

## Chance and inevitability

I have enjoyed this evening immensely. The actors have given us a charming rendition of a delightful play, and your appreciation has been most intelligent. I congratulate you on the great success of your performance, which persuades me you think almost as highly of the play as I do myself.

(Oscar Wilde, to the audience at the opening night of *Lady Windermere's Fan*.)

Because his job is to put things on stage, he is on stage himself. He puts himself on stage. The tale is thereby addressed to the reader's body, which is put on stage, itself... What here opens, limits, and situates all readings (including yours and mine) is hereby, *this time at last*, displayed: as such.

(Derrida, *Dissemination*)

*The relationship of the canvas to the viewer --  
to deny the habit of centric  
organisation & involve the viewer's whole body.  
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 82)*

*Guinness book of records -- number of people  
to hang one painting  
(Killeen, the black notebook, p.131)*

The opening of the exhibition *Chance and inevitability* at the Auckland City Art Gallery, in August 1982 was something of a performance: not a performance *for* the spectators so much as one *by* them. Confronted by 85 cut-out pieces, the viewers had to decide where to hang them, and then to nail them up. Four empty white walls, hammers, nails, a wheeled and an unwheeled stepladder, and a hole in each piece for the nail were also provided. Eighty five of the spectators were each given one piece to hang. [fig. 194]

The spectators' enthusiasm for their own performance was general, and it lasted, quite uncontainably, for the duration of the show. Long after the official opening was over, the public -- some 20,000 of whom visited the Auckland City Art Gallery during the show -- kept moving the pieces from one nail to another. Attendants had constantly to move to stop them. The curator of painting, Alexa Johnston, kept putting the pieces back to their 'original' place. The public were, as she said, delighted by the possibilities of this movable feast.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alexa Johnston, quoted Francis Pound, 'A Movable Feast', *NZ Listener*, 23 October, 1982, p. 37.



fig. 194. Hanging *Chance and inevitability*, Auckland City Art Gallery

At the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, there was another hanging of *Chance and inevitability* in which the viewers took part.<sup>2</sup> There, so a Killeen note records, the mayor, quite intimidated by it', hung the first piece, and the gallery staff nailed the pieces up -- the public were allowed only to point to a spot.<sup>3</sup>

Killeen had, of course, allowed people into the art act before, but never so many at once, nor with so many pieces, and never as a public performance. Peter McLeavey, Killeen's Wellington dealer, had always himself hung the cut-outs he showed, as had the Bosshards in Dunedin. For an exhibition at Peter Webb Galleries, five 'art people' -- a critic, an art historian, two dealers, and myself -- had each hung a cut-out.<sup>4</sup> But all those hangings were *before* the shows opened. Also, since the pieces of the cut-outs had always come to their buyers in a box, the buyers themselves had always hung them. But their hangings were *after* the shows, and, like the pre-show hangings, they were private performances -- 'private views' as it were.

<sup>2</sup> *Chance and inevitability* was also hung in the small space of the Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, 9 - 27 March 1983; and in the Hamilton Arts Centre, 12 April - 7 May, 1983. McLeavey commented of its appearance in his small space: 'It has no beginning and no end'. (Killeen, the black notebook, note dated 8 . 82, p. 142.) Of the Hamilton hanging Killeen noted 'Grey walls a problem but looks good.' (Killeen, the black notebook, p. 153.) We may see here that an unwritten convention of all the cut-outs demands that they be hung on a white wall. For two cut-outs, *Born in New Zealand -- For Martin*, and *Born in New Zealand -- For Samuel*, both of October 1985, Killeen would spell out the requisite whiteness with the hanging instruction: 'Hang on a white wall in a close group any order'.

<sup>3</sup> Killeen, the black notebook, p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> Wystan Curnow, Michael Dunn, Peter Webb, Ann Copeland, and Francis Pound.

The Auckland City Art Gallery and the McDougall hangings were much more demonstrative. Their purpose was to make physically explicit to as many people as practicable -- and not just to those 'in the know' -- the formal/political/aesthetic principles of all Killeen's cut-outs. They were instructive occasions. The viewer's creative role in making the artwork, in all paintings, from time immemorial, was here -- *at last* -- made explicit: mounted, displayed, staged.

These were also *self*-instructive occasions, a testing out... Just how far could one go in abandoning compositional control, in so spreading responsibility? Was the audience to be trusted? And if so, how much?

There are many pages of Killeen notes concerned with the relative input of the artist and the viewer.

