

DOES ACCIDENT REMIND US OF FREEDOM?

By Paul Sewter

Abstract

The central premise derives from a starting point: that individual freedom has atrophied to the point where it has become abstract; but that a view onto freedom is possible in accident.

Among the questions which proceed from the title and its premise is the necessary, 'What do the words 'accident' and 'freedom' mean in this context?'. In answering this question, an historical account and semantic enquiry is carried out, in order to introduce attendant concepts, as well as exclude ideas and dialogues not directly relevant to the logic of the question.

An analysis of the aesthetic of accident is followed by an attempt to illustrate the continued importance of *accident as process*; looking at its necessary conditions and mechanisms in painting, specifically in relation to the work and commentary of Francis Bacon.

The conclusion brings together the paper's attendant concepts in order to demonstrate the fundamental value of the question's premise: that accident's ability to represent the corruptibility of reason is what reminds us of freedom.

Critical Literature Review

The Accident of Art by Lotringer and Virilio (2005) informs the conceptual context for the word *accident*: the accident of technology is now global and has made the arts dead. It is only by understanding this that the arts can progress.

Civilisation and Its Discontents by Sigmund Freud (2004) describes the conditions by which a dialogue about the influence of consciousness and accident might proceed.

On Garbage by John Scanlan (2005) details a comprehensive account of waste production against a background of technological progress and consumerism. The aesthetic of accident is viewed as the uncanny residue of mankind's adopted faith in technology and reason.

Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation by Gilles Deleuze (2004) theorises an account of the immediacy of Bacon's imagery and the importance of accident as process in its production.

Interviews with Francis Bacon is a transcript of conversations between Bacon and Sylvester (1987), in which the importance of chance/accident in Bacon's life and work is described as essential to the success of his imagery.

The Logic of the Question

During the final scene of the film *Human Nature*, the now civilised *Puff* travels past a decaying camp in the forest, which he used to inhabit, and is reminded of his former primal state of nature. The car from which he sees the camp is heading back to New York with his faux French mistress *Gabrielle* as driver. The director is careful to ensure that in this moment of juxtaposition, as *Puff* first reminisces upon his primal past, and then eyes suspiciously his lover and the language of his current situation, the central message of the film is delivered, and we are made to ask questions about the process of civilisation.

As described below, the object *decaying camp* can be recognised as the accident of a discarded or failed invention, and the primal state of nature as representative of this paper's attendant notion of freedom. Thus, in this sense, with *Puff's* help, it is possible to illustrate the essential logic of the question *Does Accident remind us of Freedom?*, even if the terms themselves need further definition.

Accident

'Frank Auerbach says what I call accident isn't accident at all. But then what else can I call it?'
(Bacon, 1987 pp.94-96)

It would be useful to attempt to establish the difference in meaning between the words chance and accident, for although both words attempt to account in language for the cause of an unpredictable or uncertain state of affairs, and are used interchangeably as such, accident involves more readily the notion of human process or intervention. As D. Noland Kaiser says, 'When there is an event in the sphere of human conduct which we call an accident, we are never referring to the absence of causes.'

In *The Psycho-pathology of Everyday Life*, Freud cites numerous examples of plausible explanations for patients accidents. A woman trips but does not attempt to break her fall and grazes her face. This is not an accident Freud tells us, but rather self-flagellation, a rational explanation for which can be found in the fact that she reluctantly aborted a pregnancy shortly before the accident happened.

Chance on the other hand, describes more specifically the possibility or probability of a random outcome which is not necessarily subject to human control. When Duchamp released the threads he let fall toward the canvas of *Three Standard Stoppages* in 1913, as *aleator* he set into motion the possibility of a chance outcome which relied upon the influence of gravity and local physical factors to determine the outcome. The result was artefact, and to say the aesthetic is accidental is valid, but the process of human creators involvement during the period of uncertainty was absent, and therefore the word *chance* is more appropriate. Jackson Pollack used gravity also, but his involvement with an uncertain outcome was more humanly determined. His knowledge of the properties of his materials and the process of dripping paint onto the canvas, meant that the accidental aesthetic of his action paintings was never the result of pure chance but rather the subject of an uncertain mixture of accident, serendipity, synchronicity and artistry.

