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STUMBLING OVER/UPON ART
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“Chance in art” can mean many different things, so nume-
rous and so varied that one may be tempted to dismiss the
term as a misnomer or a lexical straw man, like so many
adherents to the notion of divine or natural causality have
done in the past: “Chance seems to be only a term, by which
we express our ignorance of the cause of any thing.”¹ But
there may be a plane on which at least some of these mean-
ings and forms meet and which can illuminate them—this
essay will attempt to locate it.

One classical interpretation of “chance in art” is that of
the “image made by chance.”² The phenomenon is docu-
mented across times and cultures and can be understood
as a particularly explicit manifestation of the active, cogni-
tive (or “projective”) nature of visual perception. In fact, the
earliest known “image” associated with humans—or rather
pre-humans—, the pebble found at Makapansgat in South
Africa, is supposed to have been selected, transported, and
preserved some three million years ago because it hap-
pened to look like a face.³ Rather than the first work of art,
it can claim to be the first Readymade, as one commenta-
tor facetiously remarked.⁴ Depending on the current views
of the origin and working of the universe, such “images”
have been attributed to the gods, God, or some other super-
natural beings; to Nature acting as an artist or to her blind
mechanical laws; or to man’s own eye and mind, the human
imagination, or the “unconscious.”

The last group of interpretations, which could be
labeled “endogenic,” first gained prominence in Late Antiq-
uity and the Renaissance, and has dominated the Western
understanding of this question from the late eighteenth
century to the present.⁵ Despite its apparently monistic
character, it does retain a crucial element of the earlier
“exogenic” interpretations: for the accidental image to be
perceived as an image, a “sender” must be at least implicit-
ly postulated by the receiver.⁶ If this sender is situated in
the receiver, it becomes an Other within the subject.
This explains the connection between chance images and
Freud’s notion of “the uncanny” (das Unheimliche) and the
fascination they have exerted upon the Surrealists.

Because of this sense of something or someone com-
unicating, the agent, when perceiving an image made
by chance, experiences himself or herself to be
a “patient,” to be a “passive recipient.” In the
early twentieth century, Marcel Duchamp extended this
experience beyond the iconic image and turned it into an
experiment. The demonstration of this move was made with
Trois stoppages étalon [Three Standard Stoppages], which
used a mock-scientific procedure to subvert the quantita-
tive and iterative basis of the mechanistic and deterministic
worldview: the unit of length is destroyed if the shapes
adopted by a one-meter-long thread falling three times
from a height of one meter are regarded as relevant, as the
artist made clear by deriving from them three templates
used in the production of other works including the Large
Glass. Duchamp defined this operation as “canned chance”
and explained later: “This experiment was made in 1913
to imprison and preserve forms obtained through chance,
through my chance.”⁷

Alfred Gell’s relational notion of artistic agency, based
on the agent/patient dynamics and extended beyond the
artist’s figure, can help us understand the rationale of this
“experiment.” Duchamp’s work involved letting the thread
“distort itself as it pleases and create a new figure of the unit
of length.”⁸ Letting the thread act “as it pleased” obviously
meant abandoning it to another “will,” that of universal grav-
ity. The following note, also preserved in the “Green Box,”
thus mocks the exaggerated claims to control made by
politics—following those of science—by imagining a “Min-
istry of coincidences. / Department / (or better): / Regime of
coincidence / Ministry of gravity.”⁹ A similar pattern of oscil-
bation between agent and patient position is manifest in the
description given by Duchamp of the genesis of his Ready-
made Trébuchet [Trap]: “… a real coat hanger that I wanted
sometime to put on the wall and hang my things on but I
never did come to that—so it was on the floor and I would
kick it every minute, every time I went out—I got crazy about
it and I said the Hell with it, if it wants to stay there and
die me, I’ll nail it down... and then the association with the
Readymade came and it was that.”¹⁰ The artist’s agency
is defeated by the object’s stubborn resistance and active
obstruction, until he reverses the situation and reclaims for
himself this very opposition, makes it definitive, and lifts it
from a physical to an ontological plane by recognizing the
nailed coat hanger as a Readymade.

above: Ferrous pebble of reddish color found in 1925 at Makapansgat, South
Africa. Bernard Price Institute of Paleontology, University of Witwatersrand,

One cannot miss the analogy between this scene and slapstick comedies, in which humans are regularly confronted with objects that escape control and exert their own agency with a vengeance. In Buster Keaton’s *The Electric House* (1922), for example, the ultra-modern, all-mechanized house turns into a nightmarish trap that persecutes its users and especially its designer. Slapstick films were at the height of their popularity at the time when Duchamp was playing and fighting with bicycle wheels, one-meter-long threads, bottle dryers, snow shovels, combs, typewriter covers, urinals, coat racks, and hat racks. These films were largely based on improvisation and accident—in the first 1921 shooting of *The Electric House*, Keaton had fallen victim to his reversible escalator—and they exploited the analogy and interchangeability between the human and the mechanical that fascinated Duchamp and in which Henri Bergson had recognized a crucial trigger for laughter.¹¹

Among twentieth-century artistic recourses to chance, it has been suggested that a distinction be made between “hand-made” chance—close to traditions of spontaneity and automatism that one encounters, for example, in Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism—and a mathematical kind of chance often inspired by probability theory that uses protocols and is more frequent in geometric abstraction and some forms of performances.¹² These are poles rather than categories, however, and they share the crucial feature of distributing artistic agency. The theory of economic agency provides a useful model here by describing small systems or organizations in which the agent, acting by proxy in the name of a “principal,” “is to choose among a number of alternative possibilities.” Agency is therefore delegated, and this delegation implies an essential element of uncertainty: “The outcome is affected but not completely determined by the agent’s action.”¹³ The artist as principal can, in turn, involve other artists, assistants, the public, and all sorts of objects, instruments, and materials—and of course natural laws such as gravity—as agents in this sense.

