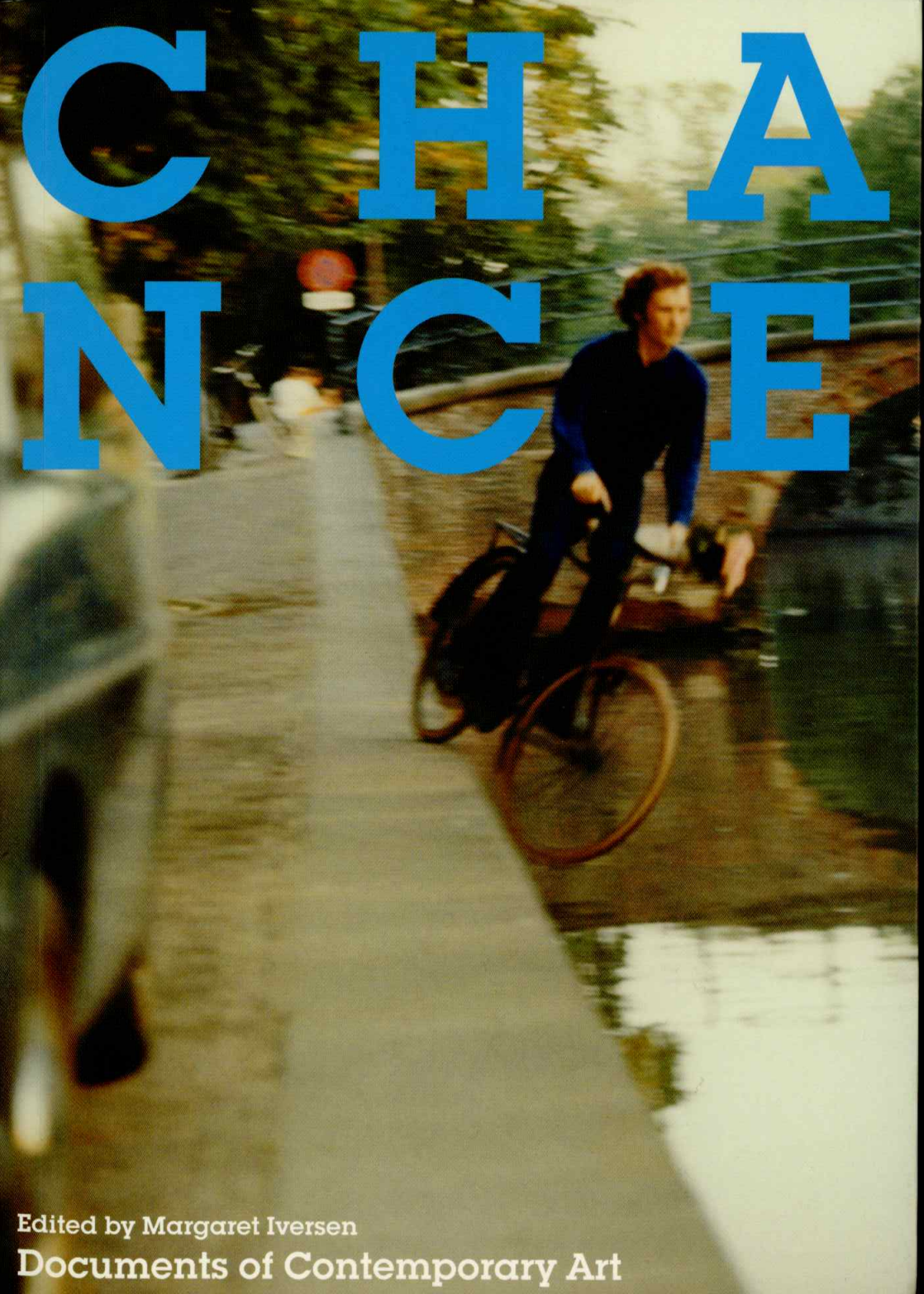
CHANCE



Edited by Margaret Iversen

Documents of Contemporary Art

Margaret Iversen
Introduction//The Aesthetics of Chance

Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1976) is a film about a newcomer to New York – Akerman herself – which conveys brilliantly her slightly estranged visual excitement in the city. The film consists of carefully set up long takes with a fixed camera. For one sequence, she placed a camera in a subway car opposite the sliding doors. The train arrives at a station where the doors part to reveal a chance composition of pillars and people on the platform. The doors slide shut and the process is repeated several times. The filmmaker obviously hopes that at each stop the doors will frame a striking composition, but she has no way of controlling the outcome. It is this gap between intention and outcome that seems crucial to the meaning of chance in art. The question then becomes: Why should artists deliberately set up such a gap in their practice? And why should the viewer find it so engaging? This book aims to answer these questions and to outline a history of chance procedures since around 1900.

