

## What I do here

He who speaks of the life and works of an individual artist places his listeners in armchairs, so to speak, and invites them to admire the various aspects of a sculptured figure displayed before them on a revolving base.  
(Erwin Panofsky, 'Preface', *Early Netherlandish Painting*)

It seems rather simple, not very revolutionary, and yet if you think of the way in which the human sciences think, conceptualise, formalise, verbalise — it becomes clear that they are absolutely not acclimatised to thinking about discontinuity: they are still dominated by the superego of continuity, a superego of evolution, history, filiation, etc. Every advance in thinking about what is discontinuous thus remains essentially heretical, revolutionary in the proper and necessary sense.  
(Roland Barthes, 'Interview: A Conversation with Roland Barthes')

I can't be supposed continuous  
(Leigh Davis, *Willy's Gazette*, 1983)

You as invention.  
(Killeen, the blue notebook, August 1971)

A consciousness disjunct,  
Being but this overblotted  
Series  
Of intermittences...  
(Ezra Pound, 'Mauberly', 1920)

In the work of any major poet who does not repeat himself, the earlier part is necessary for understanding the later, and the later for understanding the earlier...  
(T.S. Eliot, Introduction, *Ezra Pound: selected Poems*, 1948)

As a thinker, Nabokov always stalked... the incomprehensible gap between the unforeseeability of an event and the light it casts, once happened, back over the past, turning hitherto neutral moments into abortive tries or necessary preparations for an outcome now obvious.  
(Brian Boyd, *Nabokov: the Russian Years*, 1990)

In this work, I scan some twenty one years of Killeen's painting, from 1966 to 1987. While each successive phase of Killeen's art is touched upon, my concern is to cut out from all of Killeen's work — to disinter and sharply to mark off from the rest — such principles as his cut-outs have taught me to discern.

I seek to discover, in Killeen's works from 1966 to 1978, the conditions which allow the invention of his major works, the cut-outs, that diverse body of paintings begun in August 1978, and continued to this day. I seek to answer the following questions. How were the cut-outs arrived at? What, in the conditions of Killeen's previous works, makes possible the invention of the cut-outs themselves?

Killeen's earlier works, then, are treated as the precursors his cut-outs create. They are read *according to* the cut-outs, in an effect Barthes has somewhere called 'the reversal of origins, the ease which brings the anterior text out of the subsequent one'. They are read *against* their chronological grain, as it were, even as I might seem to abide by the monograph's characteristic

chronological ordering. Killeen's *oeuvre* is regarded, even in the act of producing a traditional narrative reading of it, as a thing already read, whose most climactic irresolution, and most fertile dissemination, is in the play of the cut-outs themselves.

So I say that I read Killeen's earlier works in terms of the cut-outs. I admit, and make it as emphatically clear as I can, that to do this is a *production*; that it is an interpretive *operation* performed on Killeen's works — an incision of the analytical blade, a cutting in and cutting out. I make quite a song and dance about it, in fact. Yet, it may be objected, there is nothing very surprising about treating the early work in terms of the late, even if it is, as in my quotation from Barthes above, somewhat spectacularly and paradoxically put. One *always* understands the early work in terms of the later, and the later in terms of the earlier. One sees the artist, as in my Panofsky epigraph, as a sort of revolving simultaneity, whose chronology reveals itself to be no more than the successive aspects of a single and palpable figure. So to see it is, in fact, the ordinary condition of considering an *oeuvre*.

It is so 'ordinary', indeed, that the reader, and most particularly the art historically trained reader, may here plausibly object: 'All this may be taken for granted, it does not need stating'. But, I want to insist, *why* does one do this reading of the earlier work in terms of the later, and vice versa? I do insist. What are the unspoken principles and assumptions which determine such an operation? What, precisely, *is it*, which we may here take for granted?

The principles are not, so I will argue, simply those of *description* of the *oeuvre*, a product of the structurally accidental fact that we do happen to know the late works when we happen to be describing the early, and vice versa. They are those, rather, in which the *oeuvre* is *produced* in the very act of reading it. If I seek in the early works of Richard Killeen for the conditions which make the cut-outs possible, that is already to assume some unity in the *oeuvre*, to assume some coherence in its shape, to suppose it continuous, and authorised under the jurisdiction of the proper name. It is at once to seek and to assume the very conditions which govern and produce the *oeuvre* as an institution.

But does Killeen's *oeuvre* — if we agree to call it an *oeuvre* — encourage or even allow such assumptions? Isn't it singularly discontinuous? The truth is that in the cut-outs alone there is more variety, more difference between the works of one year and another, than there is in a whole lifetime of say Rita Angus's or

Toss Woollaston's work. And this is to say nothing of the disparities in Killeen's work before the cut-outs — disparities more extraordinary still.

I hear the objection that *every* painting by *every* painter is discontinuous from the next, or from any other — that the problem is general — but (so it seems to me), with Killeen discontinuity is radically *asserted*, forcefully made a matter of mark. His first one-person show, for instance, at Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, in 1970, seemed to some of its viewers a two person, or even a group show. There might seem to be almost *nothing* in common between the works of January 1970 on the one wall, and the works of February and March on the other.

