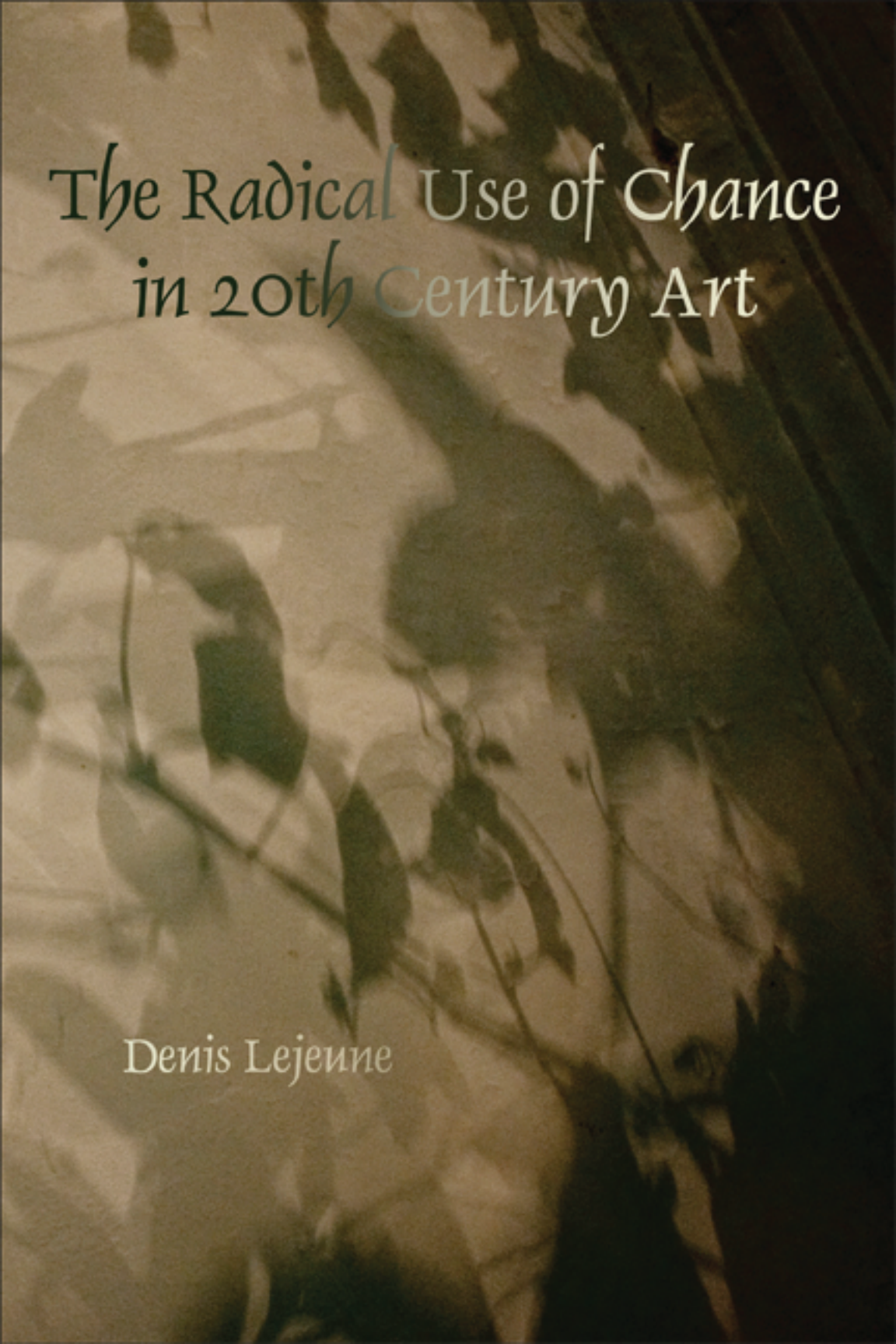
The Radical Use of Chance in 20th Century Art
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Denis Lejeune

Rodopi

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I would like to warmly thank François Morellet for kindly allowing me to reproduce his works.

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General Introduction

Coincidences, chance events, unexpected encounters: the existence of such phenomena has always been recognized. Art, for its part, appeared sufficiently early in different cultures for some to consider it a defining attribute of our species.

These two phenomena may seem to have little in common in that, essentially, the first reveals something about the world, while the second relates rather to man. Artists however, whether cavemen or contemporary urbanites, have persistently created works related more obviously to the world than to mankind specifically, evoking animals, flowers, the stars, amongst other topics. But chance, despite its ubiquity, managed almost entirely to evade the attention of artists for centuries. This in itself would be interesting enough to justify a work on the subject; but it is not my aim to investigate this matter. Rather, this study is concerned with the point of historical contact between the two phenomena: the moment and manner in which art and chance try to coalesce.

