

“This is a Stone from the Endless Beach”:

Max Gimblett interviewed by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett



Hotei-Pu Tai—After Fugai Ekun 1568-1654

2001, gesso, red clay, Swiss Gold / wood panel
gesso, polyurethane, vinyl polymer / wood panel, 50 x 90"
Haines Gallery, San Francisco

Manhattan
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Howard Becker proposed that we think sociologically about “the work itself” by treating empirically the *Principle of the Fundamental Indeterminacy of the Art Work*. This, as he acknowledged, is a daunting task, requiring as it does “detailed knowledge of the work and of the organized context in which it was made.” He was speaking specifically of how as a sociologist he might have studied jazz and why he did not study it in this way. What, he asks, would make such a study sociological, rather than musicological or art historical? One way to come at this problem, he suggests, would be to question “the very idea of ‘the work itself’” and to try to account for this idea in social and not only in aesthetic terms. As the following interview with painter Max Gimblett suggests, this is a question that interests artists too. Art making is often not the solitary activity we imagine it to be, but rather more social, as Gimblett’s process demonstrates.

During the SSRC Arts Program Committee’s early discussions of how the question of the work itself might productively organize sociological inquiry, I was most intrigued by the seemingly straightforward and not obviously sociological question “when is a work of art finished?” This seemed like a fresh way of coming at the larger issue of what the social sciences might contribute to the study of art. Becker’s reformulation in terms of “the work itself” and the *Principle of the Fundamental Indeterminacy of the Art Work*, while entailing the question of when a work of art is finished, does not make completion as central to the enterprise as I remembered from our initial discussions. Several conference participants do take up finishing, among them Pierre-Michel Menger, who offers a richly nuanced account of Rodin, and Michael Joyce and Bruce Jackson, who take up hypertext, which is so important for thinking about an incremental medium that is endlessly revisable and defined by its indeterminacy. The interview with Gimblett also focuses on the question of completion.

Janet Wolff asks “How important, in the end, is the question of ‘finish’? Is it really a sociological question? ...we need to establish *why* the question of ‘finish’ is posed as so central to our enterprise here.” She proposes, in the interest of sharpening our focus, that we bracket the question of finish (and technology) and direct our attention to the question “what can social science contribute to an understanding of the creative process?” The following interview offers an empirical situation for testing the viability of both objectives by encouraging us to link the questions before us into a series of openings. First, the question of finishing offers a way into the question of indeterminacy, which offers a way into the question of the work itself. Second, the question of finishing, when put to the artist, can open up the nature of the creative process. It is up to us, the social scientists, to make something social scientific out of it.

What might that be? Becker suggests that close attention to the formal qualities of particular works is not sociological because, among other things, a singular instance is not generalizable in ways that would produce social as well as sociological insights. While the following interview with one artist does not provide the basis for generalization, it does offer a richly empirical case for generating issues of social scientific interest, starting with the paradox that sociologists want to generalize and artists don’t—or rather, artists don’t want to be generalized about. That’s a generalization, of course, and an invitation for sociological analysis. While a sociological account would demonstrate what many artists have in common, as a way of arriving at what is social about what they do, contemporary artists place a premium upon individuation, upon making it difficult to generalize about them. That is why the way that Becker has set the question before us is so promising. The question of the work itself, particularly when posed in relation to indeterminacy and completion, is a general question that lends itself to empirical investigation. But because the question is not (yet) posed as a strictly sociological question it is, by design, producing productively unpredictable results. Information is a function of unpredictability. Our task is to find the “information” in the unpredictability before us.

If contemporary artists do their best to defeat generalization about their work—to be unpredictable—does that mean that the social sciences are at cross purposes with their subject? Becker offers a productive way to deal with this conundrum in his response to Wolff, when he says, discussing Charles Ives, that “I think it’s better not to treat Ives as an oddity that we needn’t worry about, but rather to make the unfinished character of what he did represent what would be the general case if some set of social arrangements didn’t intervene to declare works ‘done.’” This counterfactual and counterintuitive way of approaching the problem—turning the oddity into a norm, for the sake of argument—is way of generating something of sociological interest from something not, on its face, generalizable. The question that Becker is driving at is “what makes art works social in their very nature” and this is the question that might best frame a reading of the following interview.

Methodologically, we are being encouraged to work somewhat like artists, that is, to improvise, to think against the grain, and to embrace the unpredictable. This reminds me of Robert A. Ray’s *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy*, which attempts to intervene in what Ray considers the sclerotic state of film studies by treating avant-garde art practice as a research method in its own right and applying the principles he derives from it to the analysis of Hollywood B-grade movies.¹ I am also reminded of the productive collaboration between artists and scholars, whether between Hans Haacke and Pierre Bourdieu, with commentary by Becker, or between performance artist Michael Pearson and classical archeologist Michael Shanks.²

As the following interview will show, Gimblett’s approach to his artistic process is very different from that of artist Larry Kagan, who foregrounds the idea of art as puzzle-solving; or from how the musicians in our conference are thinking about their process, particularly the centrality of improvisation; or with the writers, for whom the openness of text matters. The Gimblett interview speaks to several issues raised by these and other papers submitted for this conference and suggests that methodology itself might be a productive site of theory, not unlike the early days of modern sociology or recent developments in anthropology.³

- View “the nature of ‘finished’ and ‘finishing’ [as] an empirical question that I [Becker] think we can best explore by the detailed examination of particular cases,” that is, by looking at the choices that artists make and the factors—not only aesthetic or formal, but also social, cultural, and economic—that go into those choices, or more precisely how choices of whatever kind are socially conditioned.
- Consider the material conditions of production, whether low tech or high tech—the actual substances, as well as the technical challenges—in relation to the creative process and to the question of the work itself. Material conditions involve social relations and they involve know-how, all of which is socially transmitted and socially distributed, as can be

¹ Robert A. Ray, *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

² Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free exchange*, Randal Johnson, tr. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; 1995); Howard Saul Becker and John Walton, “Social Science in the Work of Hans Haacke,” in *Framing and Being Framed: 7 works, 1970-75*, by Hans Haacke, with essays by Jack Burnham, Howard S. Becker and John Walton, edited by Kaspar Koenig (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 145-52; Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/archaeology: disciplinary dialogue* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001).

³ See the 86 page “Methodological Note” in William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 2 vols (.New York: Knopf, 1927).

seen with special clarity from the way that Gimblett works.⁴

- Think comparatively across art practices, Nelson Goodman’s sharp distinction between autographic and allographic arts notwithstanding. In Gimblett’s case, poetry is more of a touchstone than music, though he paints to music, and improvisation is important to his process. While resisting musical metaphors when talking about how he works, he does embrace a sense of performance, perhaps closer to dance than to music, which plays out in a variety of interesting ways and bears on the question of the work’s indeterminacy. More specifically, Gimblett speaks in terms of energy and impulse, satiation, exhaustion, and even desperation, as one of many possible ways to *stop* working on a work, whether or not the work, at that point, is considered finished or complete.
- Look closely at the choices an artist makes in the process of creating a work, with an eye towards illuminating the question of where one work ends and another begins. Which considerations are apparently “internal” to the work and which are apparently to “external” considerations having to do with material requirements, technical challenges, resources, time, collaborations, and reception. As this interview suggest, the distinction is somewhat arbitrary and Gimblett would contest it—“There are no accidents, only incidents.”⁵
- Listen to working artists for insights into “the working artist’s experience of the work itself” (Larry Gross)—those concepts, categories, understandings, and values that artists identify and that anthropologist’s so value because they reflect the artist’s own understandings in relation to those of his social world. Gimblett is particularly interesting in this regard because he is largely self-taught, having left school at the age of fifteen. This case might therefore provide a useful counterpoint to that of professionally trained artists in relation their formal education. Wolff raises the question of whether critical studies (and even sociology of art) is contributing to the immobilization that some artists experience in the course of their formal education, while Becker suggests that formal education may be less consequential than assumed.
- Attend to how artist’s talk, not only to what they say, but also to how they say it—their raps, poetics, labile thinking, conviction, moral authority, and personal standards for the adequacy of what they say.
- Consider the possibility of art practice itself as a research method that might have sociological value, particularly if method is considered a site for developing theoretical models that might guide a research agenda for a social science of the arts.

⁴ Bruno Latour comes to mind here and might well provide a useful model for thinking about the creative process in terms of an actor-network.

⁵ Since reading this headnote, Gimblett noted a connection between the social, as it is discussed here, as the social (*Kairos*) as one of four cultural attitudes, the others being religious (*Theos*), philosophical (*Logos*), and aesthetic (*Eros*), in Lance Storm, “From Three to Four: The Influence of the Number Archetype on our Epistemological Foundations,” *Quadrant: The Journal of Contemporary Jungian Thought* 33, 1 (2003):69-81.

1. The completion is in the beginning
2. No rules study
3. Poets teach me ways to begin and complete paintings
4. Completion is the front door
5. Getting hysterical, being desperate!
6. A method that is powerful, deep, and original
7. Completion is more important than beginning? A false hierarchy.
8. A continuous field
9. Reverses
10. all mind/no mind
11. The other painter, the uncertainty of memory
12. Tracking *Cove*
13. Where does one work end, and another begin?
14. Entropy
15. Rinzai. Gradual and fast.
16. Layers and gesture
17. Completion in different mediums
18. "This is a stone from an endless beach"
19. Circular and ongoing
20. Completion is when somebody else owns it
21. Works for the unknown show
22. Non-fitters
23. The Ornament
24. Degree of difficulty
25. Destruction, editing, and completion
26. Mandala of a title
27. Finished, finished off, finished up
28. Ways to stop rather than finishing
29. Ways to focus
30. Automatism Unknown to unknown
31. Conviction. The golden certainty.
32. Letting go
33. Passing the test
34. Failing the test
35. Failed or incomplete?
36. Masterpieces and failures
37. Procedures. Vehicles.
38. Exhausting the impulse
39. All or nothing
40. Performing clay
41. Arbitrary and spontaneous
42. Translation of the light
43. Parallels
44. Unknown to unknown

BKG: The question before us is, how do you know when a work is finished?