[fig. 1]



fig. 1 Installation view, Barry Lett Galleries, Richard Killeen: Paintings: April 1969 — April 1970

The disparate nature of Killeen's works challenges, we will see, the very notions of the *oeuvre*, all its principles of unity, continuity, coherence. I am determined here to face the nature of this upset, and not to smooth over the cracks between the *oeuvre's* disparate parts. And this because Killeen's work *demand*s that one stress discontinuity. To seek, as is the art historian's institutionally required task, for the underlying unities and continuities of the *oeuvre*, is to work somewhat against Killeen's grain. I must, therefore, at the least, somewhat *suspend* the unity of the *oeuvre*, or treat it with some suspicion.

As it is with the *oeuvre*, so it is with the individual work. The structure of each of Killeen's cut-outs prefigures, I would say, what I say of the *oeuvre*. I submit to the law of his *oeuvre*, as I submit to the law of his cut-outs. Which is? Disjunction. The *body* of his work, as they say, the *corpus*, seems a dismembered

body — an especially dismembered body. Such signs as the cut off fish head, bird head and human finger in the cut-out *From the Cairo Museum*, July 1985, [fig. 2] are no accident: they reflect the cut-out *en abyme*; they are the structural principle of Killeen's oeuvre — the body of his work — mirrored in miniature.

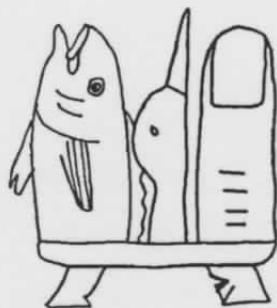


fig. 2

Killeen teaches one, somewhat as Foucault does, to regard all unities with suspicion.

*But the unities which must be suspended above all are those that emerge in the most immediate way: those of the book and the oeuvre.*

*(Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge)<sup>1</sup>*

One can say much the same of the painting as Foucault does of the book. The painting, like the book, that other parallelepiped, might seem a material thing, with its definite limiting frame, and its definite economic value. Yet Killeen's cut-outs, frameless as they are, might already give us pause for thought. Where, precisely, does a given cut-out begin, and where does it end? How material, exactly, *is* its unity?

The cut-outs are made of separate and separable parts. They come to their buyer or hanger in a box, in which the pieces are laid one upon the other, with protective cards or tissues between. Each piece has a hole drilled in it, through which it may be tacked to the wall. The pieces, when hung, are tacked together in a cluster on the wall. For most of the cut-outs between August 1978 — the date of the first — and December 1985, the artist's instruction is that the pieces be hung a few inches apart; after December 1985, the instruction is that the pieces be hung

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, transl. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Tavistock Publications, London, 1985, p. 23.