There are two ways for such interaction to occur: one is as 'in passing', the other rather 'head on'; one centres on chance as a mere theme of art, the other makes it one of its *raisons d'être*. Owing to the scope of the present study, only the second interaction will be scrutinised in detail, but in order to understand it and evaluate its meaning a brief discussion of chance as theme will be necessary.

Choosing chance as one of the main focal points of one's creations is not an innocent gesture. In many ways it requires courage and determination, because there does not seem to be a notion more foreign to art than randomness: it is bound to attract the ire of critics, the contempt of the public, not to mention the incredulity of fellow creators. As opposed to artists who engage with politics, rural idylls or notions of utopia, who are in the position of dwarfs on giants' shoulders insofar as past generations have already produced a theoretical foundation for their work, artists working with and on chance are in the unenviable position of having to fend for themselves in terms both of art and of theory. This does not imply that they are philosophers of

art in their own right, nor that after them nothing else can be said or done about the relationship between chance and artistic creation, but it does mean that their theoretical reasoning and philosophical leanings will of necessity weigh heavily in the present study.

The three chosen artists, André Breton, François Morellet and John Cage, come from three very distinct cultural backgrounds, and their thinking about the question of chance in art is highly personal.[1] The examination of how each of them deals with the notion, how they incorporate it into their work, and how they justify its place in their world view will be my principal point of focus, and raises the first question it seeks to address, namely: do those creative artists share a common *Weltanschauung* embracing chance as fundamental? In other words, is there a latent unity at the root of an enterprise that, until the 20th century, had been little explored? And if such unity there is, will it find an echo in the thought of Clément Rosset, who is among philosophers the one whose system is most fundamentally reliant on chance?

The second question presiding over the present work is whether it is possible to produce a work of art based entirely on chance. Phrased thus the notion might sound implausible, or at the very least outlandish. However the artists in question, regardless of the success or failure of their respective attempts, have at least pointed toward such a possibility and their dedication, thoroughness, and creativity have enriched the artistic landscape with this fascinating, and persistent, interrogation.

The positing of these two questions does not mean to imply that the studied individuals had chance, and chance alone, in mind when creating their art. Nonetheless in their case chance played a crucial role in their artistic practices. And it is the very persistence of this characteristic that seems to indicate a deep-seated need, and forces one to ask why this should be so.

Put chance aside and the artists under scrutiny seem to have little in common. Most notably each produced, or produces, works in his own favoured medium, be that literature and poetry (Breton), visual

[1] As often as possible, for the sake of accuracy, the present study will use specific denominations rather than simply the general term 'artist': Breton was a poet, writer, theoretician; Morellet is a visual artist; Cage was a composer. However, in passages mentioning two or more of these creative individuals together, and for the sake of simplicity, they will be referred to as 'artists'.

arts (Morellet) or musical composition (Cage). The deliberate choice of three contrasting creative individuals is driven by my desire to study the use of radical chance across a spectrum, not just within the confines of one branch of the arts; what therefore interests me is not a specific artistic medium, but the question of whether or not there can be coherence and unity behind the use of chance from an aesthetic perspective. The present study will as a result neither claim nor attempt to collate three different critical discourses, nor to look at its subject from the point of view of literary criticism, art theory or musicology, because each discipline has its own tools, not necessarily adapted to the others. If it must be classified the present work must come under the purview of the philosophy of art. This is the reason why the philosopher Clément Rosset is its first point of focus, since his understanding and analyses of chance propose the only existing system of thought entirely premised on the concept of chance, and will provide the tools needed to, so to speak, 'test the mettle' of the artists in this specific area.

This bias towards the conceptual explains another aspect of this work: the absence of lengthy analyses of particular texts, poems, paintings, performances or scores. Such work has already been done, almost exhaustively in the case of Breton, and thoroughly for Cage; Morellet's canvases and installations have also attracted the scrutiny of a considerable number of art specialists – and these investigations need not be repeated. The drive behind the present research is therefore not to duplicate the analyses of Carrouges, Béhar, Pritchett, Blistène or Nicholls when it comes to particular works; it is not to propose a revolutionary reading of Automatism (Breton), *Europera* (Cage) or 'A Califourchon' (Morellet); it is instead to incorporate these valuable contributions into the study of the dialogue between art and the idea of radical chance.[2]

The last caveat is in regard to the method adopted, which is comparative, and not chronological. While it is true that parts of the developments hereafter follow the evolution of the artists' careers, this

[2] Marc Carrouges, *André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950); Henri Béhar and Marc Carassou, *Le Surréalisme* (Paris: Le livre de poche, 1984); James Pritchett, *The music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); *Morellet*, ed. Bernard Blistène (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1991); *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, ed. Daniel Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

is only insofar as early experimentation made by Breton, Morellet and Cage is often less thorough than later explorations. This however should not suggest a teleological view of their careers, which would intimate that the older the artist, the more he incorporated chance in his pieces. The present opus studies the concept of chance as evidenced at different times in different works by three creators, and chronology is therefore immaterial (an essay on a specific aspect of a given literary corpus would not necessarily conclude that the novel best representing that precise area is the last one to have been written).