MG: Well, you told me yesterday we'd be doing this, so I allowed myself just before dawn this morning to make one short list and there's about ten items on it. What I was interested in initially was the variety of ways in which I approach completion. It's like reading a little poem that I wrote. And then you can pick and choose where you're interested amongst it all. So I think it's fair to say it's truly in no particular order although that argues with the psychology of an order.

1. The completion is in the beginning

BKG: And are you—are there any works that you have on the go at the moment where you don't know where to stop or you ask yourself the question, "Are they finished?"

MG: Well, it's a great question. And we will just simply begin. T. S. Eliot comes to mind: "In my beginning is my end."⁶ One idea would be the clarity or lack of clarity in the beginning of a particular work or family of works. You may have your completion in your beginning paradigm if you more or less stay to the path of that paradigm or concept.

BKG: Can you give me an example?

MG: Well, for instance, a clear concept. Content delivers form. If you had powerful, clear, convincing content it could be emotional, it could be conceptual, could be a structure—that might carry you through to the completion. Just with the pure force of insight and power of your beginning. Or it might be as flimsy as a hint.

2. No rules study

MG: So, concepts. There's "no rules study" which means that if you can analyze the structure under which you're proceeding on any given work (there's no need for me to keep saying or 'family of works'), in my work there's rarely a single work. Almost a single work means the thing didn't work—there's usually a family of relationships, of nuances, of variations. In "no rules study," you could have the concept that the moment that you can analyze the structure, you are free to change it or break it. You've developed a constant which frees you up to make it either asymmetrical or move it into another structure or cross it with a/or into a fresh hybrid. That would be no rules study.

3. Poets teach me ways to begin and complete paintings.

MG: Poets teach me ways to begin and complete paintings. Now if we could drop the language of beginning and completing and sort of move into a language of the work: Every original voice of poetry suggests a way to work. I read a very long article on Stanley Kunitz. And I realized that I when I read a Stanley Kunitz, a John Yau, an Anurima Banerji, a D.H. Lawrence, a Robert Creeley, a Lewis Hyde, or a Rainer Maria Rilke, any one of their poems, I am delivered a voice, and that voice suggests a style, suggests an aesthetic, suggests content and form, suggests a whole paradigm in which I might do a work. So that's something like, poets parallel what life teaches us. Any experience in life—with you, with our nieces and nephews, with somebody on the street—any insight, it's like a short story of Maupassant or Balzac. Any experience in life might suggest not just an idea for a painting, but actually a whole cluster of possibilities of a way to work.

⁶T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets," *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. London: Harcourt Books, 1963.

4. Completion is the front door

MG: To begin is to complete. On the other hand, the completion is the front door. The final editor is the letting go of the work, when it goes to the audience for them to complete within themselves and with the work as the altar of the presence.

5. Getting hysterical, being desperate!

MG: De Kooning used to say, because he's such a magnificent artist and writer and speaker, what little bits have been recorded, those scraps, what he would say sometimes is: "I would complete a work by getting hysterical." So, it's like an idea of how do you get your *body* out of the work, how do you get *out* of it. Well, kamikaze pilot, you get out of your body by ramming something." My early look-alike de Koonings, I would *charge* the canvas with a loaded house painter's brush, shouting. That's not so different from the way I do my Zen inks now, slapping my foot and shouting. So, getting hysterical, and desperate, is a way to complete a work.

6. A method that is powerful, deep, and original

MG: Now if we turn to science and read something like, you know, *The New Age of Silence*, or *Towards A New Kind of Science* (I just did my Freudian thing with silence and science!) by Stephen Wolfram⁷ we can discover in physics, if Jackson danced the drip and Morris Louis poured the flow, is there some other method around that is governed to some degree by gravity awaiting me. So, one way to complete is to have a method that's *so powerful* and *so deep*, and *so original* if you will, in the flow of a tradition, without it being linear. Or the paralyzing thought: "Have we exhausted the invention of new methods?"

7. Completion is more important than beginning? A false hierarchy.

MG: There's endless ways to complete. So, in our renewal, in our daily renewal, we would find that our aesthetic's determined by how you begin, how you proceed, and how you complete. Well, we could sense a false hierarchy, that the completion's more important than the beginning, in that the completion puts the stamp on the object. However, because Cezanne's water colours of the Provence landscape in a few primary colours with a few touches, told us everything that leads, if you will, to Donald Judd, less is more, you can really only stop with the object and complete or fail in relation to your conviction that has something to do with how you've begun and something to do with how you've proceeded. Your ever-emerging fresh model.

8. A continuous field

MG: Because we're in a continuous field—John Cage enters now—and because we're living in indeterminacy and synchronicity, how is one work separated from another, as a unit, or family of relations? So that's why I work in family relationships, and a one-off usually means I ended some path I didn't choose to go down, walk down, or take a turning, or ceased on that path. Perhaps. Now John Cage's convictions about the *I-Ching* and models of synchronicity were so powerful that he could map out a concept and proceed with a work and be utterly successful. So, the curiosity that's endless in beginning a drawing or a painting, or the making of a book, is that I

⁷ Stephen Wolfram, *A New Kind of Science*. Champaign: Wolfram Media, 2002.

attempt to find a voice that will deliver the maximum content in the cleanest, clearest aesthetics.
“Water is never clumsy.”

9. Reverses

MG: Think for a moment not of style, but of procedure. Somebody once told me I was the master of the reversal. So in “no rules study,” “one stroke bone” is one stroke. Then there is two strokes. Two stroke bone. Somewhere in there, when you add strokes, you’re composing, and when you’re composing with “add-on’s”, you have to be very, very alert as to what is your mental activity between the various movements of the construction, of the composing.

If you suddenly reverse, what was clear is shattered. The broken, fragmented pieces may deliver a form, a structure. Osiris and Seth.

10. “all mind/no mind”

MG: “all mind/no mind.” When I think and when I don’t think. You know, I’ve trained myself to do a lot of painting without thinking. And that means I have to be very, very clear before I start. Now, *Cove*, the jade painting that’s in New Zealand—I got a unusually white painting, where I thought I was underpainting and building this chalky white surface—at some point I thought, well what it needs is, it needs watery jade green thalo and then I’ll get to build a jade painting. So I



Cove

1998/99, acrylic polymer, silica / canvas, 25” diameter
King’s School Foundation Art Collection, Auckland

walked up and in a few strokes, I gave it this, and I stepped back, and to my amazement and delight and horror, it was completed, and it was your and my visit to Waitomo Caves, it was a jade temple interior—I called it *Cove* after Katherine Mansfield’s *At the Bay*.⁸

If your mind was free enough, if in your humility and letting go and surrender you walk up to the altar and paint, thinking in your mental mind, “This is a light undercoating coat that’s leading up to something else,” and then instantly you had a masterpiece. So the disconnect between the mental attitude and what’s achieved is incredibly freeing. That’s like a letting go of all the erected decisions in your history as a painter to date about how to complete a painting. You have a new completion. Some *other* time, you could start a painting to move to that position or actually begin with that paradigm, and then again you might find yourself going off somewhere else.

It’s about letting go of a fixed idea or a projection, of what you want to see, let go of it. Let go of the beginning. Let go of the next step in the logical process. Let go of scale. Let go of emotional resolution within a work. You might turn up a dark night painting that is full on light. Let go of doing something beautiful. You’re trying to generate endless opportunities. You’re trying to have a paradigm that is completely open to the moment.

11. The other painter, the uncertainty of memory

Entering Balzac’s *The Unfinished Masterpiece*, you could say that a painter is collecting experiences of paintings that don’t really actually appear to be his or her memories, they appear to be involuntary gifts that are anonymous, and that’s absolutely intriguing, because you’re in a room with a painting, and it’s not your painting. You don’t have some *claim* on it if you get watery enough or quiet enough or worked up enough, in de Kooning’s terms—now he did say, “If I just stretch my arms next to the rest of myself and wonder where my fingers are- that is all the space I need as a painter,”⁹ I mean, that was an extraordinary thing for a painter to say, and he was right. My memory of what De Kooning said is a concept with which I might begin a work. I’m going to try that one.

So you can get a huge surprise if you sort of paint yourself out of the room, rather than into a corner, like, you know, Tom Sawyer paints—that’s remarkable, he paints the white fence and he sort of—I don’t know, I haven’t read the story in 65 years, but I think he’s selling guys the ability to do some painting on his white fence. I mean, my mother went outside the house and painted the white fence endlessly. You could say it’s the persona. You can invite people into this white room with you.

12. Tracking Cove

BKG: What I heard you say was that in painting *Cove*, you started out thinking you were doing underpainting, and then somehow discovered that you had completed it. Then you suggested that, well, you might proceed with the intention of doing a painting like *Cove*.

MG: Okay. We know—we know that when people analyze music or writing, they can tell from the voice within the work about the two decades it was done in. Apparently, *nobody* works outside the style of their time, the dialects of their time, the language of their time. So sometimes, you can make what appears to be a big jump in your aesthetics by finding yourself in an entirely

⁸ Katherine Mansfield, “At the Bay,” in *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. Auckland: Golden Press Pty Ltd., 1978.

⁹ Willem de Kooning, *Collected Writings*. New York: Hanuman Books, 1983, p. 60.