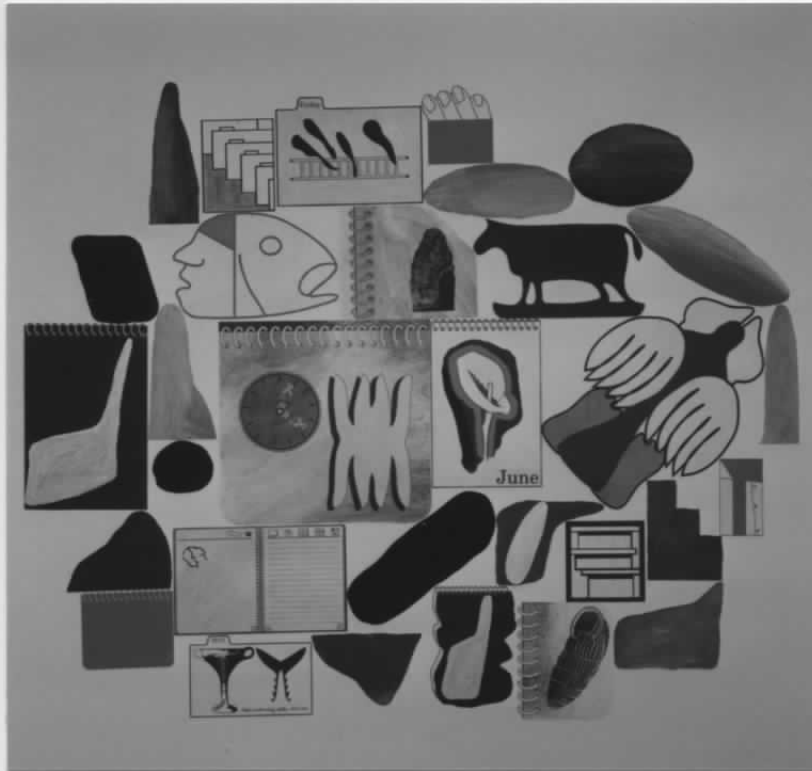


fig. 3 Stacks — months and days, 12 July 1990

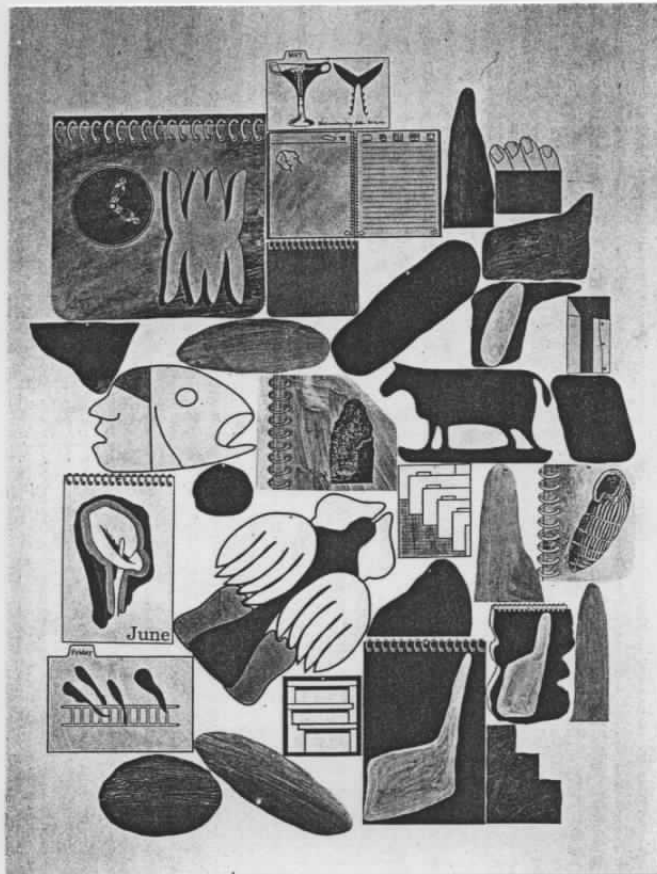


fig. 3 Stacks — months and days, 12 July 1990

touching. But, whether the pieces are hung touching or apart, because of the irregularity of their shape, the wall is left fissuring between. The cut-out, therefore, in as much as it is a whole, is full of holes: it is porous to a tissue of space which is at once outside, between, and inside itself. The cut-outs are riddled with that space which ought properly to be outside the painting. Thus their boundaries are made uncertain.

The cut-outs are, furthermore, perpetually removable, able to be tacked together in some other order, in some other shape, in some other place. If you see the same work in two hangings, on different occasions, it is quite possible that you will not recognise it *as* the same. Though, in accord with an unwritten law, each of its pieces is present on each occasion of its hanging, the same cut-out may easily seem, in its different occasions, a different painting. Nor is this a structurally accidental fact. That it may seem *different from itself* is built into the very structure of the cut-out. [fig. 3]

Should we turn instead to seek a unity in the origin of the *images* the cut-out presents, rather than in the material form of the cut-out as a whole, we will find that the origin is multiple, and often irretrievably various. One image may come, say, from a book of engraved ferns, another from an encyclopaedia entry on fish, another from a child's drawing, another from an illustrated history of agricultural technology. Still others will be 'invented' by Killeen, while yet another may be a computer translated image of a postcard of Piero della Francesca's portrait of Federigo da Montefeltro. If the cut-out itself poses a unity, it is surely what Foucault calls a 'weak unity', composed as it is of so many separate signs taken from so many places and times — a unity comparable to that of an encyclopaedia, where the question of the 'author' becomes problematic. [Fig. 4]

And there is an ever-increasing disparity of styles within the single cut-out, and, in the later cut-outs, a disparity of styles even within the single piece. The piece, like the cut-out as a 'whole', becomes a concretion of differences, an accumulation of disparities. The perspectival may be introduced to a piece which otherwise refuses the perspectival, the figurative to a piece which elsewhere refuses figuration: even within the single piece, the unities of style are broken down.

As with the individual work, so with the oeuvre. The oeuvre, it might be thought, is easily established and delimited by attributing a number of works to

an author-painter. But many of Killeen's works before the cut-outs do not seem, on the face of it, to be painted by the same painter, even if they should happen to have painted or stamped upon them — in hands themselves suspiciously various - the same name. They might seem but a series of intermittences, a nearly absolute discontinuity.