In fact, all twentieth- and twenty-first-century art can be described in these terms, which could also help analyze the still little-publicized procedures devised by those who, like Lawrence Weiner with his statements or Sol Lewitt with his wall drawings, produce quasi-allographic forms of art by delegating to others a part or the entirety of the material realization of their works.¹⁴ And the same model could also serve to describe the organization implied in the making of works before the idea of undivided labor became a defining criterion of art and to put this idea into historical perspective. Seen in this broader context, “chance in art” or rather the recourse to chance may only apply to cases and situations in which the delegation of artistic agency takes particularly explicit and sometimes conscious forms. Their relation to science need not only be one of opposition but also of emulation and even of similarity, especially if one considers science in the making rather than science as it is reconstructed *ex post facto* in the name of method or laid out programmatically to raise funds.¹⁵ André Corboz has thus provocatively but correctly suggested finding a model of realistic and efficient art historical methodology in the legend of the three Princes of Serendip and their reliance on the “happy accident.”¹⁶ Serendipity also defines artistic activity in the famous quote attributed to Picasso, “I do not seek, I find,” which dismisses in a radical way the tendency to suppose a telos to each action and to make it a key to interpretation.

Having taught a few seminars on “the use of chance in art,” I have realized that the heuristic potential of this question tends to be limited by the habits of binary or dualistic thinking, i.e., the implicit expectation to find only chance or, instead, no chance. In fact, as the idea of delegated and distributed agency suggests, what happens in the making of a work of art is always a mixture of control and lack of it, a pattern of abandoning and reclaiming agency. But it is true that, like “handmade” and “mathematical” chance, total control and total absence of control can represent poles, even though they must be qualified in relation to the relevance, for the final aesthetic judgment, of what is left by the artist to other forces to determine.

Despite its integration in a broader—and maybe universal—typology of the management of artistic agency,
the “recourse to chance” may thus be distinguished by the
search for, or the welcoming of, a foreign intervention that
promises or imposes an unknown and unexpected result.
This is the case whether a metaphysically transcendent
quality is attributed to this foreign character or not, and
it accounts for the centrality of the use of chance in the
movements dedicated to the pursuit of innovation and in
twentieth- and twenty-first-century art at large. We have
encountered or supposed this element of surprise and
accident in the Makapansgat pebble and in Duchamp’s
experiments with objects. Duchamp compared the making
of a Readymade to a rendezvous, and the programmatic use
made by the Surrealists of the definition of beauty borrowed
from Lautréamont—“the chance encounter of a sewing
machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table”—aligns it
with Antoine Cournot’s definition of chance as the result of
the meeting of two or more independent series of causes. 17

A particularly apt image of this accidental encounter is
the stumbling block, which Duchamp literally appropriated
with Trébuchet, the title of which means “a trap for little
birds” or “a little pair of scales,” but also evokes the verb
trébucher, to stumble. In the 1960s, the generation of artists
who discovered in Duchamp a benevolent and provocative
grandfather also elaborated upon this invention, and Daniel
Spoerri started turning tabletops with glued objects into
“trap pictures” (tableaux-pièges). Its graphic—and arguably
superior—version, the small book Topographie anecdotée
du hasard [Anecdoted Topography of Chance] preserves the
horizontal outline of all the objects that happened to stand
or lie on the artist’s table on 17 October 1961 at 3:47 p.m.
and describes their identity and how they had come to be
there. Spoerri “traps” the objects but, to the extent that they
determine his picture, he is trapped by them, in advance of
his reader—and one could add that he runs the risk of being
trapped by their recognition of an ever less accidental
“signature style.” 18 Closer to our time, it is telling

that Jeff Wall, who stages photographs like long-feature
films and pushes control until it meets some irreducible ele-
ment of chance, should have found in the most implausible
Stumbling Block an image that exacerbates the tension
between the instant of shooting and the permanence of the
work. One could speak of a “stumbling picture,” a concept
used by Joseph Beuys to describe (as Stolperbilder) the
works of Sigmar Polke, an artist more obviously indebted to
chance. 19

The stumbling block also acts as a challenge to rise—
after falling—to the accidental circumstances. According
to le facteur (Joseph-Ferdinand) Cheval, the primus motus
behind his “Ideal Palace” was a “bizarrely shaped stone”
on which he stumbled and which, corroborated by other
findings, led him to think: “Since Nature wants to do the
sculpting, I will do the masonry and the architecture.”
Nature was clearly not the only challenger of the country
postman who devoted thirty-three years of his life to a
“monument” summarizing the cultural history of mankind
and proclaiming “what a peasant can do,” but its continued
provocation is visible everywhere in the form of accidental
(or aided) sculptures. The initial stumbling block is said to
sit on top of a pedestal on the terrace of the West side: it is
indeed a remarkable object, one that evokes not so much
iconic associations as the stones that Chinese scholars used
to treat like sculptures and in which Octavio Paz has seen an
antecedent to the Readymade. 20

above: Daniel Spoerri, Relevé topographique du hasard, 17 octobre 1961 à 15
h. 47 (Topographical Layout of Chance, October 17, 1961, 3:47 p.m.), drawing
published in Daniel Spoerri, Topographie anecdotée du hasard (1962) (Paris:

opposite: Joseph-Ferdinand Cheval (Facteur Cheval), Le Palais idéal, 1879-
1912, Hauterives (Drôme), view of the north side, and detail of the “stumbling
stone.” Photos Dario Gamboni.