II

In terms of structure, the present introduction is followed by a short *exposé* on chance and modern sciences. In addition to being relevant to a general understanding of the concept which will later prove invaluable, this exploration reminds us that it is within the domain of 19th century scientific research that chance began to attract attention: were it not for the findings of such work, it is quite possible that chance would not have gained such a prominent place among 20th century ideas, not just in the sciences, but also in philosophy and the arts.

Part I of this study consists in a presentation and investigation of Clément Rosset's philosophical analysis of chance. There being comparatively little critical work available on Rosset, and only a single selective Reader of his works existing in English, this analysis requires a contextualisation; evaluating a thinker's originality *ex nihilo* is a difficult task, especially so in the case of a concept that has historically elicited so many different interpretations.[3] Furthermore, this contextualisation will later provide useful background information in order better to understand some of the positions adopted by Breton, Morellet or Cage. Rosset's essays, for example, dedicate few pages to Determinism per se, or free agency, although these will be important elements when considering the theories of each artist aforementioned. The study of Rosset's system itself comprises a synthesis of his numerous essays, organised logically from its premise, chance, and progressing to the various implications of this premise.

[3] The Reader in question is *Joyful cruelty*, ed. David Bell (New York: OUP, 1993).

This study then departs the field of philosophy proper to concentrate in Part II on the three artists aforementioned, or rather on how they used and how they thought about chance. The aim, again, is not to attempt to draw a complete picture of each artist's global production or thinking: what is identified, charted and explored is each artist's work and thought *as related to the concept discussed in these pages*. By way of introduction to the radicality of their approaches and enterprise, a brief summary of the history of chance in literature, visual art and music prefaces these three chapters.

Each chapter dedicated to an artist is organised around the same tripartite structure. First is a presentation and summary of each individual's *praxis*, that is, the various forms taken by chance in their work. Owing to the number of techniques used by Breton, Morellet and Cage throughout their long careers, I have each time chosen to pool them within specific categories, so as to provide a synthetic outlook, the objective being not to stress minute differences, but to draw out the logic underlying the internal evolution pertaining to each individual. In the case of Breton, this categorisation, although not acknowledged as such, is often found in the secondary literature; the division used in the chapter on Morellet is mine; as for Cage, the two categories, 'chance operations' and 'indeterminacy', are his own.

The second section of each of the three chapters considers the place occupied by chance in each individual's thinking, that is, the ideas leading up to its use; its role; its conceptual implications. This entails a brief examination of the wider context, as well as of some of the other ideas important to an understanding of each artist's aesthetics. In the course of this section, the conceptual pertinence of the working categories used in the opening section will be highlighted, and their connections and differences stressed. A number of works, some previously evoked, will likewise become the point of focus when it is deemed necessary, in order to illustrate specific arguments. The objective of these first two sections is to provide a coherent conceptual framework within which to understand the use of chance by each individual artist.

Taking stock of the prior two sections, the final part of each of these chapters contrasts Breton, Morellet and Cage's 'theories of chance' with that of Rosset. This comparison is designed to establish whether or not the elements obtained in the second section can be said to complement the philosopher's thought, and if so, to what extent.

Insofar as the fixed point in these comparisons is the philosophy of Clément Rosset, a certain degree of repetition is inevitable (his analysis of 'duplicates' is referred to when 'duplicates' are found in Breton or again in Morellet's thought, for instance), although all efforts have been made to keep it to a minimum. At the same time, a difference should be noted between mere repetition and the cases highlighted where the same Rossetian analysis, or concept, is given new meaning or is subject to a fresh interpretation, in the works of a specific artist. Morality or humour for example take on a different guise depending upon whether one is discussing Breton, Morellet or Cage; thus what may initially appear as a repetition in fact offers a different perspective on a concept previously covered, helping clarify its significance within the specific system of one or the other artist.

III

Chance is a highly problematic notion, due both to its history and to the difficulty of appending to it a precise definition; it constitutes a grey area that has evolved greatly over the last 150 years. Naturally, an impressive number of books have been written on the subject, and while it would be an impossible task to list them all, it is of use here to mention some of the most significant.