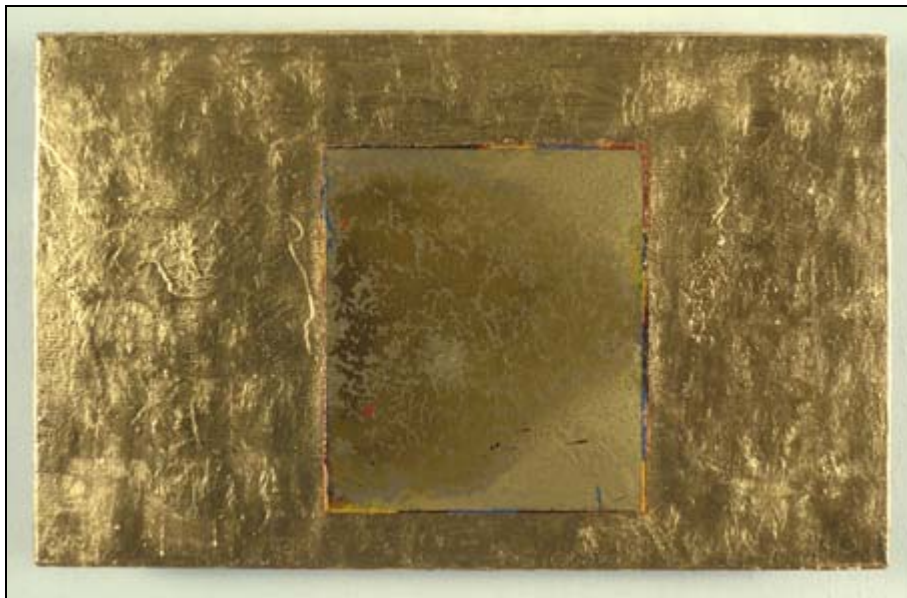
new place that you didn't know anything about, and then you can capitalize on that, once you come to and realize that you did it, that you participated in it.

BKG: Right. But you also said that there was the disconnect between the mental attitude and what is achieved as sort of letting go, and I think it had to do with your being surprised by the way in which *Cove* seemed to be—it seemed to be done quicker than you expected, and arrived at a place that seemed to be different from where you had started, or from what you had maybe intended. That was the feeling I got about that painting.

MG: Wystan Curnow and I, in 1978, did an interview.¹⁰ We tracked classical ways of proceeding, like Expressionism, and lyricism and all of that, in which body states and conceptual states relate to how one would feel before, during and after process.

13. Where does one work end and another begin?

BKG: How do you know where one work ends and the next begins? Particularly when you're working on a family of works. One of the striking things about the *Mirror* paintings is that you did work on them as a group over a very, very long period of time. There were many points where I thought to myself, it's done, why not just go move on to another painting.



Heaven's Window

1983/89, acrylic, polyurethane, 22k gold/ linen, 22x30"
Collection of Terry McCloy and Donna Vierira, Auckland

¹⁰ Wystan Curnow, "Interview: Max Gimblett and Wystan Curnow," in *Art New Zealand*, No. 10, Winter 1978, and reprinted in the art catalog *Max Gimblett: Paintings on Canvas and Paper, October 14-November 29, 1980*. San Francisco: Modernism Gallery, 1981.

MG: In that family group, I couldn't tell.

BKG: So where does one work end and another begin? In that group, I couldn't tell.

14. Entropy

MG: Then there's the element in completion of when the thing changes radically. Earlier, I worked with some not completely stable, water-based metallic alloy pigments that sometimes darken, they oxidized over the years. So in terms of entropy, some of the work's quite different. Like if you don't put a coat of shellac or lacquer on silver, it's moving towards sapphire, it's going to go midnight blue within two or three years, and if it's anywhere near saltwater and the sea, anywhere near sunlight, it's going to accelerate even faster than that, so that's a shift in the object that intention desires to be responsible for.

15. Rinzai. Gradual and Fast.

At every step the pure wind rises

MG: Until I was in my late forties, in some families of works, I didn't have utter conviction about how to complete, in the sense that a lot of the value in the paintings was about my groping my way along through trial and error. To make something incredibly rich by *inclusion* and by concentrating on it and by bearing down on it over a long period of time, to become sure about it. Now I can do that also in an instant. But it took post-mid-life for the dualism to quieten down. Shall I go this way or that? Shall I go up or down, left or right? Shall I follow *both*?

Gradual

BKG: You said something actually very interesting about when a work begins and ends, given that there's what you call "family of works and relationships." So, for instance, when you were working on that wonderful group of gold paintings that are come out from the wall, the rectangular ones with cutback sides, the *Mirror* paintings, you worked across the whole group, you worked on them for years.

MG: From 1983/89 is the main thrust of this grouping of works.

BKG: That's rather different from the experience that you described with *Cove*. Would you like to say something about the *Mirror* paintings?

MG: I can try. I practice Rinzaï Zen. Koan study and calligraphy. Two conditions: fast and gradual. But back then, that's like the Christian Middle Ages location I felt in those paintings, and that's a bit like, when you open the secret cabinet near the altar, do you find in it the grail cup, or do you find in it the makings for Eucharist or communion. Or do you find in it some secret of life? Dr. Carl Jung wrote "small and hidden is the door that leads inwards and the entrance is barred by countless prejudices, mistaken assumptions and fears."¹¹ That was something like what went on later in the *Spirit Box*, whereas in the *Mirror* works they were something like secret cabinets that you couldn't open physically. They weren't hinged. You had to attempt to open them psychically! You were encouraged by the paintings themselves to open yourself up.

¹¹ C.J. Jung, *The Collected Works*, Volume 10, *Civilization in Transition*, p. 154.

With Lewis Hyde there's a big thing with Duchamp. I have been thinking for many years now about making a hinged work with Lewis. I tried once in Los Angeles, the Getty residency year. 1991/92. Cabinet-making is so interesting, what if it's hinged, like an accordion? Whereas my work has been more about—I think for many years—"The flute without holes is the most difficult to play." I've taken a fairly limited area and tried to keep it reduced, and see what I can get from it. That would be like polishing the stone, or polishing a rock.

So, in the observation of the constant, you get all the variations. Now if you load it up, the *Mirror* paintings were loaded up—they were mirrors, they were secret cabinets, they were Christian Middle Ages, they were alchemy, they were gold and silver, they had heterodox crosses, they had anthropomorphic Christian crosses, they were *loaded*. They were like treasure chests. They had accretion of layers and in their final years, only worked when there were a lot of precious metals added to the opening paradigm.

BKG: I raised the *Mirror* paintings because, as you put it, you have a way of working that's very slow and a way of working that's very fast.

MG: You can be in a period of fast completion and get the odd slow one, and you could be in a period of slow completion with layers, and get the odd fast one. But I've never been in a period of equally balanced slow and fast completion. And at the moment, it's definitely fast. And in my case, it has something to do with the days and the hours I don't have assistants with me in the studio, the work I have to be private to do, it has to do with how much energy I've got in relation to rest and caffeine and sugar and exercise, and it's got to do with if I'm relying on linear line elements, or whether I'm into sheets or fields of mass across the plane. Does my visual art practice follow my life, or my life follow the practice?

One is very alert about one's process in relation to expressing oneself. In my studio where I can draw in six different modes, paint in about three or four modes, I can do journal work, we can make books, you can dream up ceramics, and you can make sculpture, and you can make phone calls, where people will make stuff for you at your direction, you can fax them a drawing, and you can also have discussions with people, like I do with Anthony Fodera, my studio manager, where they will help develop the object. The creative energy can move in many mediums and methods.

Fast

MG: One's trying to say in a *flash*. Instant.

BKG: When you say fast completion...

MG: Now that could have had a very slow preparation to get the surface to that point, all painting is up on the surface, it could also be selecting, an instant, a piece of handmade paper from a papermaker, or some surface Anthony and I have been working on for two or three months, with fifteen years of experience behind it to get the light up to that point.

BKG: So then in what sense is it fast completion?

MG: Oh, calligraphy or linear element. *Or*, the final touch, or the final moment. The *act* that lets you say, "This is completed." That all the previous process had been directed to that moment where it all gels, or it doesn't.



*still waters*¹²

Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland
3 -28 June 2003

BKG: Say more about what's *fast* about it.

MG: Well, you *can* do something quicker in your body than your mind can record. Mental, verbal—you can beat them both—you can beat the mental thought process with your body movement. Get ahead of it. A lot of sports does that. Beat the verbal. But also you might beat the personal *identity*, you might beat the narcissism, you might beat being caught up in any self-consciousness.

BKG: For someone who hasn't seen you work, can you describe the internal experience of working in a way that you would characterize as fast completion? Which of your works would be examples of fast completion?

MG: *First Painting* (1965), *Gate* (1985), *State of Grace* (1994), *Bridge* (1979), *You Can't Chase Two Rabbits* (1998), *Empty Water* (2003), *big mind* (2002), *One Stroke Bone* (2002), *No Trace* (2003), and *Cloak* (2001) are some examples.

BKG: In other words, where there's a calligraphic or gestural movement?

MG: Possibly, or it could be a pour, or a throw, or a pool. It can be any gesture, it doesn't *have* to be calligraphic. It doesn't have to be linear *Cove* wasn't. You see thoughts about writing come into play with drawing constantly, with me, as gesture goes somewhere and intends meaning, its a meaning that cannot be read directly, like writing.

¹² <http://www.gowlangsfordgallery.co.nz/exhibitions/auckland/pastexhibitionsauckland/maxgimblett.asp>.

BKG: Is it gestural?

MG: *Everything's* gestural, to me.



One Stroke Bone

2002, acrylic and vinyl polymers / canvas, 80" diameter
Collection of Shaw family, Auckland

16. Layers and gesture

MG: You might be in a period of working on a particular group of works or you might have many groups of works going forward at the same time. You could have *boundaries* between them. You could do that by titles, you could do that by shape, you could do that by the particular wall you work them on. The section or the area of the studio that they live in, or a separate studio.

Let's say you're going after layered works, you're glazing. Or, you get some very good layered works in a non-layered period, because you couldn't complete a work in the fast mode. And it was interesting enough when you didn't *complete* it, for you to see a way into it to continue, and it turned into layers, although you had tried to complete it as fast. But it didn't work. It was unsatisfactory, so what we've got is addition and subtraction. Adrian Stokes, in *The Image in Form*, calls it carving and modeling¹³. You can add or you can subtract, or you can do both. I do almost *no* work by subtraction in an ongoing piece, we do it be restretching or resurfacing a panel, you know, throwing out what went wrong and starting again with a fresh surface entirely, If the calligraphy sometimes doesn't work on the poly, we wipe it off with denatured alcohol, and

¹³ Adrian Stokes, *The Image in Form: Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes*, edited by Richard Wollheim. New York: Harper and Row, 1972, p. 47.

it leaves a golden shadow. So when you do the *next* move, you have to incorporate the shadow. You've got to incorporate that shadow into the move, you've got dualism and the Other there. Much of my current work's about trying to defeat dualism and be whole without double references. But you know, if you've got two squares together, obviously you're *playing* on the dualism, you're playing the left and right.