'Chance' has been used to characterize a very broad spectrum of practices including the readymade, collage, expressionist painting, performance, participation and more. While I will touch on some of these, I intend to restrict my focus mainly to those chance procedures that involve setting up some quite formal procedure or mechanical apparatus for capturing chance occurrences. Akerman's use of the sliding doors as a large, slow camera shutter is a good example of this. Once the apparatus or instruction is determined the artist then adopts a posture of waiting to see what will happen. It is rather different, then, from strategies involving high-risk spontaneity where outcomes are just as unpredictable, but where the posture is one of making something happen rather than waiting to see what will happen.

Duchamp, Cage and Fluxus

In 1913–14, Marcel Duchamp made an important work called *3 Standard Stoppages* generated by a rather elaborate and exacting instruction recorded in his box of notes for the year 1913: 'if a straight horizontal thread one metre long falls from a height of one metre onto a horizontal plane distorting itself as it pleases and creates a new shape of the measure of length – Three patterns obtained in more or less similar conditions …' The instruction dictates the initial conditions of this mock experiment, but it does not determine the outcome; on the contrary, the instruction is a device for evading authorial or artistic agency and so generating chance events and unexpected results. Once the threads were affixed to a dark ground, wooden templates or rulers were formed in accordance with these new wavy units of length. The piece offers an ironic alternative to the standard metre. Duchamp put the fixed threads and rulers in a disused croquet case where they became what he called 'canned chance'. This work stands as an early and exemplary case of the systematic use of chance in art. It consists of an instruction for a controlled experiment which in turn opens the work to the unpredictable effects of forces, objects, experiences – in this case gravity – while at the same time limiting authorial control.

Duchamp's wooden templates were used to generate the network of lines that connect the bachelors to the sieves in the lower section of his *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, known as the *Large Glass* (1915–23). It is now widely acknowledged that the *Glass* is one of the most important works of art of the twentieth century. If that is so, then it must also be the case that chance procedures are just as important for subsequent art practice as the readymade, for Duchamp's great work is a panorama of chance procedures, just as his *Tu m'* is said to be a 'panorama of the index'.[1] The *Glass* is so familiar that one does not need to elaborate this point in detail. It is enough to note what other features of the work are generated by chance. The draft pistons at the top owe their shape to another experiment repeated three times: a square piece of net was hung above a radiator so that hot air currents distorted the shape of the net, which was recorded photographically. The shots are distributed in a pattern obtained by launching paint-tipped match sticks with a toy cannon – an intentional act, but designed to defeat that intention to some degree. The delicate colour of the sieves was made by fixing with varnish dust accumulated over several months when the glass lay horizontal in the studio. In addition, in 1926, the glass was shattered in transit. Duchamp glued the pieces together and declared himself pleased with this accidental (un)finishing touch – an unplanned chance occurrence – that accorded so well with the spirit of the work. One consequence of this last dramatic chance event is that shattered glass has been a repeated motif in subsequent art – from Ed Ruscha's *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* and his more recent *Busted Glass* series of paintings, to Walead Beshty's ongoing 'FedEx' sculptures – glass boxes that since 2005 have been undergoing continual damage as they are sent long distances to be exhibited.

Duchamp's engagement with chance procedures resulted in objects that were eventually displayed in the museum. Many artists who followed his example, however, were more inclined to document the experiment itself and to disseminate the work in the form of photography, film or video. A classic example of this practice is a book made by Ed Ruscha that documents an instructional collaborative project: *Royal Road Test* (1967). Its mock experimental character is signalled in the title. It is the record of a performance involving Ruscha and two

friends who threw a typewriter out of the window of a speeding car. Ruscha says that Mason Williams spontaneously threw the typewriter and only later did they decide to go back and record the wreckage. In the book, however, the crime is presented as premeditated, since the first photograph in it shows a Royal typewriter sitting innocently on a desk top. In an email, Ruscha explained this as follows: 'The photo of the intact typewriter was added after the original one was thrown from the car. The act of throwing the typewriter was spontaneous and then we re-created the 'before' photo by finding a duplicate typewriter.'[2] The remainder of the photographs show the perpetrators turned detectives, recording the scene of a crime or accident – the wreckage strewn across the Arizona desert. In a very similar way, the photographs in *Thirty-four Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967), are the result of a combination of instruction, performance and chance. Ruscha gave an aerial photographer instructions to photograph empty parking lots around LA, thereby revealing hitherto unnoticed herringbone patterns and variegated oil stains. The instructional aspect of Ruscha's books connects them with similar strategies in some strands of conceptual art in the late sixties and seventies.[3] In my view, the brilliance of Lawrence Weiner's *Statements* of 1968, such as *A 36" x 36" REMOVAL TO THE LATHING OR SUPPORT WALL OF PLASTER OR WALL BOARD FROM A WALL*, is the unanticipated pattern of pipes and wires that are exposed when the minimal instruction is *performed* – although, admittedly, this rather goes against the grain of his own *STATEMENT OF INTENT* (1969): 'The piece need not be built …'