In France, the principal studies of chance are Emile Borel's *Le Hasard* (1938), Marcel Boll's *L'Exploitation du hasard* (1941), Jacques Monod's *Le Hasard et la nécessité* (1970), and Benoît Mandelbrot's *Fractales. Hasards et finances* (1980).[4] In the Anglophone world, there has been little work specifically targeting the concept as such, but a profusion of writings touching on it from the angle of quantum physics, Darwinism, probability and Determinism, such as James Gleick's *Chaos* (1987), John Earman's *Primer on Determinism* (1986), Michael Ruse's *Darwinism defended* (1983), and Werner Heisenberg's *Physical Principles of the Quantum Theory* (1930).[5] To

[4] Emile Borel, *Le Hasard* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1938); Marcel Boll, *L'Exploitation du hasard* (Paris: PUF, 1941); Jacques Monod, *Le Hasard et la Nécessité* (Paris: Seuil, 1970); Benoît Mandelbrot, *Fractales. Hasards et finances* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).

[5] To name but a few: James Gleick, *Chaos* (Sydney: Penguin, 1987); John Earman, *A Primer on Determinism* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1986); Michael Ruse, *Darwinism defended* (New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983); Werner

these must be added those essays on the stock market and on the economy in a wider sense, as well as writings on betting, theological matters, psychology, parapsychology, etc., that concern themselves to a greater or lesser extent with chance. Such, however, are not the main concerns of this opus, although some of them have proved very useful in helping to offer a better understanding of chance, its complexity and inner workings.

When one turns to works exploring chance in art and literature, the list is far less extensive. In French, there is only one *general* study of the role of chance in literature (Erich Köhler's *Le Hasard en littérature*; 1986), which will be reviewed and discussed in due course.[6] Essays on chance in the visual arts are more numerous, as several 20th century art movements, such as Surrealism, Land art or COBRA have integrated the concept into their aesthetics.[7] But again no art critic has produced a major work devoted solely to chance (which is essentially relegated to a chapter at most of more wide-ranging books). Under these circumstances, quite possibly the most thorough piece of writing concerned with the relation between chance and the arts is George Brecht's 1957 essay 'Chance-Imagery'.[8]

The same is true of music. Here too the 20th century was graced with several significant composers dealing, or battling, with chance: Pierre Boulez, Henri Pousseur, Iannis Xenakis and John Cage, among others. Unsurprisingly, the main contributions to the study of chance in this field are to be found in writings by and about these composers, and much of what Cage wrote, together with what has been written by others about his obsession with the random, will be referred to and discussed in the appropriate chapter.

Chronologically, the last field to have concerned itself with chance in the last century and a half is arguably philosophy. Epistemology and the philosophy of science in particular have acknowledged and reflected upon chance. In fact, most books by the fathers of quantum physics and the theory of general relativity already tackle the

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Heisenberg, *Physical Principles of the Quantum Theory* (Dover: Dover Publications, 1930).

[6] Erich Köhler, *Le Hasard en littérature* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1986).

[7] The name COBRA stands for the initials of the members' hometowns: Copenhagen (Co), Brussels (Br), Amsterdam (A).

[8] George Brecht, *Chance-Imagery/L'Imagerie du hasard* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002).

unavoidable issue of Determinism versus Randomness, thus stimulating lengthy and as yet mainly unresolved discussions on the importance of chance in the physical world and its impact on free will.[9] This is why any serious development in 20th century physics always borders on the philosophical.

This does not mean that more 'classical' philosophy has not reacted to chance, even though it must be said that relatively few studies discussing it have appeared. The first major essay on the question, albeit a rather technical treatise on statistics and probability, is Antonin-Auguste Cournot's *Exposition de la théorie des chances et des probabilités* (1843).[10] The works of Bergson played an indirect role in giving chance philosophical credibility but, after Borel's *Le Hasard*, the only significant essay to deal with the notion has been *Logique du pire* by Clément Rosset (published in 1971), followed two years later by his even more (for present purposes) significant *L'Anti-nature*.[11] Finally, in 1999, the French philosopher Marcel Conche published *L'Aléatoire*.[12] These are the only philosophical works of note on the subject, and they will be discussed in the relevant chapter.

What this brief bibliographical review reveals is that chance has been an overwhelmingly scientific concern, despite the history of 20th century art displaying numerous significant works of art based either partly or organically on chance. More surprisingly still, in this age of celebrated inter- and transdisciplinarity there are no studies exploring chance *across* the artistic fields, in a comparative perspective. The present work aims to contribute to rectifying this state of affairs. It has not been undertaken for comparison's sake, but with the intention of reflecting upon the possibility, hinted at by the thought and/or work of the three creative artists under consideration, of an art form driven by chance. The notion provides a challenging way of taking the three chosen subjects at their word/work and seeing whether the suggestion that art might be directed by chance is workable or, in current parlance, 'sustainable'. This study therefore pushes the logic of chance-

[9] The same is true for biology, as Jacques Monod's *Le Hasard et la Nécessité* showed. But the emergence of the role of chance in this field came later than in physics.
[10] Antonin-Auguste Cournot, *Exposition de la théorie des chances et des probabilités* (Paris: Vrin, 1984).
[11] Clément Rosset, *Logique du pire* (Paris: PUF, 1971); *L'Anti-nature* (PUF: Paris, 1973).
[12] Marcel Conche, *L'Aléatoire* (Paris: PUF, 1999).

as-art to its limits in order to evaluate its feasibility, along the way explaining the reasons why Breton, Morellet and Cage stand where they do.