Now, I actually haven't had a period of layers for quite a long time, as a recognized way to go. When I say that, I realize how wrong I am, because all the polyurethane and epoxy work are layers. They're all layers. They're layers of light bouncing through the transparent polyurethane and the epoxy to somewhere near the originally touched primary plane. It is pretty startling, for me. It's like a crystal clear lake of water in the mountains, where the air's very crisp, and you can see all the rocks on the bottom, and they're glistening morning dew. You can see everything all the way through to the primary plane. It's an idea about see throughs.

BKG: My sense is that the layering that you do in these works, that are often two panels (or not), with one of the panels a calligraphic move, is rather different from the layering you did on the *Mirror* family, for example.

MG: Agreed.

BKG: What's the difference?

MG: Well, either one retains all the planes in the transparency, or one is cloaking the planes with opaque information that is building to a *statement* that's about what's buried, or what's hidden, or what's underneath, or what's suggested, or what it took to get here.

17. Completion in different mediums

MG: There are a lot of different completion modes in different *mediums*. They affect each other, they go across boundaries. For instance, *Spirit Box*—you know, a jeweler, Warwick Freeman. A carpenter, Jim Cooper. Master carpenter, master jeweler. A studio manager, Anthony Fodero, who did the drawing of the cabinet. An earlier studio manager Todd Strothers, who drew the original skull. My decisions on shape and the eternal return; eight drawers; the scale in relation to the body; the decision *not* to play with a pedestal—beyond Brancusi (not part of the piece); to keep it unadorned and closed, a great mystery. I always wanted it to look like a skyscraper—it could be said to be my replacement for the World Trade Towers, which were out my window and is now in my heart. It's not Henry Miller's air-conditioned nightmare, but it does contain endangered species, and it is the death mask's skull. And some of them are floppy bits glued onto cloth in a very sophisticated manner so they're soft. They're soft skulls, they drape—as we used to strip the skin off alive human beings, what's that called?

BKG: Flaying.

MG: Flaying. Titian at 99 paints a man being flayed upside down, it's a disgusting thing. And Vietnam veterans have told me of finding American soldiers flayed on a cross in a village.



Spirit Box

1997, mixed media, 560 x 380 x 510 mm

Collection of the artist, New York

<http://www.maxgimblett.com/sculpture/spiritbox.htm>

BKG: Now in terms of *Spirit Box*...

MG: That was discussing a skull in relation to a mask and a persona, the idea that you don't need to get too worked up about *yourself* as a painter in the studio. If the studio's free of *fear*, you can participate in events that will surprise the shit out of you, and so give you whole new paradigms to work with. And it's *that* curiosity that keeps you alive.

BKG: Well...

MG: I mean, I'm talking about—the reason I feel so energized and *energetic* this morning and so *happy*, is that I hopefully face into another nine months of drawing and painting, almost uninterrupted, and my curiosity is completely *intact*, I've got no idea what we're going to do. I am free of memory.

18. "This is a stone from the endless beach."

MG: Now that's another completion—having *no* idea about what the completion will be. Being completely open about it. It can end at any given second or moment. You could *play* with it and say it ends before it begins. And, you know, that would be some idea of effortlessness in terms of

Integral Yoga. Effortlessness. There's nothing to it. I mean, there's *everything* to it, and there's *nothing* to it.

When Bob Creeley was brought along by Wistan Curnow to that Quay Street winter cold water studio in Auckland in 1995 and Bob handed me *The Dogs of Auckland* manuscript, I was foolish enough to lift my head up and look at Bob and say, "It's going to be effortless!"¹⁴ He slowly caught my eye and said, "Sounds difficult to me." And it *was* difficult, he was right. The project, the book, took four years to complete.

Lewis Hyde¹⁵ and I are attempting to finalize *Oxherding* right now, and we began at the Rockefeller Foundation residency at Bellagio in 1991.¹⁶ It's 2003, and I have yet to complete the last drawing. Of course, it being the symbolic last drawing of the ten, "Entering the marketplace with helping hands."¹⁷ Is it one figure, is it two figures. Michael Wenger, who wrote *33 Fingers* says, "One figure in relationship."¹⁸ Lewis says, "Two for sure." Relationship is the point. I could do the tenth drawing, it could be so startling, it could make me go back and redraw a couple of the other two, you see, because the tail is going to wag the dog—Uroborus—wag the ox, so, how come *Oxherding*'s taken thirteen/fourteen years to complete? Brancusi said, "Things are not difficult to make. What is difficult is to put ourselves in condition (or a state) to make them."¹⁹

Oxherding is *refusing* to complete, and when I asked Roshi Susan Postal how come I couldn't get my hands on 8, 9, and 10, she was very warm and she said, "They are non-experiential. Nobody can be sure about those three pictures while they're still in their body." She said, "Trust yourself. You've done the preceding steps. You're acting in good faith. Trust the situation." Roshi Postal is telling me I will never *know* the resolution of 8, 9 or 10, it's not given to somebody in their body to *know* it. However we have her blessing and hence permission to complete!

Earlier, in Australia, in 2001, I visited Roshi Hogeñ Yamahata, of the Open Way Centre, in Bryon Bay, New South Wales, Australia. And when I told the Roshi I was having trouble ink painting the ten *Oxherding* pictures, he instantly said, quietly, "In your life?" It made it possible for me to continue and be successful, Roshi Hogeñ Yamahata giving me that insight. He wrote an inscription for me in the book *On the Open Way* that is inspirational: "This is a stone from the endless beach."²⁰

BKG: So what are you going to do?

MG: I'm going to do them! And that's that. Better to say they are being done to me! Lewis is doing the commentary and the poems, he's responding, and he completely understands the non-experiential nature of these last three ink pictures.

¹⁴ Robert Creeley, *The Dogs of Auckland*. Auckland: Holloway Press, University of Auckland, 1998. For the drawings, see <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/creeley/dogpics/dogs1.htm#>.

¹⁵ Lewis Hyde is the author of *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York : Random House, 1983) and *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

¹⁶ The Ten Oxherding Pictures, by Shubun (15th Century), from D.T. Suzuki, *The Manual of Zen Buddhism* (1935), <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/mzb/oxherd.htm>.

¹⁷ Roshi Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*. New York: Anchor Books, 1980, p. 323.

¹⁸ Michael Wenger, *33 Fingers: A Collection of Modern American Koans*. San Francisco: Clear Glass Publishing, 1994.

¹⁹ David Lewis, *Brancusi*. London: Academy Editions, 1974, p. 20.

²⁰ Roshi Hogeñ Yamahata, *On the Open Way*. Byron Way: Open Way Zen Inc., 1998

19. Circular and ongoing

BKG: One of the interesting things about *Spirit Box* is that it's a limited edition sculpture project. And as a limited edition sculpture project, it has a particular character. One of the characteristics is that you have a collection of skulls, and they are to some degree interchangeable, so that there's a degree of arbitrariness as to which ones go into which box. So, if that's the case, is the work, is *Spirit Box* as a project, complete? Is it a matter of individual *Spirit Boxes* being complete at a certain point?

MG: *Spirit Box* is not really an edition. There are four completely different sets of skulls and three completely different wooden cabinets made in two countries. Granted one wood was repeated twice. But everything master woodworker Jim Cooper makes is a one-off. The skulls are so different in each cabinet, it's not an edition. I don't know if the art world has any terms for what it is. They are not one out of four, they're all unique. They're more like unique books.

However, the structure of the four works is the same. The carpentry was the same in the four of them, although one was made by Humphrey Ikin in New Zealand to Anthony's drawing. The other three cabinets were made by Jim Cooper in New York. They are all different. Right now we're putting eight metal skulls into a metal box. A fifth work. Anthony and Warwick Freeman are designing the metal box. They'll do mock-ups in cardboard for scale. We'll do it in Auckland in June when all three of us are together in Auckland for the first time. Then, there's Warwick Freeman making skulls. He's a master jeweler. Often he chose the material and made skulls without me seeing the material. Yes, they are interchangeable from cabinet to cabinet although at the point of claiming, of ownership, they become set to a cabinet but still moving between drawers and one gets an extra ninth skull with the piece so this movement continues.

If we draw a circle, instead of the vertical stack of the eight drawers, we could number one through eight around the circle, like a clock so there's a circular and ongoing movement about *Spirit Box*, even though it's a vertical stack.

BKG: In what ways does *Spirit Box* have this quality of being circular and ongoing?

MG: Well, it's based on 8. And if you throw a rubber band down on the floor, it will often take up the disposition of 8, which is the eternal return. It's two circles. It's in my third eye, in my forehead, laying horizontal. You put a little hook on each end, it's a pair of spectacles. The figure 8's made up of two circles. Now, I've based a one-shape cluster since 1983 on the quatrefoil, which is four circles on a heterodox cross. All the work's symmetrical. So, the circle—the main thing about the circle for me is birth, death, intermediate being; birth, death, intermediate being. Life is circular. Spherical—the globe we live in, the cosmos.

BKG: Does that apply to *Spirit Box*?

MG: Yes. It's not a ziggurat. It's not an escalator. It's not a ladder. It's not an elevator. Now, of course when I say it that definitely, by the law of compensation as I said it so strongly, I could claim all of that too, and in the same breath say it's also a circle.