The marked performative aspect of Duchamp's and Ruscha's pieces suggests other examples of the use of chance in work more closely aligned with performance art. Contemporary with Ruscha were a group of artists who in 1962 were to become part of the Fluxus group. They developed ideas promulgated by the experimental composer, John Cage. Cage is a key figure in this narrative as he taught a number of artists in the 1950s at Black Mountain College (including Robert Rauschenberg) and at the New School in New York (including Allan Kaprow). Although Cage was building on avant-garde musical traditions, he was quick to see the relevance of Duchamp to his work and visual artists were equally quick to acknowledge Cage as an inspiration. He took the principle of allowing chance to generate composition to its logical conclusion, first with a complex system using *I Ching* coins and later by leaving performers a great deal of scope in their interpretation of a score. This latter strategy, 'indeterminacy,' lent itself to the idea of creating a dense field of resonating sound rather than a melodic, linear musical experience. The multi-layered, sometimes three-ringed events orchestrated by Cage foreshadowed the rise of Happenings. Cage was thus a leader in the avant-garde project of diminishing the distance between art and life. However, he always insisted on the importance of the instructional frame: 'Life without structure is unseen. Pure life expresses itself within and through a structure.'[4]

A key factor in Cage's aesthetic sensibility was his keen interest in Zen Buddhism. This aspect of his work is perhaps best illustrated by his famous piece *4' 33"* (1952), in which the performer is instructed to sit at the piano, open the lid, and play nothing for fixed periods. The purpose of this is to allow the ambient sounds in the room to be heard. It is the frame. It also indicates an important shift from expressing to listening. Cage's synthesis of Duchampian chance procedures and Zen meant that he put chance to work in a particular way, that is, to open the mind to more intense awareness of the world and nature. For Cage, using chance procedures meant imitating nature in her underlying principles rather than simply copying appearances. This idea of Nature as essentially chance-driven is strange to us, but after the theories of quantum mechanics and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, it's not such an implausible view. Albert Einstein, exasperated by theories of the unpredictability of sub-atomic particles, wrote in a letter, 'God does not play dice.' But nature definitely does: for example, although much emphasis is placed on Darwin's deterministic theory of natural selection, later dubbed 'survival of the fittest', it is the random scrambling and mutation of genes that makes possible variation, diversity and complexity.

Another Cage protégé, the Fluxus artist George Brecht, took the idea of a fairly open-ended 'score' out of its musical context and adopted for an instructional performance art. An early piece, *Motor Vehicle Sundown* (1960), was dedicated to Cage and involved many participants in parked cars doing various car-related actions all at once. However, his work developed in the direction of minimal verbal instructions or 'event scores' for performance pieces which were presented on cards in precise graphic form. For example, his spare design for *Word Event* (1961) has a large bullet point centred on the card and then the word EXIT. Performing the piece might be accomplished by isolating and attending to that familiar sign with fresh eyes, either on the card or *in situ* or as a readymade sign offered for sale in Fluxus magazines – or by simply leaving the room. A piece by La Monte Young, a Fluxus composer, *Composition 1960 #2* ('Build a fire in front of the audience …'), as minimally performed by Brecht, involved lighting a book of matches. Another Young 'composition,' *Composition 1960 #10*, dedicated to Robert Morris, consists of the instruction, 'Draw a straight line and follow it.' The instruction is terse and open to any number of realizations. In 1961, Morris and Young collaborated on a performance of this piece in which they laboriously traced and retraced a line on stage 29 times. Nam June Paik, the Korean Fluxus artist, later performed a version of the work using his head dipped in ink and tomato juice as a brush to make a line on a long scroll laid on the floor (1962).

Performing Chance Procedures

The combination of verbal instruction, performativity and chance can be seen in the work of many artists following in this tradition. In his *Following Piece* (1969), for example, Vito Acconci set himself the task of following a randomly selected stranger walking in the street while remaining himself unobserved. Signalling the refusal of authorial control and corresponding receptivity, he called this activity 'Performing myself through another agent'.[5] Ten years later, during the month of February 1979, the French artist Sophie Calle initiated her own following piece, *Suite vénitienne* (1980). In some ways it resembles Acconci's since it involved following someone and documenting the activity with a camera.[6] Calle decided to travel to Venice, track down a man she had met once at a party in Paris, and follow him. Because the choice of Henri B., like Acconci's subjects, was more or less arbitrary, her activity lacks the character of a stalking. Rather, Calle puts herself at the mercy of another. Sounding very like a latter day André Breton, she says: 'I see myself at the labyrinth's gate, ready to get lost in the city and in this story. Submissive.'[7]