1

The Rise of Chance in Modern Sciences

Chao ab ordo

Before the 19th century, across the entire spectrum of human knowledge, chance as a fully-fledged concept did not exist. If on occasion it seemed to surface it was not taken seriously, but merely dismissed as a mask hiding our ignorance. The first steps toward a semblance of recognition came, against all odds, within a field which seemed to have settled the question of Determinism once and for all with classical mechanics. Prior to the French Revolution the only challenge to the conception of chance as ignorance was the theory of probability. In 1654 the French polymath Pascal invented what he termed '*aleae Geometria*' ('the geometry of chance'); that is, probability. Also known as the 'laws of chance', it states that the future cannot be predicted exactly. The emphasis, however, has to be put on this last word, 'exactly', as probabilities reduce complete unpredictability into fractions: they cannot ascertain whether heads or tails will appear next, but can offer convincing predictions for long-term sequences, and thus lead to the devising of mid- to long-term strategies.

This seminal insight into the workings of chance was to attract many a scientist in the 20th century, which saw, amongst other things, the development of a seminal field known as 'game theory'. Perhaps its most famous and unexpected outcome is Von Neumann's 'minimax theorem' (1938), which reveals that, in games of strategy such as chess, it is sometimes to one's advantage to take an arbitrary and unpredictable decision. Naturally game theory was not the only area to benefit from refinements in probabilities and statistics, as will be shown.

Pascal's theory however, and despite the fact that it isolated chance as a concept worthy of study, was perceived much more as emphasising the power of the intellect (the mastering of randomness)

than as highlighting the presence of a truly independent entity. In fact, the first real crack to appear in the fortress of scientific Determinism was caused by the second law of thermodynamics. It controversially showed that once a given level of disorder (or entropy) has been reached within a system, that system can only evolve in an irreversible way toward a state of equilibrium corresponding to a 'complète détérioration'.[1]

This finding clearly contradicted one of the major implications of classical Determinism, whereby everything is reversible. Classical Determinism, as expressed in the works of Pierre-Simon de Laplace, posited as a universal law that 'for any time t1 and t2 and any allowed state at t1, there is one and only one allowed state at t2'.[2] What Laplace deduced from this principle of 'uniqueness' was that knowing with precision the state of any one system at a given time would with absolute certainty allow not only the prediction of its future, but also its past.[3] With entropy the evolution of systems was discovered to be irreversible, or non-reversible, and chance entered the arena.

The second most significant finding of the 19th century as regards the notion of chance appeared in 1892 when Henri Poincaré wrote an essay on the 'three body problem', a typically mechanical question. In this essay the mathematician proved that it was simply impossible to predict the position of three celestial bodies orbiting around each other, or more precisely, that the more time passed, the more the prediction would be different from the actual state of the said system, as he explains in *Science et méthode*:

> Il peut arriver que de petites différences dans les conditions initiales en engendrent de très grandes dans les phénomènes finaux; une petite erreur sur les premières produirait une erreur énorme sur les derniers. La prédiction devient impossible.[4]

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[1] Paul Glansdorff and Alkiviadis Grecos, 'Entropie', in *Encyclopedia Universalis* (Paris: Encyclopedia Universalis, 2001), [on CD-ROM].

[2] See especially Pierre-Simon de Laplace, *Essai philosophique sur les probabilités*, ed. Gauthier-Villars <http://www.vigdor.com/titres/laplaceEssaiPhilosophiqueProba.html> [accessed on 15 December 2006]. The *locus classicus* of Determinism, Laplace's demon, is summarised thus by John Earman: 'An intelligence knowing all the forces acting in nature at a given instant, as well as the momentary positions of all things in the universe, would be able to comprehend in one single formula the motions of the largest bodies as well as the lightest atoms in the world' (Earman, p. 7).

[3] Determinism, and Laplace, will be studied in more detail in the next chapter.

[4] Henri Poincaré, *Science et méthode* (Paris: Kime, 1999), p. 57.

Although his peers did not realise the full implications of this discovery, Poincaré had unknowingly touched upon what was to become known later in the 20th century as 'chaos theory'.

Modern sciences

Following the 19th century's rocking of the tenets of classical Determinism, new discoveries required scientists seriously to reconsider their Laplacean stand. Since it is not the aim of this short account to give the reader an historian of science's account of the matter, the following pages will simply concentrate on a few stages that proved crucial in bringing chance into the general limelight. They can be split into two distinct categories, according to their most striking features: unpredictability and indeterminacy.