20. Completion is when somebody else owns it

MG: Now I don't want to sound *crude*. This business about the front door: when somebody is willing—when Anthony and I have decided—and you sometimes—have decided the work is ready to be released, and somebody will pay the price we've asked or accept our gift it leaves and

goes and lives in another home. Then rarely do I ever change anything. Degas was notorious. He came for dinner, spotted one of his paintings his host had collected, say, ten years earlier, said: "Let me just take it home with me. I see a tiny little bit that needs developing." And if you were mug enough to give it to him, you either never got it back, or you got back a painting that was unrecognizable. So some of his best patrons had his paintings chained to the wall. They had *chains* on them. He wasn't allowed to leave with it. So one completion is when somebody else owns it.

Now while it remains with you and me, and Anthony, we *can* change the skulls around. Some skulls can change with age and be replaced or not, or get richer. So ownership also completes. That's why you don't want to start your public art history too early. Younger artists now often start it so early. They're like a book of poetry where one group of poems didn't really fit earlier ones. They should be jettisoned and not published. So your art history, your works, your slides, your visual art history.... you just can't get these tracks out of the game. It's in the public domain.

21. Works for the unknown show

MG: Where you first find that desire is in the journals and works on paper, because in the *journals*, there's no huge budget commitment, there's no huge thinking about playing it out into the world as language for your audience. There is quick/slow translation from mind/hand, drawing. There's utter *freedom*. There's no censorship in the journal. No one looking over my shoulder, that is a quality I attempt to maintain, it's not easy though! In the journals I have total freedom, forward and back, no direct tracking needed, simply see what arrives. And then you read the journal and you think, "Oh God. I have been considering this and that since day one.

The journals let the drawings happen, and the drawings let the paintings happen. And I *never* begin a fresh season of painting without examining my journals. I'm spending a couple of weeks doing it now. I get up before dawn, at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning and sit there and read two journals from twenty to forty years ago, and I'm *stunned* by the drawings, and *stunned* by what's written in them. Very little to do with *me*. It's honourable. When I write something, I mostly really *mean* it. I get earthed for a new period of experimental prototypes by grounding myself in the journals, they are my through line. They interchange with my dream journals, sometimes they are one and the same, the dreams get demonstrated.

BKG: How many modes of structure have you got going now?

MG: Modes? Well, at any given time I'm doing three to maybe five shapes. Surfaces? Well, first off, there's panel and canvas painting, hard and soft, two different drumming surfaces. I'm working on three-and-four-part paintings out of Donald Judd, and they all have different surfaces and different things happening within the light. Now, of course, given that it's September we don't even know what the modes of the new season is going to be. Anthony and I are canny about how we design and order supports. You gotta come to it and do it very gently and very slowly. Gary [Langsford, Gimblett's Auckland dealer] wants some calligraphic 40-inch and 50-inch quatrefoils, poly's, so we'll start with that, but we don't even know where the next crucial show is going to be—we know, both us in our bones, all of us, there's going to be one within a couple of years. But we don't know *where*, so we're actually producing work for the unknown show. Unknown to unknown. I mean, you know, Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*—"Besides, it was in

another country, and the wench is dead.”²¹ I mean, we don’t even know where the work’s going. It’s not unrequited love. It’s lyric poetry perhaps.

BKG: Is that what you’re painting towards?

MG: Painting towards always a new prototype, a new shape. Painting towards the unknown. We draw with an opaque projector to find new shapes. We’re always looking for a new shape. We just took the corners out of the square and we’ve got what we call the screen, that’s a new shape. We’ve got one big 9/11 painting where we’ve worked it as a single. It’s *Fire*, and we now have its twin on the go, *Water*. They are expressing powerful emotion and don’t fit into the body of the opus. Two non-fitters.

22. *Non-fitters*

MG: Every now and then there’s a work that completes in a way that it doesn’t fit at all, so it’s what we’d call a non-fitter. Now, the non-fit’s interesting, because this business of me playing with the unknown, not named or recognized in any hints or clues in conscious mind, place the variety of them, as diverse as is possible to bring about, “That’s the non-fit, they *just don’t fit*.” So then you could have a show at the end of your life of all the paintings that didn’t fit. And the lousy thing that as a young painter I destroyed a lot of those paintings ’cause they upset me too much. And they didn’t fit because they were hellish, or nightmarish, or I didn’t understand the style, or I never could analyze them.

Now, the non-fit could be a whole—you know, you could, in some great, gigantic fire or something, lose all your work and only be left with the non-fitters, and would that be *you*? Yes it would.

BKG: Are you saying that non-fitters are a kind of completion if only because, being out of place, they don’t seem to lead anywhere? They are dead-ends. But, just for that reason, they matter. That is, they unsettle the categories into which everything else seems to fit.

MG: Absolutely, yes. You wouldn’t want to close yourself down within your *categories*, your *walls* or your *styles*. What’s the temptation for a painter? To repeat work that the market would like to digest because of a lack of willingness to exert yourself to tell the truth, or to be honest. And what you find, for instance—poetry’s a great help to me—in Robert Creeley’s voice, the poems are merciless. They are *merciless on themselves*. The searchlight on the poem by the poet, the searchlight by the poem on the poem itself, is *ruthless* and *merciless*. This I accept for myself at my best. There is a ruthlessness. It’s in his very *language*. What he’s got is absolutely fierce self-knowledge. His poems honest. And that’s how we learn how we’re *human*. The poems are human. Everybody shares them. Who the hell would want to admit to it, being that human? So in talking about Robert Creeley’s poetry, I am talking about the absolute *gritty grain* of the truth, is so *stark*, and so intellectually *vigorous*, that then you have a language that’s built of iron that is carved. It’s not modeled, it’s *carved*, in Adrian Stoke’s terms. Try hand-carving iron!

²¹ Gimblett is intrigued by this quotation, which he remembers as an epigraph to a chapter in Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, but which originates with Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (written in around 1589, but not published until 1633), act 4, sc. 1, l. 40-42, where it appears as follows:

Friar Barnadine: Thou hast committed—

Barabas: Fornication? But that was in another country; and besides, the wench is dead.

22. *The Ornament*

MG: Now, awkwardness as opposed to highly attuned facility, awkwardness is almost always in my work guaranteed to produce sincerity. So to reach with thumbs rather than finely tuned index fingers and being awkward is a sign that there's honesty, which is courage, which is the painting.

This sincerity may lead to the beauty expressed in my works not being narcissistic. In place of narcissism I front up to the ornamental, which has in it the most beautiful singing of the Sacred. This is something often mistaken for a decorative impulse. Richard Kalina in a studio visit here many years ago gave me the most beautiful insight into the Ornament.

He referred to Gombrich's *The Sense of Order*²² and told me of the anonymous, additive, exaltation and glorification, witness, ongoing, framed, narrative, emerging, unflooding qualities of the Ornament.²³ I discovered, thanks to Richard, what Matisse had achieved in Morocco.

My teacher, Len Lye, always urged me to retain my naïveté.

23. *Degree of difficulty*

BKG: You also have some very difficult work.



Octopus Caresses the Moon

2000, gesso, black clay, 23 ¾ k Swiss gold, moon gold, red gold, lemon gold, copper, Japanese red leaf, ink / wood panel, 21x35"
Collection of the artist, New York

²² Ernst von Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art (The Wrightsman Lectures, v.9)*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979.

²³ In *Ronald Bladen: A Max Gimblett Journal, 1990-2002*.

MG: Oh, yes I have some extremely difficult work, yes. That's another idea about completion, if you will. If we take the Olympic Games, for instance, you could be leading the Olympic high-board diving championships, and you could have somebody right up there next to you, and you have to select your last dive. In your last dive you might have to choose a high degree of difficulty—like, you'd only managed it three times out of ten in training.

So, either you do one that you can get eight times out of ten, and draw for first, or lose, or you can take a risk—a very high risk. So you can take a *very high risk* in your degree of difficulty, and fail. You are competing with your Other.

If we think of *Octopus Caresses the Moon*, it just came about. I tried to do the *Frog on the Log*, and failed. Before I did *Octopus Caresses the Moon*, I did *Fish Swims Towards Moon*. I didn't know what I was doing. It was only when I did the second one, I could see the first one. There's only two in that family so far. I would love to have four or five in the group. When I tried to do the third one, *Frog on the Log*, I fell flat on my face. Because I *projected* it, I didn't *wait* for it, I didn't live in the *unknown*—I had *greed*. I had *greed*, I *grasped* at it. I *forced* it, and I *lost* it. Whereas the other ones took eight to ten years, and they were arrived at in the unknown to unknown manner. But the degree of difficulty was extremely high. *Extremely* high. I almost didn't make it. And I *didn't* make it on the *Frog on the Log*. I didn't. I had to cut its throat.

25. Destruction, editing, repressing, compensation

BKG: You mentioned earlier that you have destroyed works.

MG: Far too many when I was younger.

BKG: But you still do.

MG: Well, there's a difference between destruction and editing.

BKG: What's the difference?

MG: Well, destruction is, you have a very good work, and you get emotional at some point, you just can't live with it, so you knife it, you cut its throat and get rid of it. That's a repression. It comes back to haunt you, it comes up again. It's like a dream motif you can't get any resolution on till you go to the analyst. I mean, you track it in your books, examine it, turn it over every which way, draw it and it keeps coming!

BKG: And editing?

MG: Editing? It's a calculated mode of composing done at the time of doing the work, or later, where some are judged more worthy of retaining than others. And, as you know, I take you and Anthony—particularly Anthony—into consideration on that. But you sort of, in your gut know, in your body, you know. when it's complete and is a keeper. Jackson was a master of completion. I haven't seen see any Jackson Pollock works that are not complete. He was a *master* of completion. Didn't matter what year, what period, or what mode. He completed it. He knew how to complete. He knew how to stay in the particular work, the particular paradigm. Editing carries a self-knowledge that, while open, is far-seeing and whole.

BKG: In what sense?

MG: It's a decisive function. Best done for me around the time of actually doing the works. It is possible though sometimes to edit later. With my ink drawings, I edit quickly the same day or next morning or directly within the wet ink session. I might do thirty and I might toss out ten, I might do ten and toss out eight, I might do ten and keep eight. Depends on how the impulse went that day. And then before we photograph them usually weeks later Anthony and I go through them quite slowly and we both have a vote. And we vote into three piles—keepers, losers, and still in process. And I think we get that overall more or less right. And we do that with the paintings too. The losers get torn up and cut up and tossed out.