Calle's openness to chance events in this work and elsewhere qualifies her for inclusion here, but there is a slight element of risk in this piece, especially when Henri B. finally confronts her, and this connects the work to a whole genre of performance art that involves the artist subjecting him or herself to danger or harm. Some signal examples of this genre are Carolee Schneemann's orgiastic *Meat Joy* (1964), Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) and Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 10* (1973), which involved her rhythmically stabbing a knife between the splayed fingers of her hand. In these cases, and many more one could mention, attention is focused on the bodily experience of the artist and the tension produced in the viewer.[8] The emphasis is on the immediate presence, visibility and vulnerability of the body enduring the performance of a strange ritual. As a result they have an existential or phenomenological quality quite alien to work using chance procedures. In addition, the participatory character of some of these works adds a dimension of indeterminacy which I will not pursue here, for I am mainly concentrating on chance at the moment of composition rather than reception.[9]

Writing in 1971 on the work of Eva Hesse and 'process' art more generally, Lucy Lippard observed that 'risk', a favourite term in the 1950s, implied at that time 'a determined mindlessness, even sacrifice, in the heat of creation.' For her, process art altered the role of the artist:

> Now the risk, or the gesture, rather than being made by the artist from the inside out, as a direct expression of himself, is an 'act' of the sculpture, almost independent of the creator, its scale and meaning deriving from its materials, context and situation rather than any psychological necessity. Serra uses gravity, weight ... as pure physical risk.[10]

Robert Morris was the key apologist for this kind of work and he characterized process art as 'chance, contingency and indeterminacy'.[11] Allowing materials to succumb to the force of gravity has more in common with the kind of chance procedures detailed here than the 'sacrificial' risks taken by some performance artists. Gravity was, after all, the force at work in *3 Standard Stoppages* and falling turns out to be an important chance procedure. In fact, the etymology of chance is traceable to the Latin verb '*cadere*', to fall. (The French word, *le hazard*, stems from the Arabic name for a dice game.) The fall can be actual or potential. For example, Fischli and Weiss' *Equilibrium* series of photographs of precariously arranged found objects suggest imminent collapse.

The distinction I've sketched between chance and risk is helpful, but not absolute. The work of Los Angeles based Dutch conceptualist Bas Jan Ader is a case in point, since his staged accidents, such as riding a bike into a canal or falling from his roof, or climbing out on a branch over a stream and then letting go, exposed him not just to chance (and gravity) but to physical harm and even death. His final performance, *In Search of the Miraculous II* (1975), was a failed attempt to cross the Atlantic solo in his twelve and a half foot sail boat. His body was never found. This work points to the connection between the sea and chance which is also a recurrent motif in the discourse and art of chance. It goes back to Mallarmé's famous poem 'A throw of the dice will never abolish chance' which involves a shipwreck in a stormy sea, and forward to several of Tacita Dean's works. In Horace's *Odes* (1: 35) and in some visual representations of the capricious goddess Fortuna (Luck or Chance) who bestows her favours so randomly, she is given a rudder and billowing sail or a model ship.

The untimely death of Bas Jan Ader also raises the issue of the connection between chance and mortality. One of the most affecting works that turns on this link is Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (March 5) #2* of 1991. The piece consists of two burning, wall-mounted light bulbs in porcelain sockets attached to intertwined wires. The date in the work's subtitle is the birth date of his partner who had recently died. The simple light bulbs allude to their close relationship and the impossibility of knowing in advance which life was to burn out first.

The continuing productivity of chance procedures in recent art can be seen in the work of a many of contemporary artists. Gabriel Orozco, for example, a prominent Mexican artist, is clearly interested in performative chance procedures. His *Yielding Stone* (1992) is a ball of soft, grey plasticine that he has rolled through the streets gathering whatever fragments and marks it encountered. Benjamin Buchloh notes that this is an example of 'transforming a

surface into a purely passive receptacle of merely accidental pictorial and indexical marks'.[12] Plasticine, Orozco has said, is hardly ever used for the definitive version of a work ... Its malleability and vulnerability make it unsuitable for permanent forms in a finished piece.'[13] The surface of the ball has the sensitivity of skin, or light sensitive paper. This permanently malleable ball remains vulnerable to pokes and kicks when it is displayed in the gallery. Many of Orozco's video works, such as *From Dog Shit to Irma Vep*, also have an aleatory openness to whatever presents itself while he strolls along the street with his camera. This receptive mood is related to his interest in Zen – an interest which suggests that his photograph, *Extension of Reflection*, is a Zen circle performed in the street with a bicycle for a brush and a puddle for ink. The work makes canny reference to Robert Rauschenberg's twenty foot long *Automobile Tire Print* (1953) – a work which involved making a straight line with a Model A Ford driven slowly by John Cage across pieces of typewriter paper glued together to form an extended scroll, while Rauschenberg poured black house paint on the tire.