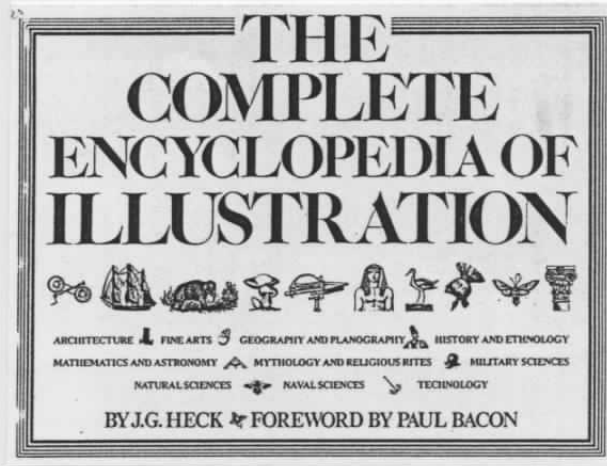


fig. 4

And Killeen's notebooks — to which I will here have constant recourse, and to which I have already had recourse, without questioning it, in the epigraphs to this chapter — are they to be called part of the *oeuvre*? Are the words in the notebooks, as well as the occasional sketch there, to be called part of the *oeuvre*? Or are they 'background material', only? (It might be salutary to remember, in this regard, that with the cut-outs the white of the 'background' wall is made part of the work: that with Killeen's painting there is a constant ambiguity as to what is figure and what ground, that the border between back and foreground is constantly made uncertain.)

If, for my convenience, I resort to Killeen's notes, if I regard the artist's statements, as art historians are liable to do, as 'proof' or alibi of my own assertion, am I then putting these private jottings into the public glare of the *oeuvre*? The fact that I have, for convenience of reference, pencilled page numbers into Killeen's notebooks may serve here as a sign of the larger fact: in 'using' the notebooks, I am in a sense 'interfering' with them, 'mis-using' them, transforming them from private aids into the full publicity of the *oeuvre*. Had I not published them, under the name of Killeen, they must have remained private, at least until the event of the artist's death.

And what are we to say of the artist's statements, tacked up on the white wall in some shows, much as are the cut-outs themselves? And what of Killeen's photocopied 'source material', tacked to the wall in the Auckland City Art Gallery show, 'Chance and Inevitability', in 1982? And what of paintings Killeen later destroyed, so refusing publicly to grant them authorship, paintings which exist now only in the form of a photographic slide? And what are we to say of the work I call '*Painted Over*',<sup>2</sup> a painting which also now exists only in the form of a slide, since Killeen painted it over, to produce the painting now known as *Three Patterns* (August 1975)?

*The problems raised by the oeuvre are even more difficult. Yet, at first sight, what could be more simple? It is a collection of texts that can be designated by the sign of a proper name. But this designation (even leaving aside the problems of attribution) is not a homogeneous function: does the name of an author designate in the same way a text he has published under his name, a text he has published under a pseudonym, another found after his death in the form of an unfinished draft, and another that is merely a collection of jottings, a notebook. The establishment of a complete oeuvre presupposes a number of choices that are difficult to justify or even to formulate.*

*(Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge)<sup>3</sup>*

It would seem unexceptionable, no doubt, to include various finished works which, for one reason or another, Killeen never showed. But should one include works Killeen destroyed? And those he abandoned without finishing? And those he painted over, but which survive in the form of a slide? Should one include such sketches and first drafts as Killeen never chose to show? If one *includes* them, one in a sense *adds* them to the oeuvre — they were not placed there, in public, by the artist. One performs an operation on the work, and this perhaps even in the face of the author's wish

And isn't such 'interference' in the oeuvre, such 'operation' on the work, typical of the monographer's task and mode?

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<sup>2</sup> Those titles which appear in quote marks are titles I have added myself, for convenience's sake, to paintings left untitled by the artist.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, op. cit., pp. 23-24.



8.83

*Francis to do Ph.D on me*

*Means looking back*

*(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 164.)*<sup>4</sup>

28.9.83

*Francis Pound comes to see notebooks, drawings*

*& paintings for his Ph.d. This is first time.*

*I find some things & do some work.*

*(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 168.)*

Since we are already sliding into the pit of something like the confessional mode, let me admit this too. The observer infects the observed. Or rather, the act of observation itself irreparably changes the observed. The very bringing out of paintings from the artist's past, the literal carrying into the studio of works from the storeroom, in its very wish to investigate the *oeuvre*, creates, or at least affects, the *oeuvre*. For the artist as much as for his monographer, should the artist still be alive, it 'Means looking back'. Killeen, in seeing these old things 'of his', begins all the more to re-use his past, creating with that past and out of this interference with the present, a simultaneity and a unity — that unity which is called 'the oeuvre'.

The earlier works introduced from the storeroom to the studio for the purpose of my study, stayed for a while lying about. They were lying too, it might be said, in the sense of an untruth: they implied, they proffered, they suggested, they all but demanded, a past in the present, a simultaneity foreign to the artist's present practice. Killeen's seeing again his *Seeds across the land*, for instance, a drawing of 23 March 1980, [fig. 6] when it was brought out for the purposes of this study, lead to the reissuing of its black leaf and red square in several versions of the cut-out *Destruction of the circle*, 1990. [fig. 5] Here we may clearly see that the observer's infection of the observed is central to the oeuvre principle.