So editing's very different from destruction. Destruction is a repression of such a magnitude that it—it's almost like a mutilation, it's a part of my Dionysian complex, that if I have too much ecstasy, too much partying, I get, by compensation, involved in dismemberment, and something has to be sacrificed. And when I was younger I sometimes sacrificed paintings rather than parts of my body. Or other people. I mean, it's life and death. It can be brutal. I remember I got one show back from a dealer out of town in my early life in New York, where nothing had sold, I destroyed the whole show of paintings, four or five. I mean, it would be marvelous for you and I to have them now. It's part of a family of works—they were double-bar geos—it's a family of works where our own collection is modest. I'm haunted by that missing group as I am haunted by the group of Don Judd pencil drawings I did not collect, even though I could have. And sometimes, years ago, in the late 60's and early 70's, we destroyed some works, you and I, 'cause we just couldn't get them in the truck. We had no money and we had to go right across the country again, you know, there wasn't room for them. We gave a few away and destroyed the rest.

A younger painter now would perhaps have a digital image. Even if the work got destroyed, there is a photographic record that's helpful. In the beginning you and I couldn't even afford photography.

Now, what you destroy that you can no longer hold in your mind, has no sort of a helpful memory, is possibly a repression. The return of the repressed, whereas compensation will engender reconsiderations. On the other side of it, some of it has to be let go of, to clear space, in my mind. But sometimes it did not, it got stuck! That used to happen more, years ago. Destroyed physically, it stayed in mind as a regret, as a missing element, an occasion for grieving.

BKG: What's the difference between destruction, editing, and completion? Or a sense of finished-ness?

MG: Well I suppose the completion, the finished-ness, is more interesting than the first two. Destruction—repressed material—destruction, it's so bad it's gotta be got rid of straight away, it probably means it carries too much hellish shadow. It's an embarrassment. It's guilt and shame.

Edited would be poised, you are poised. You're making somewhat familiar decisions and with poise. With the full range of your mind, the full range of your non-identity, the opposite of personality, and probably with advice and counsel from others.

Completion and finished. Inclined to play with the word, no such thing as finished. I mean, there's the audience to look at it and everybody brings their own perceptual view of what they're seeing. Everybody sees different things, so, if there's a few principles, they're the things we share when we're seeing. But as soon as anyone starts talking and expressing that, it's as good as the person is articulate. Kind of like the space between the dream and writing the dream.

BKG: So, when you divide up, say, when you do—particularly the works that are completed quickly, and there are many of them, it seems—it strikes me that part of your process of, if you will, completion, is deciding which to keep, which not. In other words, that the editing is actually part of the process.

MG: True.

BKG: That is in part what allows you to be free to do a lot.

MG: True.

BKG: To work quickly, because you know you're not going to keep it all.



Crucifixion after Peter Gabriel

1989/90, acrylic / canvas, 120" diameter
Collection of the artist, New York

26. *Mandala of a title*

MG: Also, giving a work a title may help consolidate the piece and that focus may help me gain confidence in it. A title may name this emotional cluster of feelings. Sometimes you get the title when you're working or sometimes you may have the title ahead of time. But one can be very convinced when you get a certain title, and sometimes I get a line of words or a little poem with the work, and all of that is sometimes convincing²⁴.

²⁴ Some Gimblett titles, organized by religious reference, include the following—Christianity: *Crucifixion, after Peter Gabriel*, 1989/90; *The Red Sea*, 1995; *Mary*, 1996; *Angel*, 1990/95; *Easter*, 1984. Hindu:

I almost can't write a line of English into the ink drawing, because English doesn't elongate. John Yau can but I can't. My writing does not convince me as calligraphy whereas John and Lewis Hyde's writing does convince me. Lewis is a natural calligrapher. You know, Chinese is coming from ideographs and pictographs and runs down the page. English is not condensed. It keeps going and going as cursive. "The rain fell through his palette." That would be difficult for me to incorporate as writing in an ink drawing but a good external title, so the title is invariably not written into the piece as an element of completion. But John and Lewis would include it and make it work. It's because they are poets.

27. *Finished, finished off, finished up*

MG: I'm realizing that there's something unpleasant about the two words "completion" and "finished." There's something unpleasant about them. *Completion* feels like it's coming from the field of psychology. That's what it feels like. And finished? Finished, you know, finished up? Finished? Finished is a bit *ugly*, it's like, "So, he *began* it," well, it's not very inspired to *begin* something, you know. Like, we're not finished with the painting just because we stopped touching it wet. It goes out into the world, it's in the database, it becomes mythical, it's a legend. Can we come up with another word, or are we stuck with "completion? Completion is passable, the tough one is finished.

BKG: No, no, no, we're not stuck with it at all.

MG: The word "finished" is worse than the word "completion."

BKG: Well, I know, it's like "finished off."

MG: Yeah. "Finished up." It's like you're on your death bed, and I come to say goodbye to you, and I say to you, "Well, Barbara, are you *finished*?"

BKG: Well, if you've finished dinner, can I clear these plates, you know, it's like....

MG: Yes.

BKG: It has all sorts of connotations.

MG: Right!

BKG: So then maybe another way to put it...

MG: Will you be finished when they take your body away?

BKG: Are you finished with me, you know, or whatever!

Mithra, 1996; Ganesha, 1983. Buddhism: *All Mind ,No Mind*—6, 1983; *Buddhist Weather*—2, 1996; *Daruma Again and Again*, 1996/97; *Zen*, 1980/85; *Study for the Buddha*, 1993; *Angkor*, 1997/2000; *Oxherding*, 1998; *You Can't Chase Two Rabbits*, 1998. Hermeticism: *As Above, So Below*, 1989; *Along the Higher Slope*, 1989; *The King*, 1989/91. General Religious: *I Believe*, 1995; *Hymn*, 1997/98; *Ritual*, 1985/86; *Temple*, 1990/91; *State of Grace*, 1994; *Anubis*, 1993. Greek: *Dionysos*, 1988/89; *Hermes*, 1995; *Pane*, 1993/94; *Minerva*, 2000. All titles listed in *Max Gimblett*, with texts by Wystan Curnow and John Yau. Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2002, p. 38.

28. *Ways to stop rather than finishing*

BKG: Exactly. Then maybe another way to talk about it is, there's a certain point where for whatever reason, you stop working on a....

MG: Stop touching it.

BKG: You stop touching it. So then maybe the question is, how do you know when to stop? Why do you stop?

MG: Okay, so the classics are: Why? How? What? Accumulated experience. Every time you complete a work, you are adding a new nuance to your bag of ways to stop. It's a group of devices, really: hysterical, desperate, peaceful, arbitrary to a time element, number of moves. I believe Philip Guston found one of his middle period styles by stopping when it was time to go out for dinner, and when he came back, "Well, I'm not going to touch that again. It could be a set up, it could be a concept.

29. *Ways to focus*

MG: In my Zen ink drawing practice that is governed by "all mind/no mind," I allow myself a tiny window at the beginning of a session in which I might name a motif. It might be *enso*. By focusing on a single motif for the entire drawing session, I get tremendous direction and very fine-tuning of variations of the motif. If restlessness enters my mind, that is often signaled by wishing to switch to another motif within the session—and that can occur, but the most successful ink drawing sessions, *zenga*, have been when I've had the discipline to stay with the motif. It's the limitation, the severe limitation of the motif, which allows for the variety of the variants.

30. *Automatism*

MG: By utterly freeing the mind from any recognizable motif, recognizable to the mind by naming, by a word, a thought, there is the possibility of ink painting and fast usually works out better than slow. There is thought felt in the body, through the senses, that are *not* thoughts as words. Without only relying on body movement, automatism encourages an abstract field of activity where composition and mark become extremely lively and often result in fresh views across the page space.

Automatism with wet ink feels like the perfect match of concept and material and allows me extraordinary freedom. Over the years, this has led to a wide range of experimentation and feels open into the future. I can't wait to have another session!

31. *Conviction. The golden certainty.*

BKG: I'm hearing a couple of different things. One thing I'm hearing is that there's an interesting relationship between the works with respect to where one work ends and the other begins. You have to stop in order to start on another work....

MG: Well, you could start another one where you stopped the last one, for instance.

BKG: Right, but I've often felt that, like the *Mirror* group, there may only be ten or twelve or whatever number of actual physical works, but many more could have been made. There was

certain arbitrariness as to whether you kept going on one painting or stopped and then started on another surface.

MG: Absolutely, I agree. I wonder what we can say further about this arbitrary function. You are also saying there were a lot of paintings underneath any single painting, so how did I end any one of them? Part of it was that they had to get very rich, very beautiful. They had to get thick and juicy. They had to become layered with meanings. They had to grow into themselves so that they utterly departed from where they began. They desired to arrive somewhere by journeying. They are pilgrims.

BKG: But, they were thick and juicy at many points, and you kept going.

MG: Right. Well, I had to have ultimate conviction of their meaning.

BKG: That's actually a point that you've come back to several times, the idea of being convinced, or the work being convincing, or your having conviction...



State of Grace

1994, acrylic and vinyl polymers / canvas. 60x35"
GowLangsford Gallery, Auckland

MG: Yes, for me to be convinced? How to be secure? Doubt is a marvelous motivator for some. However a crucial reality about conviction is enlightenment. In John Steven's translation of *Zen and the Art of Calligraphy*, the essence of *sho*, there is a chapter on Tesshu, the No-sword warrior. Tesshu is one of my masters. One of my teachers. John Stevens writes that Tesshu's great enlightenment was when he was 45 years old.²⁵ Magnified ink particles demonstrate that the *bokki* has changed. It shifts to vibrant, full-spirited and overflowing with energy. Tesshu's conviction is apparent. You can photograph the solid ink particles and magnify them and demonstrate the authority of the stroke. The health of it! There's no fucking arguing with that. It's not in the written style, it's in the actual stroke and gesture in the ink. That is empirical science as far as I'm concerned.