The Belgian-born artist, Francis Alÿs, takes walks through Mexico City and elsewhere which are undertaken in the spirit of harnessing chance occurrences. In one such performance, *The Collector* (1991–92), he drags a make-shift toy dog on wheels after him; it has been magnetized so it picks up metallic detritus in the street. Alÿs' note on the work is, in effect, an instruction: 'For an indeterminate period of time, the magnetized collector takes a daily walk through the streets and gradually builds up a coat made up of any metallic residue in its path.' Both Orozco and Alÿs are obviously interested in taking their art-making into the street and making contact with a reality beyond the studio through chance. There is also an element of play in their work, evident in the materials, whether it be modelling clay or a child's toy. It is Alÿs, however, who has most consistently taken to the street and its opportunities for chance encounters, or what he calls 'accidents'.

Alÿs takes as his point of departure a surrealist technique, the chance encounter, and transforms it so that the encounter is with some social reality rather than with an objective correlate of some unconscious fear or desire; he engineers an encounter with a social unconscious. Alÿs' strategy is to literalize a surrealist trope, defamiliarize it, and so make it poetic again. His *Seven Levels of Garbage*, for example, was an experiment that involved placing small metal sculptures in the garbage bags throughout Mexico City and then searching flea markets for years afterwards to find them. (Apparently only two have surfaced to date.) Whereas Breton and his friends sought out objects in flea markets that might hold a clue to unconscious desire, Alÿs is interested in the underworld of garbage-pickers and stall holders and in tracking their marginal economy.

The uses of chance in the examples I have cited are a way of introducing an element of uncertainty and contingency into the work, but it is not a matter of unbridled spontaneity or sheer chaos. On the contrary, in these cases the operation of chance occurs only in the context of certain predetermined conditions, much like a deck of cards or pair of dice. Within those constraints, a process is set in motion that has unpredictable results. Yet chance procedures vary from the highly systematic to the more intuitive and informal. They can be tied to instructional or mechanical systems or generated simply by letting scraps of paper fall. Jean Arp, one of the founders of Zurich Dada, was a master of this type of chance procedure. Beginning in 1916, he made a number of collages of torn bits of paper glued to a paper ground 'arranged according to the laws of chance'. The collages are so perfectly composed, however, that they call into question how scrupulous he was about relinquishing control and fixing the chance result. Nevertheless, Arp was an extremely articulate advocate of chance. Central to his insight is the connection between chance and the precariousness of life. For him, perfection and finish have the look of death, while accident, transience or withering show an openness to what happens, 'what befalls us'.[14]

Jackson Pollock let paint fall, but his drip technique cannot be called a chance procedure. The heightened spontaneity of expressionist brushwork or skeins of wet paint dropped and flung on a horizontal canvas certainly introduces accidental and unexpected effects. But there is an effort in this type of work to push painting to its limit, to risk painting, and master it. It is quite different in spirit to the work under discussion here. Perhaps 'improvisation' captures the mood of this work better. Consider the difference between Pollock's powerfully active technique and Duchamp's strategy of allowing dust and other airborne debris to collect on the lower register of the *Glass*. In 1920, Duchamp affixed a sign to his studio wall that read 'Dust Breeding: To Be Respected.' Taking a photograph of the dusty surface, Man Ray respected this procedure by leaving the shutter open for an hour, while he and Duchamp went to lunch.

Alÿs' performance called *The Leak* (1996), seems designed to highlight both the continuity and the difference between a procedure that involves risk and mastery and one that employs chance: he strolled through the streets of São Paulo, dribbling blue paint from a can. Pollock's drip technique is here stripped of all gestural expression and taken into the street. The principle of what might be termed weak intentionality is crucial, but Alÿs is alert to the limits of this principle. In the video *If you are a Typical Spectator what you are really doing is waiting for the accident to happen (bottle)* (1996), Alÿs trained his camera on an empty plastic bottle as it blew around the square. It strays into the street, Alÿs in hot pursuit, until bang, crash, the world turns upside down as he is hit by a car. This points to the difference between intentionally harnessing chance and

retrospectively incorporating an accident – a distinction that also applies to Duchamp's planned chance events that make up the motifs of the *Large Glass* and its accidental shattering. In this work, Alÿs seems to be poking fun at his own openness to chance encounters which, in this case, literally knocks him down. Like Jacques Lacan in his anecdote about the discomfiture he felt at being the butt of a fisherman's joke, he is no longer observing a picture. He is suddenly in the picture.[15] The traumatic side of the chance encounter is perfectly understood here.