Unpredictability

The evolution of some systems renders any accurate prediction of future states impossible. The first illustration of this was the three body problem: what it highlighted was that despite Deterministic laws and a precise knowledge of the state of the system at t1, something happened within the system that forbade the accurate determining of its state at t2, t3 or tx.

The second example useful to an understanding of this category is that of meteorology and, more precisely, the work of Edward Lorenz.[5] It indeed seems that the notion of 'chaos theory' was born in his 1963 article: 'Deterministic nonperiodic flow'. Under this cryptic title the meteorologist showed how important the dependence on initial conditions is in predicting the state of any nonperiodic system, such as the sky. The dependence on initial conditions means that however slight the difference between the real state of a system and the data used to produce a model of its evolution, the prediction gathered from the modelling will, after a given time, have no resemblance whatsoever to the real system; since absolute knowledge of a system at t1 is but an unattainable ideal, predictions concerning the evolution of this system will always prove wrong at one point, and sooner rather than later.

[5] See any account of chaos theory: for instance Gleick, *Chaos*; David Ruelle, *Hasard et chaos* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1991); Ziauddin Sardar and Iwona Abrams, *Introducing chaos* (Victoria: Icon Books Ltd, 1998).

Imagine one knows the first centimetre of a ball's trajectory, but that in assessing its exact position one errs by 0,01 cm. After 10 centimetres, our (simplified) model will show a divergence of 10,24 cm with the true trajectory. Another 10 centimetres later, the difference between truth and fiction will amount to a little over an absurd 104 metres… Since the divergence grows exponentially any approximation, even the slightest, is always going to have a major consequence on the result of the calculation, that is, the accuracy of the prediction itself.[6]

From Poincaré and Lorenz's discoveries and mathematical formalisations an impressive number of others followed on and gave birth to the famed 'chaos theory', which some have confidently termed a paradigm shift in world sciences.[7] 'Scientific chaos', as it is also known, describes the ability of simple models to produce irregular behaviour. In other words Deterministic systems can generate Indeterministic behaviours. But as John Earman puts it, 'the proper conclusion to be drawn from this result (the dependence on initial conditions) is not that Determinism fails but rather that Determinism and prediction need not work in tandem': chaos is not the opposite of Determinism.[8] This, it must be stressed, has nothing to do with any sort of technical or human fault: it is the intrinsic property of certain systems within which order, without cause, is able to generate disorder.

This new understanding undoubtedly dealt a serious blow to diehard believers in Determinism. But it was by no means the last one they were to experience since, as Earman explains, even 'the doctrine of Laplacian Determinism has no firm truth value for Newtonian and classical relativistic physics'.[9] To further make his point, the historian goes on to observe that one finds 'non-uniqueness for the initial value problem for some of the most fundamental equations of motion of classical physics'.[10] This fact clearly contradicts the principle of uniqueness that was a keystone of classical mechanics. As a result it

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[6] It should be borne in mind that all experimental data, by nature, is but an approximation, since absolute knowledge of the physical world is impossible (cf. David Dacunha-Castelle, *Chemins de l'aléatoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996)).
[7] The expression 'chaos theory' was coined by Jim Yorke (see Ruelle, p. 86).
[8] Earman, p. 9.
[9] Earman, p. 109.
[10] Earman, p. 52.

can safely be asserted that, in spite of mythical connotations, chaos does not imply the complete absence of determinism, thus explaining that scientists also talk about 'Deterministic chaos'. But on the other hand modern sciences and logic have proved that Determinism, as Laplace and most Determinists understood it, had laid its foundations on shaky grounds.

Indeterminacy

Because of a number of intrinsic characteristics certain physical states fail to be defined or identified. In the case of unpredictability the initial state, though approximated, is known. With indeterminacy on the contrary this initial state is itself indeterminable. In 1931 Kurt Gödel published his famous theorem of incompleteness, in which he showed that 'à l'intérieur de l'arithmétique comprise comme non-contradictoire, il existe des propriétés vraies qui sont indécidables: il n'est possible de prouver ni leur vérité ni leur fausseté.'[11]

But the most disturbing result, which still today poses serious epistemological and ontological problems to philosophers and scientists alike, came from quantum mechanics, arguably the most important scientific discovery of the 20th century. Quantum mechanics refers to the sub-atomic world and has laws of its own that do not seem to apply to the next level, or macro-level, where Newtonian physics are still relevant. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, for instance, claims that the more definite the position of a particle is when measured by an observer, the less its momentum, a state of affairs that is impossible at the macro-level.