32. Letting go

BKG: You were feeling very uncomfortable with the terms that we began with—finishing, completion, stopping. You offered as alternatives, letting go, surrendering, moving on, terms which you felt better captured...

MG: Letting the audience in. Other people's thoughts and opinions. Often you can't see a work until somebody else is standing there looking at it with you. The other person is a range finder, like looking over the top of the fence, or peering at something under a baseball cap visor. Often a work feels unfinished or incomplete or you feel unsure about its value until somebody else tells you something about it. In my case, Anthony and Matt, my studio assistant, you know, and you. You've said very little over the years, but what you've said has counted.

33. Passing the test

MG: So, when you come up with a compositional impulse, when you come up with a whole cluster of events that give you a painting, you have to test it. You have to pass it through certain criteria. When you go out into the world and find a painting with your name on it you've made that's no good, you want to withdraw it. If somebody owns it, the only way you withdraw it is to buy it off them.

BKG: What's the test that it has to pass?

MG: When I experience the work, the piece, I want it to be inspiring. It must lift me up. It must be convincing. It must not have changed much for the worse since I stopped touching it. If it has changed, hopefully it has changed for the better. Richer, deeper, more clarified, more mysterious.

BKG: You mean...

MG: Its upsetting to find a stale work that I felt at some earlier time was complete and fulfilled my criteria.

BKG: Has that changed over the years for you? Your ability to know whether or not....

MG: Buddhism teaches me that I am born complete. There is the momentum of experience. A wise person might say, "It's all within its period and it's within the time of its making, and it's within the language of that cultural period. That's been pretty constant, I think. But there's

²⁵ Omori Sogen and Terayama Katsujo, *Zen and the Art of Calligraphy: The Essence of Sho*. Translated by John Stevens. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 19.

absolutely no doubt that the way the world is set up and the way marketing is,—all my works out there are not at an equal level of richness and mystery. On the other hand my drawings from childhood are magnificently convincing to me, so time appears to work in my favour with duration. Time passing works in my favour, it humanizes.

34. *Failing the test*

BKG: When you say they're incomplete, what do you mean?

MG: They don't rise up to a completely inspired level. My—my criteria's really how inspired it is. When I go and look at Velazquez and Fra Angelico, their works are completely inspiring, for me.

BKG: Okay, but in the case of a work that you feel is "incomplete," what's the difference between the work being a *failed* work, and it being an *incomplete* work?

MG: God, you're relentless!

BKG: That's my training!

MG: Yeah. Jesus! What's the difference between a failed work, and an incomplete work? Well, failed work hopefully has disappeared, it no longer exists, you can't see it, it's a flimsy memory. And an incomplete work is something that's laying around still that you could possibly complete satisfactorily.

MG: Completion and finished?

BKG: There are some works that you are prepared to let go of, which is to say, to stop touching them.

MG: And to stop looking at them.

35. *Failed or incomplete?*

BKG: About the distinction between failed and incomplete, if it's failed, it's not that it's incomplete; it's that it's complete but doesn't work. If you see anything incomplete it means you could still work on it ...

MG: That's good...

BKG: and come to a point of conviction.

MG: That's good. Yes.

BKG: In the case of Newman, it's interesting that you didn't define the work as an unsuccessful work, but rather, you saw the possibility that had he kept working on it, he might have made a better painting.

MG: What I would say is that I'm interested in the Newmans that *soar*. And many of them *soar*.

BKG: The question is whether the ones that *don't* soar should've been destroyed, and he should have started all over again.

MG: I have some works out in the world that don't soar. *I* do.

BKG: So my question is, about the works that don't soar, are they incomplete? Did you stop too soon? *Or*, are they simply un-completable, in which case, they should be destroyed?

MG: If they should have been destroyed, they would have been destroyed, in the main. Or if I get my hands on them, they will be, other than some materials that entropy and drop away, because you didn't know at the time that they would do that and you took risks with them you didn't know how they would last. But my terms are a bit more about which are masterpieces. There are "more than professionally adequate paintings" and there are "failures." The failures have to be destroyed or continue to be worked on. If you kill off all the "more than professional adequately works," you will have done a disservice to the works themselves, your audience, and yourself. "More than professionally adequate" may be too Protestant. I have confessed to a certain ruthlessness. Protestants like me often make good Buddhists. I became gentler and kinder as a Buddhist.

36. Masterpieces, more than professionally adequate, still in progress, failures

BKG: You made a very interesting comment about three categories of work—"masterpieces," "more than professionally adequate," and "failures."

MG: "Still in progress" would be before "failures." "More than professionally adequate" is the term I feel least good about. I'd like a nicer term than that. I would like to suggest changing "more than professionally adequate" to "to be invited to live and help others."

37. Procedures/Vehicles.

MG: If you bring enough things together in a place, with enough conditions that are right—like you were wondering why I needed a space upstate, a larger studio, a higher wider door and an opportunity to bring a team together in the country atmosphere, more relaxed and open. Great light and nature. I hope for a breakthrough, some new groupings of new impulses, maybe even a few masterpieces, certainly a fresh paradigm feeding probably into all the categories above.

Somehow my Asian-derived calligraphy in a New World manner married to music from all countries, and all periods, sets up an interior language and I am now intrigued to add in a different locality and light. This skid row studio on the Bowery remains as the constant and also painting in upstate New York and in Auckland both intrigue.

Sometimes the procedure is such, it's so mysterious, that if you don't know how the artist proceeded, that not knowing anything about it can actually free up your viewing of the language. For instance my desire to work a wabi/sabi group of paintings. Large and deliciously empty paintings. *Wabi* and *sabi*. Empty of identity. Empty of needs of the Self. I mean, very refreshing. In other words, if you can get the *procedures*, you're going to get some *results*. The first bit of research is how to set the procedures.

You have to analyze a shape and a procedure to such a point that you can play with it and be very effortless with it. It must give birth to itself. It's not something you can order up, or you can

manufacture, or you can project. You're going to have to discover it and find it. You're going to have to surrender and let it come. It will come to you under certain inner conditions.

So, in our ceramic collaboration, Phil Sims and I got some procedures, and we'll continue. The next procedure is the glazing and the firing. There's the procedure of the forming. He invited me to collaborate with him on ceramics. He would have never got those procedures on his own and neither would I. So together we came up with that. That's why I keep talking about Anthony creating, because when we make some works, he and I make them together. And without him—it's not a question of it being somebody else—without the specific *him*, we wouldn't come up with these procedures. So, you would know something's *complete* when you had an extraordinary set of procedures that you would articulate in scale with a surface that held and gave you conviction. For instance, an inspiration is Sigmar Polke. His American Indian stain paintings in resin in the San Francisco Museum of Art are *fucking* remarkable! He came up with a machine to hold that silky surface. He knew how to *spread* resin without getting *gassed* up himself and *dying*, insects stuck to them, and they're very liberating and very freeing.

BKG: One of the interesting things about your work is the way that you come up with a set of conditions, whether a set of forms like the shaped canvasses, which are based on geometry, or procedures.

MG: Yes, shape, surface, touch, scale, light, materials. The shape as a container, as an edge, as a boundary.

BKG: Some conditions seem to be established before you start and provide the framework within which you can improvise, be spontaneous.

MG: Well said. There is crossover from a completed work to a new one. As you proceed with all of those conditions, you continue to improvise, based on what you were learning. So there would be a crescendo, there would be a lifting, and then the impulse would be over and there would be a dropping away. You would become satiated.

Now, that's done in relation not only to the weather outside where you're living, and the nature of the urban or rural culture around you, but that's also done in relation to your age. So, I'm going to be 68 in a couple of months, and Anthony and I are setting up my final, classical Chinese phase if you will. Doesn't matter whether it lasts five years, ten years, or thirty, the new building is about getting beyond "easel painting"—metaphorically speaking. To some degree, the urban studio, even though it's 3000 square feet—I've set the doorway up 84-inch diagonal, which goes in the elevator to go out.

It's set up here to some degree as easel painting. My doorway determines my largest scale. The next doorway's going to be 120 inches. I want that scale. There's a freedom that comes with scale. With large scale, there's also a crucifying aspect of the test and determination of your procedures. If we're not up to it, the thing's going to flop.

My point's not scale per se. My point is that *one* way of testing a procedure is scale.

38. Exhausting the impulse

BKG: Like I said earlier, one of the themes that keeps coming up is the idea of conviction. In terms of *your* deciding *for yourself* whether to keep going or let go, you had to have conviction

about what you saw before you. You said something now that is a bit different. You said “the *impulse* would be over. That you would feel satiated.”

MG: May I be permitted to quote James Hillman on masturbation?

BKG: Hey, why not?

MG: It’s in his book, *Loose Ends*. He wrote, or rather quotes, “Since the sexual impulse does not respond when sated,”²⁶ the impulse is self-governing. The scale, and the procedures, and the materials, and the light in the space, and the inspired determination of the painter will either *soar* into ecstasy and new works, or collapse, in entropy, as an utter failure. It’s something like launching a ship. People launch ships, and they just go to the bottom. The creative impulse is self-governing.

BKG: Let’s say in terms of the most recent work, because that’s what you have been describing in most detail, the impulse would be over. How would you know?

MG: You’d stop touching, you’d put the tools down, you’d sit down, just plain stop, you’d feel satisfied, you’d feel satiated. You could stop arbitrarily. There’s endless ways. We’ve talked about that. You could get hysterical, you could get desperate. Someone could walk in, like Chris Martin, or Anthony, or Matt, and say “Don’t touch that again, that’s done!” and you were all ready to *pounce* on it and make your next move, but they say you’re not *allowed* to touch that! Somebody offered that view, and it’s marvelous that they offered you that view. Some of my finest paintings have been stopped by other people. I don’t think the single artist should have to decide when the work is completed. It’s an idea about democracy, that a group would take a decision about something. It’s not a question about one person saying we’ve got to do it this way.

BKG: Yeah, that’s less about the impulse being over, and more about somebody coming in from the outside, saying it’s done.