Psychoanalysis, Photography and Chance

The mentions of 'trauma' and 'chance encounter' signal that it is now time to circle back and consider another tradition of chance imagery that has its origin in psychoanalysis.[16] The role of psychoanalysis is of key importance in the modern understanding of the meaning of chance and the Surrealists readily responded to it. In his remarkable pamphlet, *Chance Imagery* (1957/1966), George Brecht makes a useful distinction between two species of chance. One sort of chance event is described as such because it results from 'consciously unknown causes'; the other type results from some mechanical operation where human agency is bypassed. Consequently, the origin of one kind of image 'is unknown because it lies in deeper-than-conscious levels of the mind'. The other kind derives from 'mechanical processes not under the artist's control. Both of the processes have in common a lack of conscious design.' The first understanding of chance, developed by psychoanalysis, governs surrealist automatism and the gestural abstraction of Jackson Pollock. The Surrealists were particularly drawn to Sigmund Freud's book, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), in which a range of common everyday accidents such as forgetting, slips of the pen, losing things, bungled actions, are shown to be ways of allowing unconscious thoughts and desires to attain some form of compromised expression. As Freud put it, 'Certain shortcomings in our psychical functioning ... and certain seemingly unintentional performances prove, if psychoanalytical methods of investigation are applied to them, to have valid motives and to be determined by motives unknown to consciousness.'[17] This three-hundred page book of anecdotes is thus dedicated to the explanation of the sort of phenomena that are normally brushed off as meaningless accidents.

André Breton took up and elaborated Freud's theory in his ideas of the chance encounter and the '*trouvaille*' or lucky find spotted amidst the detritus of the flea market: these sorts of occurrence, by virtue of their apparently fortuitous, accidental character, bypass one's consciousness and intentionality, thereby giving access to an otherwise inaccessible reality. As Breton said of the found objects described in *Mad Love*, such as the famous slipper-spoon, 'It is really as if I had been lost and they had come to give me news about myself.'[18]

While the encounter is sometimes interpreted as a happy coincidence of desire and reality, Breton offered another, 'modern materialist' definition of chance which brings it closer to a reactivation of trauma: 'Chance would be the form taken by external reality as it traces a path in the human unconscious.'[19] Traumatic events bypass what Freud refers to as the protective crust of consciousness leaving an indelible trace. Chance encounters touch on that raw nerve. The Czech conceptual artist, Jirí Kovanda, who was active during the period of post-Prague Spring 'normalization', makes use of this Freudian idea in his actions. His *Contact* piece of 1977 is particularly telling, for it mimics the psychical evasion of censorship: a purposive act is disguised as an 'accident'. The artist walks along the pavement, and seemingly without intent bumps into passers-by or just misses them, failing to make the contact he desires.[20]

The conjunction of chance, trace and trauma raises the issue of photography, at least as it is imagined in Walter Benjamin's 'Little History of Photography' (1931) and in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980). Photography has a special place in the history of chance procedures since it involves a mechanical device and photochemical or digital processes that function to some extent automatically. This bypassing of intention and artistic convention has made it important for those interested in chance. It might even be argued that the snapshot is the model for the work under discussion here, for there is a hiatus, even now with digital technology, between clicking the button and the resulting image. Stanley Cavell has written of 'inner opacity' and 'suspense' as essential features of the medium. David Campany has suggested that one way of understanding photography is 'as a trap for the incidental'.[21]

Although Duchamp's *Large Glass* only marginally involved photography, he referred to it as 'a delay in glass', suggesting that he was fully aware of the significance of the camera with its glass plates as an apparatus apparently designed to generate automatic or chance procedures. Even though sophisticated cameras are designed to produce predictable pictures in the hands of a skilled photographer, the automaticity of the process lends itself to unintended happy (or unhappy) accidents and even the most skilled photographers value this. As Walker Evans so eloquently put it, the camera excels at 'reflecting swift chance, disarray, wonder and experiment'.[22] There is an intrinsic connection, then, between the instructional means of short-circuiting authorial agency, of ensuring non-interference, and a certain use of the medium of photography.[23] Photography, or at least this particular snapshot use of photography, brings together authorial abnegation, indexicality and openness to chance. Ruscha refers at one point to its 'inhuman aspect', as it records without making qualitative judgements.[24]

Artists associated with Dada and Surrealism were the first fully to realize the potential of this characteristic of the medium. In the 'First Manifesto of

Probably one of the worst things to happen to photography is that cameras have viewfinders

John Baldessari, Interview with Nancy Drew, 1981

Surrealism' (1924), Breton said of automatic writing, 'to you who write, these elements are, on the surface, *as strange to you as they are to anyone else*.'[25] And this holds true for the experimental techniques used by Surrealist artists. Man Ray's more experimental photography, for example, might be understood as aiming at the 'the look of chance'. If one can take his word for it, the techniques of solarization and the Rayograph were discovered by chance. The doubly exposed portrait of *La Marquise Casati* (1922) was, he claims, also an accident. In 'Photography is not an Art', Man Ray listed what he considered his ten best photographs. Topping the list is 'an accidental snapshot of a shadow between two other carefully posed pictures of a girl in a bathing suit'.[26] A photographer of great technical mastery, Man Ray could quip that he had learned 'to produce accidents at will'.[27] In my view, photography was one of the many techniques the Surrealists used to circumvent intentionality, allowing the agency of chance to bring about the unexpected. As with André Masson's automatic drawings or Max Ernst's *frottages* or the *Involuntary Sculptures* photographed by Brassaï, the process precedes and determines the image. Photographic automatism is exemplary of chance procedure. Ann Banfield has discussed this mind-independent aspect of the medium, noting that 'what the photograph is sensible of can be outside the ego, a thought unthought, unintended, involuntary and without meaning'.[28]

