 objects cannot be opposite one another  
 because each thing is entirely separate  
 (as an object) and does not need an  
 opposite to make it comprehensible.  
 Opposites only occur in man's thinking  
 Male female life death are not opposites  
 in our sense. -- (death is not a state of being)  
 gander is not the opposite in nature of goose.  
 except in our language.  
 (Killeen, the green notebook, pp. 79--80)*