In critiquing the use of chance by Western artists influenced by Zen, Alan Watts helps make this distinction clearer -

... the indiscriminate framing of simply anything--blank canvases, totally silent music, torn up bits of paper dropped on a board and stuck where they fall ... is, indeed, [of] considerable therapeutic value in allowing oneself to be deeply aware of any sight or sound that may arise... it brings to mind... a free space in which altogether new forms and relationships may emerge. But this is therapy; it is not yet art The real genius of ... artists in their use of controlled accidents goes beyond the discovery of fortuitous beauty. It lies in being able to express, at the level of artistry, the realisation of that ultimate standpoint from which "anything goes" ... The mere selection of any random shape to stick in a frame simply confuses the metaphysical and the artistic domains; it does not express the one in terms of the other.

Another important consideration here is the metaphysical conception of accident alluded to by Bacon 'I think that man now realises that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, that he has to play out the game without reason.' and comprehensively theorised by Paul Virilio:

As soon as there is invention, there is accident... When you invent a concept, an art, a sculpture, a film that is truly revolutionary, or when you sail the first ship, fly the first plane or launch the first space capsule, you invent the crash.

That is to say that the accident is immanent, or as Wittgenstein would say, 'if a thing can occur in a state of affairs, the possibility of the state of affairs must be written into the thing itself.'

Much of Virilio's work is concerned with accident as part of the duplicitous consequence of civilisation's 'technological adaptability ... [where] as Heidegger wrote, *technology is the ordering of nature for use*'.

Bacon, Virilio and Scanlan in talking about the *stuff* of accident illuminate the content of a shadowy realm that lies in the wake of what Scanlan calls 'reason's hubris' - the visible remainders of civilisation's will to order.

Freedom

'western freedom seems to be interesting because it can appear to be the opposite of what we think it should be, which is to say it seems to imply some kind of limitation that gives us an element of certainty over our lives'

(Scanlan, personal communication)

Reliant on opposites - 'restriction', 'control', 'bondage' etc, the word 'freedom' becomes abstract in our conception, so that we are no longer able to recognise the experience to which the word relates as its signifier. In the abstract form it is evolutionary - subject to the systematic treatments of civilisation and remaining relative to its opposites. The influence of civilisation on our understanding of the word freedom is necessary in order to trace the history of our prescriptions for overpopulation, our subsequent faith in reason and determinism, and the atrophy of personal freedom. 'Individual liberty is not an asset of civilisation. It was greatest before there was any civilisation' says Freud. Explaining the necessary will to order, Thomas Hobbes thought that 'the fundamental aim of the state was security... to generate enough certainty that people would co-operate [and] not kill each other....' The effect of this regulatory institution on the psychology of the individual however, leads Freud to the opinion that:

civilisation overcomes the dangerous aggressivity of the individual, by weakening him, disarming him and setting up an internal authority to watch over him like a garrison in a conquered town

Sublimation of these aberrational impulses is civilisation's prescription via psychoanalysis. And, since repression and sublimation are themselves forms of regulation (which must be conscious), it may be postulated that the first significant flight from *In-itself* freedom toward consciousness occurred at the point of the ordering of the kosmos of western civilisation, and ironically, with the Platonic notion that freedom relied on a 'well ordered polity which is based on reason'.

The *freedom* to which the title of this essay refers, and which I make attendant for this paper, is a non-abstract state closest in character to the Sartrean '*In-itself*' or Zen notion of being - as that without conscious or transcendent pre-formulations, or reliant upon reason and opposites in its abstract conception.

Accident as process

'chance, which so many painters hate, is always welcome to me, at first one thinks one's disrupted the picture or even ruined it, but when one continues it always transpires that not only was progress not hindered but that often a whole new direction has been opened up.'
(Otto Muehl)

Throughout the various commentaries on accident, chance and the products thereof, there is an association between the properties which cause change and the innate - 'Creation is nature' says Virilio. The speed of change that modern civilisation induces, makes us reflect upon whether this is a natural process or not. And where the effect of a cause would otherwise go unnamed in nature, the cause of modern mankind's effects becomes named *invention* or *accident*.

It is not possible for man to completely abstract himself from nature whilst he is still an organism. Therefore some reconciliation to the Buddhist idea - that *all life is suffering*, or regard for the single word answer that Marx gave to the cryptic question 'What is? ... Struggle' or what Wheen translated as the 'law of life' might prove useful in countering the comfort of reason and promoting an active engagement with accident as a process in mankind's ecology.

There is no ecological anxiety about art. But there should be. I don't see why ecology should be little birds, flowers, the smell of the atmosphere, etc. Ecology is everywhere. Painting is ecology.

(Virilio)

Engagement with accident as process happens in the present. The organs of its manifestation may have been conceived in the past, and post-mortem occur in the future, but the necessity of a lack of conscious regulation in accident as process requires that accident happen in the moment, in time with our immanent nature.