This is where the shoe really starts pinching the Determinists, for it does seem that right at the base of our physical world randomness and pure chance reign unequalled. 'It is now common', as Weatherford has it, 'for many philosophers to believe that quantum mechanics has disproved Determinism once and for all'.[12] Indeed if particles at micro-level behave randomly, Indeterminists could be thought to have some ground for rejoicing. But the question is far from being settled yet, as Earman explains in his *Primer*. For a start it is still unclear

[11] Jacqueline Russ, *Panorama des idées philosophiques* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2000), p. 193.
[12] Roy Weatherford, *The Implications of Determinism* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 8.

whether the uncertainty principle really applies to all areas of quantum mechanics. Despite Einstein's 'hidden variable' theory having been proved wrong, the total applicability of Heisenberg's principle appears doubtful to some.[13]

Beside this theoretical dispute, what is striking in the fact that chance characterises the movement of one particle is that it does *not* characterise the movement of a large group of them. In other words, there is a contradiction between an indeterministic micro-level and a deterministic macro-level. Indeed, despite our positive ignorance of one particle's trajectory, we can predict the evolution of a sufficiently large number of them, thanks to probabilities: 'phenomena', explains Charles Ruhla, 'that are inherently unpredictable at the level of single events become predictable, and with precision, as soon as the models are applied to statistical ensembles of such events.'[14] It is not because a particle's behaviour is indeterministic and random that a table, as made up of particles, will suddenly jump up, that is, behave randomly.[15] Though this is at least theoretically possible if there is a safe path for chance from sub-atomic reality to macro-level world, it is very highly improbable. Weatherford thus concludes: 'It might be better, therefore, to say that QM (quantum mechanics) lacks determinacy rather than Determinism'.[16]

Surprisingly enough, the statistical boundary of randomness has an equivalent in chaotic systems, within which Lorenz showed a meta-order existed. Working on the 'behaviour of gas in a box with a temperature difference between the top and the bottom', he gave a graphic representation of his findings in a three-dimensional state space: what came out of this chaotic behaviour was an attractor, technically known as a 'strange attractor', named after its discoverer.[17] An attractor is the shape which 'trajectories in state space will asymptotically approach'

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[13] In his dispute with Bohr over the question of whether 'god plays dice' in quantum mechanics, Einstein suggested that some hidden variables, still unknown to us, would eventually account for the random trajectories of particles. This argument can be tracked back to Laplace, but it has been proved wrong, and randomness is today recognised an intrinsic characteristic of the world of quantum mechanics.

[14] Charles Ruhla, *The Physics of Chance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 214.

[15] This example is taken from Weatherford.

[16] Weatherford, p. 113.

[17] Anon, The Open University, *Predicting Motion* (London: The Open University, 2000), p. 204.

in dissipative dynamical systems.[18] It is in tribute to the shape of this strange attractor (which looks like a butterfly), and in order to show its relation with initial conditions, that in 1972 Lorenz gave his famous paper: 'Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?'

There are many other instances falling into the indeterminacy category, amongst which two seem particularly interesting. They too are taken from quantum mechanics. First is the mystery of atom decay: no scientific tool has as yet been devised that explains either the life expectancy of particles, or the reason why they decay. Second is the slightly more general concept of 'stochastic' processes, which defines processes showing purely aleatory variations. The best example of such processes is the Brownian movement: a speck of dust on the surface of a liquid exhibits stochastic movement, in that the way it moves is perfectly indeterministic and unpredictable. Technically, the expression 'stochastic' is used to describe non-deterministic systems, as opposed to chaotic ones.

Most of these apparent counter-arguments to Determinism are still much debated today. In particular, the indeterministic nature of quantum mechanics has not fully convinced the scientific community. However, even if it were proven that quantum mechanics was indeterministic, the next problem for Indeterminists would be to show how micro and macro worlds relate, that is, how the random behaviour of individual sub-atomic particles can directly affect the behaviour of complex systems of considerable size, such as the brain. This argument was first formulated by the American scholar Smart in 1963, and is called the 'scale argument'.[19] Large ensembles can be accurately described in statistical terms. This holds true for non-chaotic systems, such as a table or a stone. The issue at stake regarding the brain is that it is still not known whether or not it works chaotically, if it is dependent on changes in initial conditions. If it is, both scales could be related and interact with one another, which would raise new and fasci-

[18] 'Chaos theory', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1998) [on CD-ROM].
[19] *Oxford Handbook on Free Will*, ed. Robert Kane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.118-9: 'Smart accepted the truth of the absence of determinism at the quantum level but argued that the brain remains deterministic in its operations because microscopic events are insignificant by comparison'.

nating questions in psychology, decision-making and any discussion of free will.[20]

Summary

This brief consideration of unpredictability and indeterminacy is intended to give an idea of how and why chance is now central to sciences. Central, because randomness was diagnosed in many areas, and because it helped provide scientists with more accurate tools to account for phenomena that could not be explained using traditional approaches.

