

To appear in *Art from Start to Finish*, edited by Howard Becker, Robert Faulkner, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (University of Chicago Press, 2005). From a longer interview, part of which appeared in *The Brush of All Things* (Auckland Art Gallery, 2004).

“This is a Stone from the Endless Beach”:

Max Gimblett interviewed by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

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Howard Becker proposed that we think sociologically about “the work itself” by treating the *Principle of the Fundamental Indeterminacy of the Art Work* empirically. 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?” The interview with Gimblett also focuses on the question of completion. It 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.

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 this volume think 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 in this volume. It is a selection of remarks from a much longer interview.

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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 one short list and there’s about ten items on it. [These appear as the headings of the sections, some of which are quite short.] 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.

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."¹ 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.

No rules study [Figure 1: "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 can 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 realized that I when I read a Stanley Kunitz, a John Yau [Figure 2: *John Yau*], an Anurima Banerji, a D.H. Lawrence 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--in 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.

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

¹T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets," *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. London: Harcourt Books, 1963.

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.

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 Wolfram² 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?”

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.

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 you 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” [Figure 3: ***One Stroke Bone—For Anthony Fodero***] 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, 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: “all mind/no mind.” When you think and when you 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,

² Stephen Wolfram, *A New Kind of Science*. Champaign: Wolfram Media, 2002.

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*.³

If your mind was free enough, if in your humility and letting go and surrender you walk up to the altar and paint, saying, "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 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 of 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.

So in a way you could enter Balzac's *The Unfinished Masterpiece*, [**Figure 4: *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,"⁴ 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 soon.

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. But then, you know, you can invite people into this white room with you.

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 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

³ Katherine Mansfield, "At the Bay," in *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. Auckland: Golden Press Pty Ltd., 1978.

⁴ Willem de Kooning, *Collected Writings*. New York: Hanuman Books, 1983, p. 60.

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.⁵ 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.

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.

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.

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 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 completion.

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 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*?

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 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?

⁵ 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: I can try. I practice Rinzai 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.C.G. Jung wrote "small and hidden is the door that leads inwards and the entrance is barred by countless prejudices, mistaken assumptions and fears."⁶ 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.

With Lewis Hyde there's a big thing with Duchamp. I have been thinking 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. 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 Fodero, my studio manager, where they will help develop the idea. The creative energy can move in some 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.

⁶ C.J. Jung, *The Collected Works*, Volume 10, *Civilization in Transition*, p. 154.

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.

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

MG: Well, you *can* do something quicker with 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? 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.

BKG: Is it gestural?

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

Completion in different mediums

MG: There's 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 was 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 Americans flayed on a cross in a village.

BKG: Now in terms of *Spirit Box*... **[Figure 5: *Skull from 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. And the only real frustration you finally see in Picasso is right at the end in that last death mask pastel drawing, when he's about to leave

his body. And you know, you could *guess* that what it *means* is, “I don’t get to do any more drawings,” rather than, “I don’t get another breakfast.”

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.

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’s four completely different sets of skulls and three completely different wooden cabinets made in two countries. Granted one wood was repeated twice. But the skulls are so different in the 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, except 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 too strongly, I could claim all of that too, and in the same breath say it’s also a circle.

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--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 I, 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 slides, your visual art history.... you just can't get them out of the game. It's in the public domain.

Works for the unknown show

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

MG: Modes? Well, at any given time I'm doing three to maybe to 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 seasons are going to be. So 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 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."⁷ 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.

Non-fitters

⁷ 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.

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 is 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 style that's built of iron that is carved. It's not modeled, it's *carved*, in Adrian Stoke's terms.

Degree of difficulty

BKG: You also have some very difficult work.

MG: Oh, yes I have some extremely difficult work, yes. That's another idea about completion. 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* that John Yau owns. 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.

Destruction, editing, and completion

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. And that's a repression. And 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 better 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. 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 a group of works--they were double-bar geometrics--it's a group 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.

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 and the uncertainty of memory. 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.

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 you start talking and expressing that, it's as good as the person is articulate.

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 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 with wet materials. 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 dying 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!

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.

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, which you felt those terms better captured...

MG: Letting the audience in. Other people's thoughts and opinions. Often you can't see a work for what it is 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, you know, and you. You've said very little over the years but what you've said has counted.

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 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.

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 criterion'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.

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.

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."

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,"⁸ 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

⁸ *The Kinsey Reports*, 48 & 53, quoted in James Hillman, *Loose Ends*. Dallas: Spring Publications, 1994, p. 108.

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! But 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 actually an idea about democracy, that the 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.

So, some works are done within a season, 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 paintings 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? 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 53.

Unknown to unknown

The five petals of the one flower open, and the fruit of itself is ripe.⁹

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,¹⁰ 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 tell of 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 do a work from and in that source.

⁹ Ishu Miura and Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Zen Koan*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965, p.96.

¹⁰ Wystan Curnow and John Yau, *Max Gimblett*. Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2002.

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