Exhibition literature for a 1997 New York exhibition curated by Jones & Krasnow coins the word 'Slad' to represent the Freudian slip as accident, and describes the psychology of accident as process:

'At some point in each of these pieces, at some level, the artist willingly opens him or herself to allow a series of Slads, creating work that is only partially "controlled" by conscious process. This is different from the type of slip that sometimes occurs when we place a banana peel on the floor while knowing full well we're in for a fall. The "faux Slad" actually serves as a defence against the surprise, uncertainty and possible humiliation of a real upset. Like a Slad, the work of art can disquiet and confuse the artist, before it is placed before the public, offered up to others for multiple interpretations'.

(Jones & Krasnow)

Or as Deleuze says in his commentary on Bacon, 'It is as if the hand assumed an independence and began to be guided by other forces, making marks that no longer relied on either our will or our sight.'

The Aesthetic of accident

'In my view, the accident is positive. Why? Because it reveals something important that we would not otherwise be able to perceive. In this respect it is a profane miracle...a miracle in reverse. It reveals something absolutely necessary to knowledge'

(Virilio)

The aesthetic of accident is the picture postcard we send to ourselves to remind us of a being in-itself notion of freedom outside of consciousness. It represents the corruptibility of reason. The rupture of technology, which 'made it possible to rely on consistency'. (Scanlan). In an article entitled 'Rolling the Dice: An Interview with Jackson Lears' Lears outlines the cultural context for an aesthetic of accident:

The aesthetics of accident is central to modernism and postmodernism, and twentieth-century art defines itself explicitly in contrast to an over-organized society. That's partly because during World War I the dream of reason bred monsters, technological rationality was harnessed to horrific ends... All of these artistic movements are in reaction to a kind of Weberian modernity or technocratic regime that expressed itself most horrifically in the Nazi state, but was certainly present in other totalitarian societies, namely the Soviet Union, and in the softer form, from these artists' point of view, in American consumer culture... I think this tension between what can be measured and what is possible is a constant shadow behind the aesthetics of accident, and I think it helps explain why it remains fascinating in so many forms to artists in so many different disciplines.

The aesthetic of accident strikes the senses as the unexpected. As antidote to the formal.

...we can see obvious shapes such as a circle and rectangle – but the work truly comes alive in the various drips and smudges of paint that are laid over or alongside these basic shapes.
(Artsway)

The association is made again here between the accident and the living, as the eyes are made to work to resolve the uncanny - the dislocation between the senses and cognition, which forces the forms before us to enter what Scanlan (2005) calls a kind of *spectral reality*.

Bacon

The state from which Bacon paints

In 1754 Rousseau aptly ruminated,

It would be melancholy, were we forced to admit that this distinctive and almost unlimited faculty [self-improvement or civilise-ation] is the source of all human misfortunes; that it is this which, in time, draws man out of his original state, in which he would have spent his days insensibly in peace and innocence... [and] ...makes him at length a tyrant both over himself and over nature.

Almost two centuries later, after a period of exponentially hurried civilisation, Freud (2004 p.21) presents the scene from which Bacon works as a century which is treating this melancholy and its neuroses pragmatically, where we have developed techniques,

...to displace the aims of the drives in such a way as they cannot be frustrated by the external world ... [where] sublimation ... - the artist's joy in creating ... the scientist's in solving problems and discovering truths ... [seem] 'higher and finer' [but who's] ... intensity is restrained when compared with that which results from the satiation of crude primary drives: they do not convulse our physical constitution.

Bacon as medium

Bacon practises sublimation to show what it is to live within the paradox that the premise of the question suggests. And through Bacon, his figures do *convulse their physical constitution*, in such a way as to suggest a direct link with Freud's theory. Within claustrophobic fields of flat colour, the artist '... dismantle[s] the face, to rediscover the head' revealing 'the animal spirit of man...' (Deleuze, 2004 pp.20-21) as if to exhume the ghost of Rousseau's fears, to display 'the fact that knowledge and reason involve a separation of the human from the natural.' (Scanlan, 2005 P.36)

Bacon and accident

I am interested in chance and it seems to me that people who have seriously pursued chance see the immersion in an unknown situation as somehow genuine, real, or an expression of their freedom. (Scanlan, personal communication)

The work and commentary of Francis Bacon stands as a tribute to the process of accident, as antidote to reason's hubris. In the Interviews with Francis Bacon, he (Bacon, 1987 p.53) refers to the importance that accident and chance have played in his life and work:

One possibly gets better at manipulating the marks that have been made by chance, which are the marks that have been made quite outside reason. As one conditions oneself by time and by working to what happens, one becomes more alive to what the accident has proposed for one. And in my case, I feel that anything I've ever liked at all has been the result of accident on which I have been able to work. Because it has given me a disorientated vision of a fact I was attempting to trap. And I could then begin to elaborate and try and make something out of a thing that was non-illustrational.