And what status are we to grant Killeen's published interviews? And Killeen's 'artist's statements' — those stock devices of the art catalogue as a genre? What, precisely, are we to make of them? And what of the things he has, over the years, said privately to me, and to others? And what of the words he has jotted down in his private notebooks, to which I have already, even in this

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<sup>4</sup> The black notebook is a hardback, unlined notebook, in which Killeen wrote and drew from May 1975 to August 1988.

introductory chapter, had recourse? This is a problem both theoretical and practical. Are we to include them in the oeuvre? Is to do so only to succumb to



fig. 5 *Destruction of the circle*, 7 May 1990



fig 6 *Seeds across the land*, 23 March 1980 (margins cropped)

the intentionalist fallacy? Are we to make them only authorising 'proofs' of our claims of the oeuvre itself? Or are we to call them 'background', something

merely 'contextual' to the oeuvre, and this when Killeen has made us distrust the very concept of inside and outside, and background and fore?

Killeen's notebooks show him, I might argue, 'merely' as the painting's first reader. And such notes as I chose here to quote are those — perhaps inevitably — which suit my reading — seem fitted or tailored to it. Yet, just as inevitably, to quote Killeen's notes is, willy nilly, to privilege Killeen as the reader of the painting, to privilege his intentionality: to abide, that is, by the monographic convention. To quote from Killeen's notes while at the same time to claim the pictures are open to the spectator's reading, is, perhaps, to try to have one's cake and to eat it too, since it is, quite regardless of my intention, to proffer Killeen's reading to those who will take it as necessarily 'true', or as 'proof' of my own.

Such citations from the notebooks will justify *my* readings, for those traditionalist art historians — and their name is legion — who, always distrusting mere *pictures* as evidence, say: show me a *text* to prove such and such was intended by the artist — readers for whom no other kind of argument or 'proof' will do.

And this is an inescapable problem of the monograph: that its objective is to construct 'the artist' — his wishes, his needs, his fears, his loves, his loathings, his intentions — and this at the expense of the reader/viewer, at the expense of the always implicit relation of artist to reader/viewer.

*In fact, if one speaks, so indiscriminately and unreflectingly of an author's oeuvre, it is because one imagines it to be defined by certain expressive functions. One is admitting that there must be a level (as deep as it is necessary to imagine it) at which the oeuvre emerges, in all its fragments, even the smallest least essential ones, as the expression of the thought, the experience, the imagination or unconscious of the author, or, indeed, of the historical determinants that operated on him. But it is at once apparent that such a unity, far from being given immediately, is the result of an operation; that this operation is interpretative... and that the operation determines the opus, in its unity, and consequently the oeuvre itself... The oeuvre can be regarded neither as an immediate unity, nor as a certain unity, nor as a homogeneous unity.*

(Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) <sup>5</sup>

So Foucault here defines my (difficult) task.

*These pre-existing forms of continuity, all these syntheses that are accepted without question, must remain in suspense. They must not be rejected definitively of course, but the tranquillity with which they are accepted must be disturbed; we must show that they do not come about by themselves, but are always the result of the construction of rules which must be known, and the justification of which must be scrutinised... What we must do, in fact, is to tear them away from their virtual self-evidence, and free the problems they pose; to recognise that they are not the tranquil locus on the basis of which other questions (concerning their structure, coherence, systematicity, transformations) may be posed, but that themselves pose a whole cluster of questions...*

(Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) <sup>6</sup>

So I will want, at the least, in this place whose task is to describe an oeuvre, to be somewhat self-conscious about the very idea of the oeuvre as a unified body, to question it as I go. At the same time, I will want to be wary of the idea of the individual work as a unified thing.

*The frontiers of a book are never clear cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network.... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands; and it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the base of a complex field of discourse.*

(Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) <sup>7</sup>

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5 Michel Foucault, op. cit., p. 24.

6 Michel Foucault, op. cit., pp. 25-26.

7 Michel Foucault, op. cit., p. 23.

Killeen's cut-outs, and most especially in the works with photocopied images, pose their intertext very clearly. It is not just that, unframed as they are, they are hardly the self-contained parallelepiped that one expects painting to be; that they are abnormally open to the world which is meant to be outside them. It is also that there are so many images in them which clearly come from some other book, some other work. The much vaunted 'unity' and inner coherence of the work, generally assumed to be an 'expression' of its author, an individualised coherency, is clearly put by the cut-outs to question. The unity of the one work is made by Killeen as problematic as the unity of his oeuvre, which may also seem but a series of intermittences, a nearly absolute discontinuity.

Is it just that the eye is avid of coherency when it sees continuities throughout Killeen's work? Is it just to succumb to 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'?<sup>8</sup> Is it just to satisfy 'the institutionally organised desire to recognise a unified subject in the artist's work'?<sup>9</sup> For, as all the critics — including myself — have said, Killeen's art seems most especially — most exhilaratingly — inconstant. From 1966, when he left art school, until 1978, when he began the cut-outs, many of his exhibitions have seemed so different from the last that only his signature might seem to signify the continuity of his presence behind them. It's as if there were countless Killeens, each the product of a stylistic moment, a veritable profusion of persons.