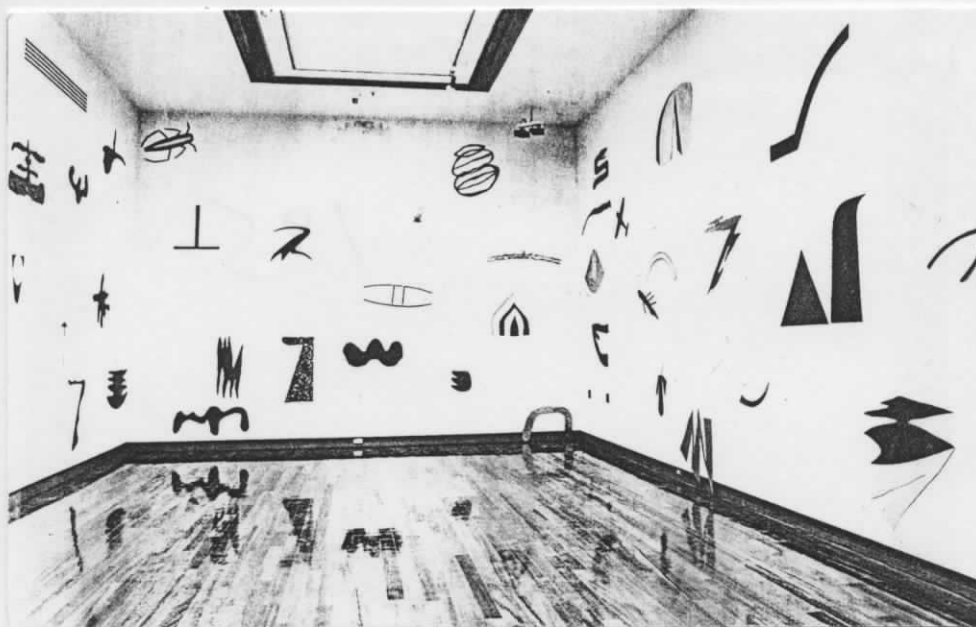


fig. 195. *Chance and inevitability*, hung at Auckland City Art Gallery

20.4.83

*problem of people hanging pieces too far apart  
for work to be seen as group. Maybe need  
rules on distance apart.*

*(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 153.)<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the sparse hanging of at the Auckland City Art Gallery does not seem to have provoked any immediate change in hanging instructions. Not until June 1985 do the instructions change to 'hang in a close group any order', and not until October 1985, do the instructions change to 'Hang pieces touching in a group any order'. (From February 1987 until July 1989, the instructions will read 'Hang pieces in a group approximately 75 mm. apart in any order', after which there is a return to the instruction, 'Hang in a group, pieces touching, any order'.)

Certainly, the relatively large size of the room provided by the Auckland City Art Gallery had provoked a certain sparseness of hanging, which might have been mitigated had the viewers not hung their pieces so high and so low. [fig. 195] Such a sparseness seems to Killeen for a moment, problematic, and so we find him wondering about using the hanging instructions to assert a further control. Yet:

*Anyone hanging one of these cut-outs in their own way can not alter my intention for the work, my emphasis is on the bringing together not the composition. (Killeen, the black notebook, p. 105.)*<sup>6</sup>

It also seemed to Killeen, in the full flush of seeing *Chance and inevitability* brought to public fruition, that even a 'negative' input -- that is, a spectatorial input which is determined to defeat the Killeenian 'rules' -- 'Does not seem to make much difference'.

5. 8. 82

*The public hang Chance & Inevitability in the A.C.A.G. -- Alexa Johnston controls the hanging...*

*The public or some public take the attitude that because I set up the system of 'hang how you like' they should attempt to test the theory by hanging as badly as possible.*

*Therefore they have some negative input instead of attempting to make as good a job as possible of the hanging.*

*Does not seem to make much difference. (Killeen, the black notebook, pp. 138-139)*

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<sup>6</sup> Note dated 8. 80.

Killeen was responding here to people who tried to hang a piece diagonally between two corners, or overlapping the skirting boards, [fig. 195] or overlapping an adjoining piece -- people who were endeavouring to thrust their own point, as it were, in the face of the cut-out's conventions. He was answering, as if in some slight irritation, to what might be called an act of aggression, or at least of spectatorial wilfulness.<sup>7</sup>

Most of Killeen's notes, however, put less stress on the artist's predetermining role, and more on the interaction of the work with the viewer -- and so on the work's interaction with the culture at large. More precisely, the interaction of the viewer with the work seems to Killeen to 'reflect' -- or to allegorise -- the interaction of the work with the whole culture.