The accident proceeds in establishing what Bacon called the *diagram*. 'The diagram is indeed a chaos or catastrophe, but it is also a germ of order or rhythm ... the chaos germ, where [the artist] no longer sees anything and risks foundering: the collapse of visual co-ordinates'. (Deleuze, 2004 p.102)

It is from this point that Muehl's *whole new direction* opens up or Watt's *ultimate standpoint, from which anything goes* happens.

Bacon's practise empowered the accident in process. The resulting uncanny aesthetic of the facts he attempted to capture has ensured the primacy of his imagery on the senses, and prompted various readings of the unconscious symbolism of accident in his work - the umbrella in Painting 1946, hanging like a post-World War 2 Virilio'an accident over mankind. The sanitary ware of Triptych 1973, as Scanlan's waste disposal unit for the *rubbish of reason*. The disfigured heads of the portraits *convulsing the constitution*, sublimating the *crude primary drives*.

Conclusion

Maybe the things that constitute the accidental seem to embody freedom because we have insufficient knowledge of the causes? Accidents - and chance events - may be reminders of the kind of freedom we might associate with nature, in the sense that natural forces like the

weather just seem to be. (Scanlan, personal communication 2)

It has been established that the accidental seems to embody freedom because reason is not capable of rationalising the corruptibility of reason, as represented by the aesthetic of accident in its multifarious forms. To give an account as knowledge, and transcribe a language common to accident is limited by the fact that it involves a separation from nature, where nature seems to be a vital ingredient. There is also a danger that in distilling the process to examine the parts for use, we rationalise a mortal infringement upon the essence of accident, sterilising the animal spirit that reminds us of what lies beneath the carapace of our enforced '*Bad-faith*'. (Sartre, 1992)

Since Sartre, we have 'sleep-walk[ed] into a surveillance society' and the loss-less accountability of digital systems has ensured a further move away from the uncertain nature of being in-itself toward the all-seeing consciousness of globalised society.

With central nervous system now installed as World-Wide-Web, it is possible for the collective consciousness of civilisation to relegate and transcend the last vestiges of the being In-itself impulses of the individual. To map the past, and attempt to model a non-contingent future. If mankind is an accident as Bacon suggests, then civilisation is the catastrophe, and digitisation its denouement. Now, in this state, Sartrean claims for individual freedom, and totalising arguments against Bad-faith seem like the polemical rhetoric of an era long since past, as the 'technologically immersed present' (*Scanlan, personal communication*) subsumes and orders all, including its creator, and leaves over as remainder only a reminder - a bug, a glitch, a system error, garbage, accident. Freedom as being *In-itself* becomes terminally abstract. A picture postcard. A decaying camp in the forest.

[adio4/history/inourtime/inourtime_20020704.shtml](#)> [Accessed 10 September, 2006 GMT 13:24:25]

Freud, S. (1962) **Two short accounts of Psycho-analysis** Harmondsworth : Penguin

Freud, S. (1975) **The psychopathology of everyday life** Harmondsworth: Penguin

Freud, S. (2004) **Civilisation and Its Discontents** London: Penguin Books

Human Nature (2001) Directed by Michel Gondry, Pathe Distribution, 92mins [DVD]

Human Nature (2002) Podcast [Internet] BBC, London, 7 November. Available from < HYPERLINK

"http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/inourtime/inourtime_20020704.shtml"http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/inourtime/inourtime_20021107.shtml> [Accessed 10 September, 2006 GMT 16:28:45]

Jones, M. & Krasnow, J. (1997) **Slad: Press Release PDF** [Internet] New York: Apex Art C.P. Available from < HYPERLINK

"<http://www.apexart.org/exhibitions/joneskrasnow.htm>"<http://www.apexart.org/exhibitions/joneskrasnow.htm>> [Accessed 15 October, 2006]

Jung, C. (1985) **Synchronicity : an acausal connecting principle** London: Ark

Junkerman, C. & Perloff, M. ed. (1994) **John Cage: Composed in America** Chicago: Chicago University Press

Kaiser, D. (1969) Philippa Foot and the Concepts of Law, Intention, and Accident. **Mind** [Internet] Apr. 1969, Vol. 78, No. 310. pp. 273-277. Available from < HYPERLINK