Such discontinuities accord with a necessity which Killeen addressed in a note to himself: the necessity of a constant vigilance over style, by which all style traits must continuously be questioned:

*Necessary that all style traits  
are questioned continuously so  
that they do not continue to be used*

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<sup>8</sup> Andrea Fraser, 'In and Out of Place', *Art in America*, June 1985, p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Fraser, *op. cit.*, p. 127. See also there her further remarks. '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 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.'

*for longer than they are needed.  
Go over the painting asking what things  
mean (outlines shadows colours etc.)  
and what they are there for (and if it is right) to  
prevent falling into complacency  
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 150)<sup>10</sup>*

Killeen's artistic life, with its complacencies so ruffled, might well thus appear, like the life of Proust's narrator to himself, as 'offering a succession of periods, in which, after a certain interval, nothing of what had sustained the previous period survived in that which followed — as something devoid of an individual, identical and permanent self'. If Killeen as a person may for some years have enjoyed the stability of a fixed address, and its appurtenances of comfort, in the person of painter he might seem a homeless multitude, perpetually peripatetic, not one person only, but an intermittent advance, in which there appears, according to the moment, the abstract painter, realist painter, the hard-edge painter, the brushworky painter, the regionalist, the internationalist, etc., not one of whom shares even the same kind of realism, or abstraction, or whatever. And newcomers might seem perpetually to make their appearance in him.

And, whereas that intermittent advance of painters had once been one through time, arriving in a succession of moments, today, in each cut-out, it might be said, all these painters *simultaneously* appear: the abstractionist, the figurationist, the painterly, or the hard-edge painter, the regionalist, the internationalist, the organicist, the geometer: a multitude in advance *in the single work*.

*To generalise here about an oeuvre founded on wilful discrepancy would be to fall into a trap. Actually it is an indescribable oeuvre, one that constantly breaks the rules it has just set itself. One can say nothing about it — about its fabrication, its palette, its conceptions of perspective, its 'backgrounds' — that is not immediately contradicted by this or that group of paintings. The notion of style, in the current sense, loses all relevance, as do those of developing and maturation.. [His] oeuvre does not develop, it simply operates by*

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<sup>10</sup> The green notebook is a green, clothbound, hardback, unlined notebook, in which Killeen wrote and drew from June 1969 to March 1971.

*displacement. It precedes like the species according to Cuvier: by abrupt and catastrophic mutation.. Here is an artist who simultaneously paints smoothly and distinctly... There is a repeated cleavage and conflict among the components of the painting. It is no longer a matter of painting masterpieces, or entities, but of introducing elements of torsion and contradiction... (Jean Clay, 'Ointment, Makeup, Pollen')<sup>11</sup>*

Killeen's most notable unity or continuity might seem to be the refusal of unity or continuity — there is the same discrepancy and cleavage of parts in each painting as in the oeuvre. Killeen, to adopt a nice formula from Jean Clay, would seem 'not a painter, but discrepancy in painting', a producer of 'discordances', of 'pictorial aporias'.<sup>12</sup> He seems to feel, as Clay has claimed Manet was the first to do, 'the constituent parts of the painting — surface, border, colour, texture, gesture — to be disassociable'. He seems to break from 'the age-old conception of harmony, of *concinntas*'.<sup>13</sup>

These discontinuities which must be stressed of the *oeuvre*, since the *oeuvre* itself so insist on them, might, of course, be resolved in traditional fashion, simply by recourse to an originating subject, by recourse to that traditionally privileged creature, the biographical figure of the artist. But here, my analysis will refer to such structures as I find inhering in Killeen's use of pictorial language itself. Fortunately, 'structuralism,... in allowing one to think the relationships between heterogeneous integers, [has] permitted release from notions of stylistic coherence or formal consistency...' <sup>14</sup> And so must Killeen's discontinuities be resolved at all? No. Here they will be marked with such continuities as may be seen in them, but never resolved.

Those continuities I do find in the oeuvre, that sameness I do see in the face of evident similarities, and in the larger face of their seeming absence, will here be opened to view through two distinct but always converging approaches: the analysis of Killeen's repeated use of certain signs, and the analysis of certain

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Clay, 'Ointment, Makeup, Pollen', *October* 27, Winter 1983, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Clay, *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Clay, *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1986, p. 5.

structures in which those signs are repeatedly formed. And the repetitiveness of those structures, it will be shown, is greater, or rather, stretches at once more widely and densely through time, than the repetitiveness of the signs — they are inscribed, as Barthes would say, in a larger temporality. Such an approach serves to establish a principle of relevancy, to make some things relevant, some not, among all the innumerable garnered facts — if one may still speak of facts. As though they might exist, innocently, independently of the modes by which they are gathered and shaped.

Other features, such as the 'political' in its narrow sense, are not entirely ignored, as when I treat of the effect of the Vietnam war on Killeen's 1970 Barry Lett Gallery show, or of feminism on Killeen's *Social Document* and the related cut-outs: they have their own kinds of relevance. But these aspects are themselves submitted to a somewhat structural kind of analysis, to determine their place and their meaning — and *how* they are placed, and *how* they find their meaning — within the structures I trace.