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes called for a photographic practice that would cut through the generalized image repertoire, the de-realizing simulacra, to touch the absent real. This is made possible by the camera's capture of the unintended, chance occurrence, which is then registered by the observer as the punctum of the photograph. 'For punctum is also sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the die. A photograph's punctum is the accident which pricks me.'[29] The camera lens is often imagined as an eye wide open, without the buffer against shock that we call consciousness. Salvador Dalí, for example, indicated this vulnerability when he praised 'the anaesthetic gaze of the naked, lashless eye of Zeiss' – imagining the camera as incapable of censorship, naked.[30] Breton conjured up this defenceless quality by referring to the 'blindness' of the camera, that gives it access to unconscious material normally only accessible to automatism and dream.[31] 'Blindness' I take to be metaphor calling attention to its mechanical character, but it also recalls the fact that the Classical goddess Fortuna was represented blind and even eyeless, because of the way she often rewards the unworthy and even wicked. The themes or blindness and its correlates, darkness and night, are recurrent in work involving chance. Both Robert Morris and William Anastasi, for instance, made blind drawings. Bruce Nauman's remarkable video installation *Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)* (2001), was made by filming his mouse and moth-infested studio at night using infra-red light and a specially adapted camera.

Hal Foster extended the sense of Barthes' photographic punctum to cover Warhol's technique in his 'Death in America' series. The works are based on repeated photographic readymades, but each one is crossed in the silkscreen process by an accidental, but unique, tear or 'pop'. Foster also mentions in this context Gerhard Richter's blurred photo paintings, but doesn't elaborate.[32] Richter is, however, an artist patently drawn to the depersonalization that both the readymade and chance procedures offer. His abstract painting using a squeegee or plank on wet paint recall the 'decalcomania' experiments of Max Ernst, and his colour chart paintings are arranged randomly by a computer, as were some of Ellsworth Kelly's abstract paintings in the early 1950s.

In those artists who value chance we recognize 'the replacement of the desire to do something with the desire to see what will happen'. I take this phrase from a chapter in a book by Walter Benn Michaels. Titled 'Action and Accident: Photography and Writing', it contains some of the most interesting reflections on chance I've found.[33] Although the context is mainly literary, Benn Michaels sees the relevance of his work for art theory. For example, he mentions in passing Harold Rosenberg's 'compensatory' effort to re-establish action in an automatic world. 'Action Painting' is a way of retrieving spontaneity and resisting the depersonalization of mechanism. Rosenberg does not value the gap between intention and outcome, although he does value risk. But what would it be like to live in an accident-free world? Is it not a more attractive prospect to inhabit a world 'where not only the consequences of one's actions but the very identity of those actions may be unpredictable and unstable'.[34] As Benn Michaels acknowledges, psychoanalysis has a pivotal place in the history of this debate, for it teaches that there is a gap between conscious intention and action. The unconscious is an interference apparatus that produces slips of the tongue, mistakes, sudden failures of recall, and so on. As we've seen, in analysis all these mistakes can supposedly be interpreted as having unconscious intentions, so they are not really mistakes at all. Nevertheless, Freud's vision of the mind stressed its internal division and opacity. Lacan, following Freud, located that internal split in the subject's relation to language: language precedes the self and exceeds its control, so language is also a major interference apparatus. This insight has led literary theorists, including Barthes, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault to think of the literary text in the same way, that is, as exceeding its author's control. Stéphane Mallarmé's way of scattering lines of poetry of various font sizes across the ground of a white page is often invoked in this context, for this arrangement encourages an infinity of possible readings. This is what is meant by 'the death of the author' which, as Barthes notes, implies the birth of the reader. It is worth noting that Barthes' essay of that title was first published in a special double issue of the American avant-garde art magazine, *Aspen* (1967) that was dedicated to Mallarmé.[35]

We are perhaps nearing an understanding of the meaning of chance in art. It would, of course, be unbearable if our intentions were regularly frustrated. Yet there is something terribly arid, not to say mechanistic, in the idea of a world where all our purposes result in predictable consequences, where we are completely transparent to ourselves and where intentions always result in expected actions. We value the degree of interference in human intentional activity offered by the unconscious, by language, by the apparatus of the camera or computer, by the instruction performed 'blind.' In short, we desire to see what will happen.

1 The phrase is in Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America', *October*, no. 3 (Spring 1977) 70.

2 Edward Ruscha, email to the author, August 2009.

3 See my 'Ruscha and Performative Photography', in special issue on 'Photography after Conceptual Art', ed. Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen, *Art History*, vol. 32, no. 5 (2009).