MG: Well, do you know when you’re finished making love, do you know when the meal’s over. You *know*. The more experience you have, the more you know. I mean, do you know when you’re dying? When you’re done? When this interview is complete? You can feel sometimes that you can soar higher, or be more inspired. In the last ten or twenty percent of the process, you can turn it up a couple of notches.

Some works are done within a season, say September through May, or within a year. They’re not allowed to go over to another year. That’s a way to complete. We’re setting a time limit, a boundary.

You have a sense of how many works you do in a year in a given mode. You see, something about completion is in how many works you make. Tesshu, who probably wrote a million pieces altogether, did 4500 Sutra drawings that were absolutely magnificent, in one day, with five assistants. And in one year, he did 180,000 pieces, an average of 500 a day. His wife told him he was crazy—“Why was he doing so many works?,” she asked. He said he was doing a piece for everybody in Japan. At that time there were 35 million people in Japan. His wife said, “You’re not going to make it, you don’t have enough time.” He said, “Don’t worry, I’m going to get rid of

²⁶ *The Kinsey Reports*, 48 & 53, quoted in James Hillman, *Loose Ends*. Dallas: Spring Publications, 1994, p. 108.

this shitbag of a body soon, and get another.” In other words, that could be me. Tesshu withdrew from his body at the age of fifty-three.

39. All or nothing

BKG: You used the word arbitrary, which I think’s important.

MG: Set ahead of time or abrupt, non-rational endings.

BKG: Right. Sometimes, decisions are practical, but you also say that the outcomes can be inspired. The arbitrary’s interesting because, for example, in your two-part ceramic collaboration with Phil Sims, one project is abstract clay sculpture, and the other is a group of mythological gestural figures in clay, that are derived, so far, from Hindu Indian and Aztec and Mayan mythologies, to mention only a few sources. You determined that there would be a set of procedures one, two, or three moves, but beyond four moves, the work would be destroyed.

The decision to limit the move—the limit to one, two, or three moves—was arbitrary, but it was also *not* arbitrary, because by being decisive within a limited number of moves, you introduced chance into the process and eliminated revision. This work was not about a long process.

MG: If they didn’t work, we tossed them out. They were all or nothing.

BKG: All or nothing. Now that’s a very different way of working.

MG: All or nothing is not layers.

BKG: Right.

MG: Not gradual.

BKG: So what’s “all or nothing” about?

MG: You either get it right or you don’t. And you conserve energy and time by moving on. And you keep doing it till you get it right. Get it right in terms of what? In terms of the paradigm you began with—freshness, clarity and inspiration. Actually, you stay very close to what you began with. You usually don’t discover any new mode halfway through. It’s usually the cluster of meaning that you began with. The first few are the freshest. When I do calligraphy, the first couple are often the best. Then you start another paradigm, another day, another session. Not somewhere in the middle of the earlier one. It’s tough to keep the initial qualities of freshness, clarity and inspiration going.

40. Performing clay

BKG: But I think that what’s interesting here is the idea that completion has not to do with working on it till you get it right, in the sense of working on the same *work*.

MG: No, it has to do with mindfulness. If you are relentless with your mind and your intelligence in setting up the paradigm, and you’ve got the paradigm more or less correct, for the procedure, when you begin, you can turn your mind off. And you can perform it. You perform spontaneity and improvisation in relation to the paradigm.

BKG: Each work is a performance.

MG: Oh yes. In the collaboration with Phil, it is performing clay.

BKG: So, if you weren't satisfied with the performance, you didn't tinker with it or add to it or revise it...

MG: No. With clay, you recycle it, you put it in a pot and melt it down again if it's dried, and start again some other day. The clay doesn't have an innate identity.



Untitled

2003, ash-fired stoneware, 10x3"
Sims/Gimblett collaboration,
Collection of the artists, New York

41. Arbitrary and spontaneous

BKG: So the principle of one, two, or three moves is arbitrary, in the sense that you simply set it down as a condition of the working process, but you didn't pick the number out of a hat. You could have picked 200.

MG: One, two, or three is father, son, and holy ghost. It is trinitarian. One, two, three, four is quaternic, and the fifth is the transcendent fifth. Counting is not without its sacred ritual. It was

actually one through four. We did not keep anything we made a fifth move with. The works were usually three to four gestures.

BKG: Well, my sense is that although the number is arbitrary...

MG: I never said the number was arbitrary.

BKG: But, the idea that you can't make more than a certain number of moves is not a condition that you placed on the *Mirror* paintings, for example.

MG: Correct.

BKG: Or on the building of surfaces. So, why was the number predetermined here?

MG: It came from my calligraphic process. You couldn't retain spontaneity and improvisation after about three moves. We had a sense—there were two of us working together—we did very few two moves, we did threes and fours. And I said at the end, I thought we'd worked with the psychological Other. There had been a third person present. I think it was the beautiful woman we were both inspired by, the wind, the magnificence of the hot kiln firing nearby, which we were wood-stoking. The anima, or the muse. There was this sense which one has with leaving a chair empty at the dinner table, that Elijah will come and join the meal.

There is the sense of constructing something for the Other. One move each, another/ an Other. Two moves each, another/an Other. There was the sense of a psychological Other. In doing a collaboration, we performed a third identity. It's neither he nor I. It's Sims/Gimblett, or Gimblett/Sims. In 1966, we did an etching together at the San Francisco Art Institute, in which we both drew half the face. And we kept—we only printed two, and we each have one, from 1965. It's an etching of Phil's face and mine, merged.

BKG: I guess, what I was trying to say is that, while the actual number—whether it's two, three, four—is “arbitrary,” what isn't arbitrary is the idea of the fewest number of moves needed.

MG: Okay. For me, it comes from late Cezanne watercolours, minimalism, and Zenga. I see your mental state but I continue to insist the number of moves was not arbitrary. It comes from forty years of calligraphy on my part. It comes from one-stroke and two-stroke bone. After you're going into three and four strokes, the composition possibly becomes Cubist.

BKG: Right. But what I was trying to say is that what wasn't arbitrary was the principle of very few moves.

MG: Nor were the numbers arbitrary. There was nothing arbitrary about any of it. It was based on profound experience. We both have thirty-nine years of studio practice. We brought everything we knew to the situation.

BKG: Right. But it's not a limit. It's not a number of moves that you bring to all your work.

MG: No. Each work has its own requirements.

BKG: Or body of works, or family of works.

42. Translation of the light.

MG: And each material has its own requirements. This was clay, it wasn't paint, it wasn't pigment. Clay goes into Phil's pigment, and a certain amount of clay into my pigment, like silica, but it was clay. And it was also sculpture, it wasn't flat. It wasn't illusionistic on a two-dimensional plane. It was low-relief 3D work.

BKG: Right. And of course, it will get fired. And will it get glazed?

MG: Oh, yes. And it won't mostly be hung on the wall, it'll be like it was made. They're—they're what you'd call "table pieces." They're floor or table, but they're more likely table. The table is the pedestal.

BKG: Right. But there's the case in ceramics, where the kiln is, if you will, an agent.

MG: Fire's an enormous agent. So is the translation of the light in the glazing. Enormous agent. Yes.

BKG: And—my sense is—I don't know how other artists work. I mean, presumably, some of them do modify fired and glazed pieces after they've come out of the kiln. But my assumption is that neither you nor Phil intend to.

MG: Phil, on occasion, refires a piece a number of times.

BKG: So that there is, in a sense, a material condition that says—

MG: Agreed. In these procedures, the material condition is very high.

BKG: When it comes to pottery....

MG: Well, it's pretty high in ink on paper too.

BKG: Yeah.

MG: Paper's already formed. You can only do so much with it. All mediums have their limitations. It's their limitations that let you be free. If they didn't have limitations, it'd be hopeless.

43. Parallels

BKG: Tell me why you think that the parallels between music and painting are unsatisfactory.

MG: Well, I think there may have been a point in the criticism, in the written criticism of painting, the critique of it, where there was too much reliance on comparisons with musical terms and musical metaphors.

BKG: For instance, some of the writing about Pollock has linked his method of painting to jazz. Do you find that...

MG: Oh, I think that was probably true of all the Ab-Ex [Abstract Expressionist] people. So, it's also one's interests. But it has been hard for painting to develop a critique of itself by painters and

writers in visual terms. It's been hard to do. It's still forming. Psychology, for instance, as an empirical science, is of very recent origin. It's about one hundred years old!

44. Unknown to unknown

***The five petals of the one flower open,
and the fruit of itself is ripe.***²⁷

MG: One big idea is, if you're fortunate enough to begin a work in the unknown, to know nothing. And to stay in knowing nothing, and take all your direction from the autonomous object, from the work itself. Never touch it or proceed to project a thought into it, or an emotion, but instead, try to understand how to serve it. And hang out around it until it lets you know with utter conviction the next move. You sometimes get an extraordinary work. And that has no time barrier. That's not measured in any way by a human quality. So to live in the unknown—you know, we could say, to be in silence as opposed to mind—but without going there, to live in the unknown is a startling way to do a work. Now John Yau's written about my work,²⁸ and he and I have worked so much together that we've investigated—and it's a true persona, what Zen might call the not-self, the non-work—which in Kali you'd find, perhaps, as the shadow in the alien. In other words, Hindu teachers will us of our non-identity, no such thing as identity: do not be caught up in the identity of yourself, do not become caught up in the particular identity of the work. Now, in that nature of the alien, there is the huge energy of what is not human. Human is a tiny part of things. The ocean, the unconscious—these are things that are not knowable. Sometimes you can participate in a work from and in that source.

²⁷ Ishu Miura and Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Zen Koan*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965, p.96.

²⁸ Besides the essay "Going Forth" in *Max Gimblett*, Yau contributed "Drawing on the World" to *Max Gimblett: The Language of Drawing*, by Anne Kirker, Brisbane, Australia: Queensland Art Gallery, 2002 and "Max Gimblett: Painting as Paradox," in *Max Gimblett: Paintings*,. Sydney, Australia: Sherman Galleries, 1995.