

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN A WORK IS FINISHED?

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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 a list. What I was interested in initially was the variety of ways in which I approach completion.

The completion is in the beginning

BKG: 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. 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 on the path of that paradigm or concept.

'No rules study'

MG: In 'no rules study', you could have the concept that the moment that you can analyse 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.

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 realised that 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.

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.

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.

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 Cézanne'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.

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

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-ons', 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.

'all mind/no mind'

MG: 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 an 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 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*.

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.

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

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. 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. 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.

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 be 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*?

Rinzai. Gradual and Fast.

'At every step the pure wind rises'

BKG: In the *Mirror* paintings you have, as you put it, a way of working that's very slow. You also have a way of working that's very fast.

MG: I practise Rinzai Zen. Koan study and calligraphy. Two conditions: fast and gradual. 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. Now I am in a period of equally balanced slow and fast completion. 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 Fodero, my studio manager, where they will help develop the object. The creative energy can move in many mediums and methods.

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 your work, can you describe the internal experience of working in a way that you would characterise 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 – for Anthony Fodero* (2002), *No Trace* (2003), and *Cloak – an NZ Childhood* (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

BKG: Is it gestural?

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

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 modelling.² 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 by re-stretching or re-surfacing 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 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 recognised way to go. When I say that, I realise 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, which 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.

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 jeweller, Warwick Freeman. A carpenter, Jim Cooper. Master carpenter, master jeweller. 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 live 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.

'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!'³ 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 Hyde⁴ and I are attempting to finalise *Oxherding* right now, and we began at the Rockefeller Foundation residency at Bellagio in 1991.⁵ 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'.⁶ Is it one figure, is it two figures? Michael Wenger, who wrote *33 Fingers*, says, 'One figure in relationship'.⁷ 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 – Uroboros – 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.'⁸ *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.' Rochi 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 Rochi Hogen Yamahata, of the Open Way Centre, in Byron Bay, New South Wales. And when I told the Rochi 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, Rochi Hogen 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.'⁹

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 recognised in any hints or clues in conscious mind, places 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 analyse 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.

Degree of difficulty

BKG: You also have some very difficult work.

MG: 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 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 *Fish on the Log*. I didn't. I had to cut its throat.

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 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. 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 marvellous 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. And sometimes, years ago, in the late 60s and early 70s, 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.

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.

Finished, finished off, finished up

MG: I'm realising 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'.

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 signalled 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.

Automatism

MG: By utterly freeing the mind from any recognisable motif, recognisable to the mind by naming, by a word, a thought, there is the possibility in ink painting... Fast usually works out better than slow. There is thought felt in the body, through the senses, that are *not* thoughts as words. Without relying only 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!



Conviction. The golden certainty

BKG: 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 a 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...

MG: Yes, for me to be convinced? How to be secure? Doubt is a marvellous 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.¹⁰ 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.

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: The question is whether the paintings that *don't* soar—the ones that “fail”—should be destroyed and you start all over again. Or, whether continuing to work on them would bring them to successful completion. 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.

Procedures/Vehicles

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.

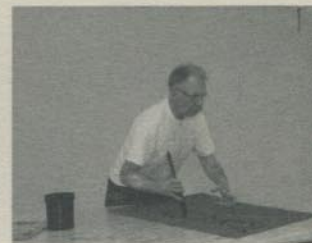
BKG: Some conditions seem to be established before you start and provide the framework within which you can improvise, be spontaneous.

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.

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. 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 marvellous 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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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. 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 Cézanne 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've gone beyond 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.

Unknown to unknown

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

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,¹² 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 teach 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.

Manhattan, 26 August, 2003

1 This text is drawn from a longer interview, an edited version of which will appear in *Art from Start to Finish*, edited by Howard S. Becker, forthcoming. The assistance of Anurima Banerji in transcribing and editing the original interview is gratefully acknowledged.

2 Adrian Durham (ed.), *The Image in Form: selected writings of Adrian Stokes*, New York, Harper and Row, 1972.

3 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>

4 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.

5 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.html>

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

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

8 David Lewis, *Brancusi*, London, Academy Editions, 1974, p. 2.

9 Roichi Hogen Yamahata, *On the Open Way*, Byron Way, Open Way Zen Inc., 1998.

10 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.

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

12 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.