4 John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press/London: Marion Boyars, 1967) 1.

5 Vito Acconci, 'Notes on Photography', in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960–1982*, ed. Douglas Fogle (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003) 184. See also special issue on Acconci: *Avalanche*, no. 6, (Fall 1972).

6 In conversation with me and in other interviews, Calle has insisted that she was unaware of Acconci's *Following Piece* when she made *Suite vénitienne*. However, after she'd taken the photos a friend told her about it. She made a trip to New York to visit Acconci who 'gave her his blessing'. See the account of this episode in Cécile Camart, 'Sophie Calle, 1978–1981: Genèse d'une figure d'artiste', *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, no. 85 (Autumn 2003) 64.

7 Sophie Calle, *Suite vénitienne* (Paris: Éditions de l'Étoile, 1983); translated edition (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988) 6. Also relevant is André Breton's account of his trailing of Jacqueline Lamba through the streets of Montmartre in *L'Amour fou* (Paris, 1937); trans. Mary Ann Caws, *Mad Love* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1987) 43.

8 See John C. Welchman, ed., *Aesthetics of Risk* (conference proceeding of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools, 2006) (Zürich: JRP/Ringier, 2008).

9 See Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation*, Documents of Contemporary Art series (London: Whitechapel Gallery/Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006).

10 Lucy R. Lippard, 'Eva Hesse: The Circle' (1971), in Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P.Dutton, 1976) 165.

11 Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture. Part 4', *Artforum* (April 1969); reprinted in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993) 67.

12 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Cosmic Reification: Gabriel Orozco's Photographs', *Gabriel Orozco* (London: Serpentine Gallery/Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2004) 51.

13 Gabriel Orozco, *Photogravity* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1999) 103.

14 Jean/Hans Arp, 'Looking', in *Arp*, ed. James Thrall Soby (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1958) 15.

15 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XI: 'Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse'* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973); trans. Alan Sheridan; ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin Books, 1977) 95.

16 For a study of the impact of theories of trauma and the death drive on art and theory see my *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

17 Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901); *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. VI (London: The Hogarth Press/Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1960) 239.

18 André Breton, *Mad Love*, op. cit., 8.

19 Ibid., 25.

20 Vit Havránek, ed., *Jirí Kovanda 2005–1976, Actions and Installations* (Zurich: Tranzit/JRP/Ringier, 2006) 106.

21 David Campany, 'Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp: Dust Breeding', in Sophie Howarth, ed., *Singular Images: Essays on Remarkable Photographs* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005) 51.

22 Walker Evans, 'The Reappearance of Photography' (1931); in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays in Photography* (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980) 185.

23 See Benjamin Buchloh's interview with Robert Morris for Morris' comments on his exactly contemporary attraction to the idea of instructional sculpture: Buchloh, 'Three Conversations in 1985: Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol and Robert Morris', *October*, no. 70 (Fall 1984) 33–54.

24 Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003) 170–71.

25 André Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism' (1924); trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane in *Manifestos of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969) 24.

26 Man Ray, 'Photography is not an Art,' in Lucy Lippard, ed., *Surrealists on Art*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

27 Neil Baldwin, *Man Ray: American Artist* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988) 158.

28 Ann Banfield, '*L'imparfait de l'objectif*: The Imperfect of the Object Glass', *Camera Obscura*, no. 24 (September 1990) 85. For more on involuntary photography see my essay of that title and one by Anna Dezeuze: 'Richard Wentworth's *Making Do, Getting By* and the Elusive Everyday', in Anna Dezeuze and Julia Kelly, eds, *Found Sculpture and Photography from Surrealism to Contemporary Art* (London: Ashgate, 2010).

29 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma/Gallimard/Seuil, 1980); trans. Richard Howard, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980) 27.

30 Salvador Dalí, 'Photography: Pure Creation of the Mind', *L'Amic de les Arts*, no. 18 (30 September 1927); reprinted in Salvador Dalí, *Oui: the Paranoid-Critical Revolution*, ed. Robert Descharnes (Boston: Exact Change, 1998) 13.

31 André Breton, 'Max Ernst', in *What is Surrealism?: Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (London: Pluto Press, 1978).

32 Hal Foster, 'The Return of the Real', *The Return of the Real*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996) 134. See also Foster, 'Death in America', *October*, no. 75 (Winter, 1996) 37–60.

33 Walter Benn Michaels, 'Action and Accident: Photography and Writing', in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism, American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987) 223.

34 Ibid., 232.

35 The translation by Michael Howard was published in *Aspen*, no. 5–6, guest-edited by Brian O'Doherty (Aspen, Colorado, Fall/Winter 1967). Barthes' essay was first published in France as 'La Mort de l'auteur' in *Manteia*, no. 5 (Paris, 1968).