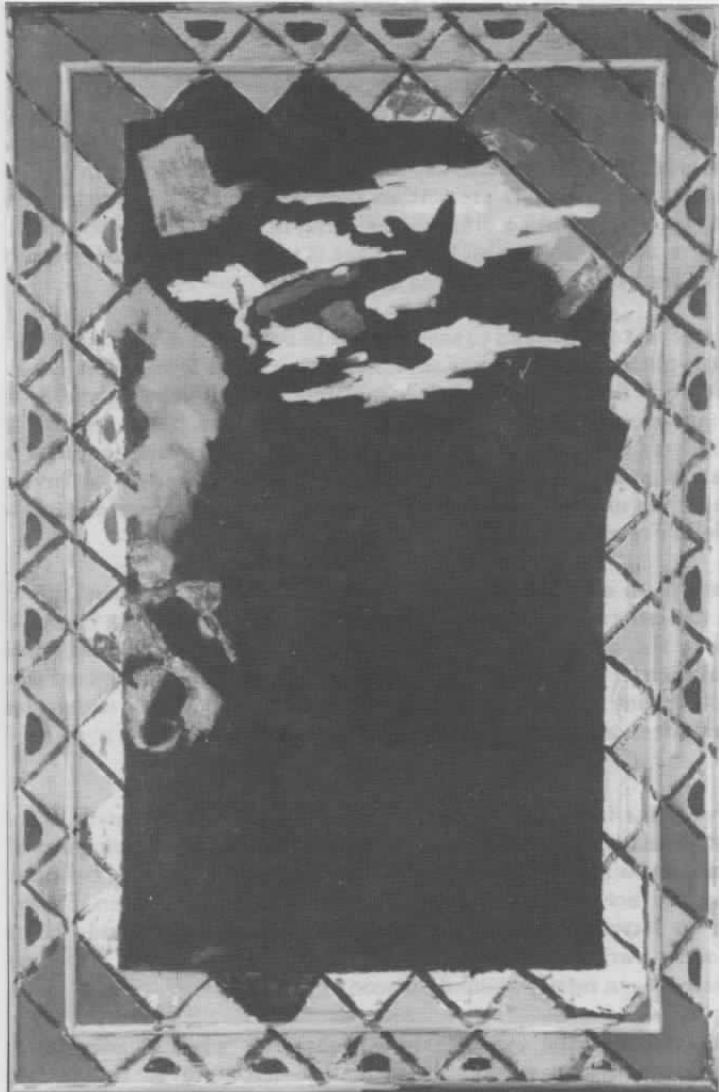
In any case, so this approach discovers, in what might seem shaped by Killeen's capricious and purely spontaneous inclinations, there are constancies as well as abandonments, there is much kept, and re-tried and re-formed. 'One may fairly identify the process', as Leigh Davis once said of Allen Curnow, 'by which the art — the oeuvre — produces its own sequels'.<sup>15</sup>

For instance. The triangulated frame of *From Here to the World*, 1971, [fig. 7] precedes the half erased triangulations of *Across the Vistula*, 1972, [fig. 8] which themselves precede the triangulations of the *Comb* series of 1973 and 74, [fig. 9] those of the *Lace* series of 1975, [fig. 10] and those of the *Grids* on aluminium of 1978 — [fig. 11] not to mention the triangles which appear in such early cut-outs as *Red insects, blue triangles*, April 1980. [plate 45] Or, starting with the aeroplane of *From Here to the World*, [fig. 7] one might trace to and through the cut-outs a certain play of positive and negative whereby, ambiguously, ground tells as figure, and figure as ground. (See, for instance, the white circles and lines cut out of, but seeming to be 'on', the black tools of the first cut-out, *Across the Pacific*, August 1978.) [plate 1]

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<sup>15</sup> Leigh Davis, 'Solo Curnow', *And* 3, 1983, p. 51.





**fig. 7** *From here to the world*, 15 December 1971



fig. 8 *Across the Vistula*, 15 December 1972

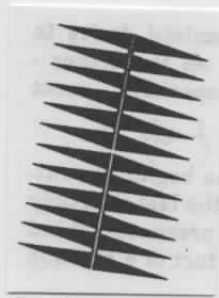


fig. 9



fig. 10 *Hanging lace*, June 1975 (margins cropped)

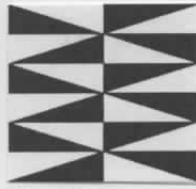


fig. 11

And there are larger constancies — I mean constancies which stretch more widely and more densely through time. From the very start of Killeen's stylistic peregrinations we will see, for example, a certain undoing and fissuring of the classical view. At first, with such McCahon paintings as the *Northland Panels* speaking in him, and some of Rosenquist's works, Killeen will make vertical fissures between what are still classical landscape views. Later, within a view still coherently framed, there will be a certain separability of parts, each sharply edged (thus: tower/cloud; or, car/cloud/hill), so that classical unity is somewhat offended. Still later, by the time of the cut-outs, when each part is *literally* cut away, and separately tacked to the wall, it will be the whole classic order, its entire collocation of things, the classic way of seeing the world undone.