"[http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0026-4423\(196904\)2%3A78%3A310<273%3APFATCO>2.0.CO%3B2-1](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0026-4423(196904)2%3A78%3A310<273%3APFATCO>2.0.CO%3B2-1)"<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0026-4423%28196904%292%3A78%3A310%3C273%3APFATCO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-1>> [Accessed 20 October, 2006]

Lessig, L. (2004) **Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity** [Internet] USA: The Penguin Press. Available from < HYPERLINK "<http://free-culture.org/freecontent/>"<http://free-culture.org/freecontent/>> [Accessed 20 October, 2006]

Lieberman, F. (ca.1997) **Zen Buddhism And Its Relationship to Elements of Eastern And Western Arts** [Internet] University of California Santa Cruz. Available from < HYPERLINK

"<http://arts.ucsc.edu/faculty/lieberman/zen.html>"<http://arts.ucsc.edu/faculty/lieberman/zen.html>> [Accessed 15 November, 2006]

Lotringer, S. & Virilio, P. (2005) **The Accident of Art** New York: Semiotext(e)

Macmillan (2002) **A Dictionary of Philosophy** [Internet] Aylesbury: Market House Books Ltd. Available from < HYPERLINK

"<http://www.xreferplus.com/entry/1426300>"<http://www.xreferplus.com/entry/1426300>> [Accessed 2 November, 2006]

Muehl, O. [no date] **Shark Manifesto** [Internet] Archives Otto Muehl. Available from < HYPERLINK

"<http://www.archivesmuehl.org/painten.html>"<http://www.archivesmuehl.org/painten.html>> [Accessed 2 November, 2006]

Nechvatal, J. (2005) **Fast and Beautiful: The A-life Undeading of Painting via the Digital** [Internet] New York. Available from HYPERLINK "<http://www.nechvatal.net/>" <<http://www.nechvatal.net/>> [Accessed 23 December, 2005]

O'Brien, J. (1968) **How to Design by Accident** New York: Dover London

On Garbage (2006) Podcast [Internet] ABC Radio National, Sydney, 26 August. Available from < HYPERLINK "http://abc.net.au/rn/philosopherszone/stories/2006/1722274.htm" <http://abc.net.au/rn/philosopherszone/stories/2006/1722274.htm>> [Accessed 2 September, 2006 GMT 18:11:06]

One in the Other (2006) **Exhibitions: Dan perfect** [Internet] London: One in the Other. <<http://www.oneintheother.com/exhibitions/perfect06/perfect.html>>

Rousseau, J. (2005) **A Dissertation on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind** [Internet] Austin: The Constitution Society. Available from < HYPERLINK "http://www.constitution.org/jjr/ineq_03.htm" http://www.constitution.org/jjr/ineq_03.htm> [Accessed 5 November, 2006]

Sartre, J. (1992) **Being and Nothingness** New York: Washington Square Press

Scanlan, J. (2005) **On Garbage** London: Reaktion Books Ltd.

Serlin, D. (2005) **Rolling the Dice: An Interview with Jackson Lears** [Internet] New York: Cabinet Magazine. Available from < HYPERLINK "http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/19/serlin.php" <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/19/serlin.php>> [Accessed 15 October, 2006]

Sylvester, D. (1987) **Interviews with Francis Bacon** London: Thames and Hudson

Taoist Way 1-6 (2006) Podcast [Internet] Alanwattspodcast.com, 27 July. Available from <<http://www.alanwattspodcast.com>> [Accessed 28 July, 2006 GMT 14:55:05]

Walker, B. (1993) **The I Ching or Book of Changes** London: Piatkus

What Is Civilisation? (2006) Podcast [Internet] ABC Radio National, Sydney, 7 October. Available from <<http://abc.net.au/rn/philosopherszone/stories/2006/1757269.htm>> [Accessed 8 October, 2006 GMT 20:42:47]

When, F. (2000) **Karl Marx** London: Fourth Estate

HYPERLINK "http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/19/serlin.php" Wilhelm, R. (1968) **The I ching or, book of changes** London: Routledge & Kegan Paul

Wittgenstein, L. (2004) **Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus** [Internet] Mississippi: Project Gutenberg. Available from < HYPERLINK "http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/5740" <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/5740>> [Accessed 2 October, 2006]

Interview conducted by email with John Scanlan 9th November 2006 see transcript appendix 1.
Interview conducted by email with John Scanlan 9th November 2006 see transcript appendix 1.

Interview conducted by email with John Scanlan 9th November 2006 see transcript appendix 1.