10.8.82

*The hanging of the work by the public  
reflects the complex nature of art in terms  
of the input & output that  
goes on between the art and the culture.*

*many artists see their own art as entirely of their  
own making rather than a complex set of  
responses between the culture and the artist.*

*(black notebook, p. 139)*

*The issue now is that painting is not  
so much a reflection of the artist who does  
it ... as a reflection of the culture that  
the painting is done in.*

*(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 138)*

Also emblematic of such reflection is the fact that Killeen's title *Chance and inevitability* is not 'his own'; rather, it has been provided by the culture at large. It is a variant of the title of Jacques Monad's book, *Chance and Necessity: an Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*, 1972.<sup>8</sup> Nor was this

<sup>7</sup> The majority of the hangers, it should be said, happily respected the rules of the game, and did not try to cheat or defeat them.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Monad, *Chance and Necessity: an Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*, Collins, London, 1972.

simply a matter of taking a title: there are a large number of black notebook notes from and about Monad. The following, for instance.

*Chance & Inevitability*

*... man is a*

*cosmological accident...*

*1970 book 'Chance and Necessity'*

*Neither God nor grand design in the universe -- chance alone is at the source of all novelty, all creation. If we accept evolution man is not a necessity.*

*Man knows, at last that he is alone in the universe's unfeeling immensity out of which he emerged only by chance.*

*Globular protein -- converting chance into order  
rule & necessity*

*(Killeen, black notebook, p. 130)*

*The properties of living beings are based on a fundamental mechanism of molecular invariance.*

*(Killeen, black notebook, p. 131)*

*It is clear that only such a source as chance could be rich enough to supply the*

*organism (antibodies) with means to repel attack from any quarter'.*

*(Killeen, black notebook, p. 132)*

*'When behaviour implies elements acquired through experience, they are acquired according to a programme and that programme is innate, that is to say genetically determined.'*

*(Killeen, quoting Jacques Monad, the black notebook, p. 132)*

A number of Killeen's notes from Monad may easily be applied to the relation of artwork and viewer. The relations between the cut-out and the spectator/hanger, for instance, might be called akin to those between Monad's

'autonomous morphologies' and such rich external forces as chance. If, in disposing the images of his Chance series, Killeen had converted 'chance into order, rule and necessity', now he accepts the chance of the spectator's whim in the disposition of the cut-out's pieces. It might be said, too, that the cut-outs 'are based upon a fundamental principle of molecular invariance', since, however a cut-out may be arranged on a given occasion, its constituent parts remain unchanged.

And perhaps Killeen was pleased with Monad's formula, 'When ... elements [are] acquired through chance, they are acquired according to a programme and the programme is innate', because it reminded him of the cut-outs' programme. The cut-outs, too, are programmed in such a way as to grant the cut-out's internal relations a certain autonomy -- such an autonomy, indeed, that it sometimes seemed to Killeen that however the cut-out might be hung by the chance of its viewer, it 'does not seem to make much difference'. That is, however the viewer might choose to perform the cut-out, the performance will be according to a programme already imposed by the cut-outs themselves -- a programme that is innate to them, a programme 'genetically determined', as it were.

One might say, therefore, that the cut-outs too are

*autonomous morphologies* -- owing nothing to external  
forces in its making but only to interactions within  
the object itself

(Killeen, *the black notebook*, p. 130)

I don't wish to imply that Killeen troubled to transcribe Monad's words simply because they might be applied to the formal principles of the cut-outs. Rather, I think, it seemed to Killeen that Monad's words proved his claim that the cut-outs are closer to life than are conventional paintings -- closer to what Monad would call the fundamental principles' of biological life'. Such a folding over of the borders between art and life was fundamental to Killeen's concern.

That each of the cut-out's pieces is of equal aesthetic weight, for instance, might be a correlative of Monad's principle:

*'From the bacterium to man the chemical machinery  
is essentially the same, in both its structure*

*& its functioning'*

(Killeen, *black notebook*, p. 131)

The cut-out's 'democracy', in such a reading, might be as much ecological as political, proffering an equality in which 'man' is no longer the apex or centre of things. And if this realisation was already imbedded in the non-hierarchical 'formal' principles of the cut-outs, so it was too in their 'subjects' -- for the cut-outs might seem to lay out an illustrated biological taxonomy, to represent the biological world in all the fantastic and interrelated array of its variety and its difference. From the very beginning of the cut-outs, their taxonomies -- and anti-taxonomies -- are as commonly biological as cultural. In 1978, for instance, there are artifacts from *Across the Pacific*, but also a *Collection from a Japanese garden*. It is noteworthy, in this regard, that of only five persons named by the titles of the cut-outs, the first should be a biologist, *George Forster, Naturalist*, June 1980 -- Forster, naturalist to Cook's second Pacific voyage.<sup>9</sup> [plate 47]

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<sup>9</sup> The other persons named in cut-out titles are Killeen's child, Samuel; his sister's child, Martin; the Italian writer, Italo Calvino; and the Uruguayan painter, Joaquin Torres-Garcia.