Similarly, from 1966, when he wonderingly wrote of his art school abstracts: 'the background is unnecessary. I am not painting the background but only the symbol?',<sup>16</sup> through to the chance derived works of 1970, or to the Combs, Grids or Laces of 1973 to 1975, in all of which Killeen reduces the background to a mere whiteness, right through to the cut-outs, which have no background at all, or only the whiteness of wall, there is that same concern in the work: the desire to have done with background.

Such constancy, such unity within the diverse, is ulterior, not conscious, is one more of effect than intent: 'a unity', in Proust's words, 'that has been unaware of itself, therefore vital and not logical, that has not banned variety, chilled execution'. Yet it is a unity happily discovered, sometimes, by the artist himself, in those moments when he is both artist and critic, engaged in self-contemplation. As when, for instance, in 1979, Killeen said of the cut-outs: 'The things I'm doing now go back ten years. I've tried the ideas before, but never so well or so successfully'.<sup>17</sup> We may hear Killeen in such moments as these, as Proust says it, 'casting over his works the eye at once of a stranger and a father', seeing, for the moment, his life's works as a work — one work — finding in it

<sup>16</sup> Richard Killeen, note about his abstract paintings of 1966, loose white A4 sheet.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Killeen, in Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters*, Vol. 1, A-M, Alister Taylor, Martinborough, 1980, p. 120.

(imposing on it) in retrospection a unity which it did not in intention possess. We may see Killeen in the very act of *constituting* an oeuvre: we may see Killeen *producing* the oeuvre in the very act of reading it. (Precisely, no doubt, what I am up to here.)

And if Killeen's later periods do sometimes seem to echo something from the earlier periods, it is not because there is somewhere a whole, pre-existent Killeen, just waiting to flower: it is, we will see, because the later Killeen plunders the earlier, so that the later is, therefore, at least in some part, wilfully formed by the possibilities the earlier opens. (Hence, perhaps, the cut-out titles *Appropriation*, *Subjective Attachments* and *Prior Knowledge* — here Killeen knows, attaches himself to, and appropriates images from his own earlier selves, so that the cut-out becomes, as another title has it, a *Living Memory*.) No doubt Killeen, like everyone else today in the West who has anything to do with art, *believes* in the oeuvre. When in those works I call *Samplers* he makes a sampling from his earlier work, we may again catch him again in the deliberate act of constituting his works as an oeuvre — we may catch him, to borrow the words of another cut-out title, *Tracing the Lines of my Face*.

So Killeen's work — we will see — *itself* makes a theme of oeuvre creation. I follow him even in that...

Yet I will want to maintain my suspiciousness of the oeuvre concept, even if already I imagine myself concluding somewhat as follows, admitting, at the end, to a partial and perhaps inevitable failure. 'Somehow we never found the moment to show the entire spectrality and instability of the oeuvre, or to prove it is an error to assume coherence: perhaps, do what we might, it was impossible within the monographic confines.' Perhaps, peering through the blind bars of the monographic cage, one may, like Nabokov's artistic ape in the *Jardin des Plantes*, that ape which inspired the story of *Lolita*, do no more than reproduce the imprisoning grill. Perhaps, in that chronological succession required by the conventions of monographic presentation, consecution must inevitably be mistaken for consequence. Perhaps, in the numb habit of textually interconnecting each separate issue of the oeuvre, nothing may be seen but what the monographic convention dictates. It may be too that my presenting Killeen's oeuvre in small fragments instead of in the more totalising and unifying masses of large chapters, hoping thus to mime my object of study, is but a dumb literalism, availing me nothing.

Yet there are moments, I fondly think, when in the clash or succession of my fragments, in the manner of their combination, I may yet manage to slip the monographic leash, to outsmart the monographic controller, and to present a glimpse of Killeen's oeuvre's true disconnectedness. And perhaps this will be my text's fate. Such momentary semblances as I achieve of the oeuvre's real disconnections, those moments where I seem almost to abolish the unities the oeuvre concept imposes, will be seen by my readers as no more than an oeuvre improperly presented or grasped. That is, the flaws in the very notion of the oeuvre will be regarded as mine. If so, so be it. This much will remain: an array of Killeen's work, and of his notes towards and around it, an array which, however disconnected, is presented in such a fullness as never before, and screwed up to a maniacally tight focus.

Or, it may be, the contrary will happen. Such is the pressure of the notion of the oeuvre, and so tyrannical and imperious is the mode of its monographic presentation, that I will, after all, have presented the requisite unity, and have dismissed all doubt about its existence. That is, I will have failed in my noisily proclaimed intention, only to succeed with my readers — readers filled and happy with the oeuvre concept. I will have presented a monograph.

So it is best then, as I say, to *test* the oeuvre concept against Killeen, whose work itself seems to me to test it, without, however suspicious I may be, being too assured of the outcome...