Since few things are definite with regard to the influence of randomness and disorder over the observable world, it is wise to keep in mind these two, albeit generalising, facts: first, that Determinism can lead to indeterminacy; second, that indeterminacy is not incompatible with a larger statistical Determinism. What 20th century sciences have thus shown is that the difference between chance and necessity is more blurred than was initially and instinctively thought. Chance has been proved to be not a consequence of our ignorance, neither intrinsically nor extrinsically, but instead an inner and objective property of certain systems and objects. Chance does exist. The question left to future and possibly endless generations is about the very nature of its presence: essential or accidental, fundamental or restricted?

But the existence of chance is a very recent discovery, and before Poincaré and Lorenz, the overriding philosophical frame of mind was that of strict Determinism, either theological or materialistic, neither apparently willing to give any credibility to chance. In order to prepare for the introduction of Clément Rosset's thought on chance, it is now useful to concentrate on the philosophical difficulties and implications of Determinism, and in so doing to home in on the role of the concept in the field of philosophy.

[20] The range of books published on the problem of free will (closely linked to that of Determinism) is considerable. An introduction can be found in some of Weatherford's developments (Weatherford) and in the comprehensive *Oxford Handbook on Free Will* (especially the article by Robert Bishop, 'Chaos, Indeterminism, and free will', pp.110-124).

Part I

2

The Tribulations of Chance within Philosophical Thought

Within the field of philosophy, the concept of chance has a long, yet subdued, history, and has featured as a topic of discussion within relevant circles for as long as there have been philosophers. The first thinkers sought to understand and explain the world, to make sense out of it. In doing so, one of the first points of contention they encountered was whether reality should be thought of as determined, or as not determined. Two and a half millennia later, fuelled by the aforementioned advances in physics and neurosciences, the debate surrounding Determinism still goes on.

The problem with linking chance and Determinism is that, historically, the consensus has always greatly favoured the latter. As a result chance, although acknowledged from the outset as an existing phenomenon, failed to attract enough attention to lead to thorough studies, or even much consideration. Until recently, it lived in the shadow of its extremely successful partner; in other words, chance worked as nothing more than a *faire-valoir* of Determinism, and therefore never gained the status of a proper and independent fully-fledged philosophical concept. That is the reason why, when scientists started coming up with instances of random behaviour, of physical indeterminacy, philosophers were caught unawares and needed time to adjust to these revolutionary findings. It is in this respect noteworthy that the first individuals to discuss the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics were scientists.

It therefore appears that chance is not restricted solely to the boundaries of the particular debate of Determinism: it can now be viewed as a separate entity, studied outside of such a specific frame of reference. However, in order properly to understand the concept's

many implications, to measure the importance and meaning of its emergence into the 20th century's cultural and intellectual life, and consequently to be able to see beyond the said restrictive framework, the history of chance must be looked at concomitantly with that of Determinism. Indeed, acceptance or rejection of this latter notion has a critical impact on how the concept of chance is analysed as a whole.

Determinism

As the previous section briefly mentioned, the doctrine of Determinism rests on the general premise that, given two successive states of things S1 and S2, S2 is determined by S1, or evolves logically and necessarily from S1. The effect of a cause is therefore strictly contained within that very cause. Possibly the most famous definition of Determinism is that of Pierre-Simon de Laplace. In the introduction to his *Essai Philosophique sur les Probabilités*, Laplace wrote:

> Nous devons [...] envisager l'état présent de l'univers comme l'effet de son état antérieur et comme la cause de celui qui va suivre. Une intelligence qui, pour un instant donné, connaîtrait toutes les forces dont la nature est animée et la situation respective des êtres qui la composent, si d'ailleurs elle était assez vaste pour soumettre ces données à l'analyse, embrasserait dans la même formule les mouvements des plus grands corps de l'univers et ceux du plus léger atome; rien ne serait incertain pour elle, et l'avenir, comme le passé, serait présent à ses yeux.[1]

For the Determinist, the universe evolves in a way that is certain: the past can only lead to the present *as it is*, and in turn, this particular and necessary present will create a future that shares the same quality of inevitability. The key notion of Determinism is therefore, understandably, causality. Each temporal state of the universe grows into the next one through causation. As is implied in Laplace's statement, causation is an unambiguous process: nothing is added between the cause and the effect other than the logical transformation from the first state to the second. In other words, Determinism implies that there exists only one possible future; furthermore, it implies that anyone with a sufficient knowledge of the present could, logical step by logical step, go back into the past to the very origin of the universe. In

[1] Laplace, *Essai philosophique*, p.3.

recognition of Laplace's theory, a being capable of gaining such knowledge has been called Laplace's demon.

Aristotle, in his *Physics*, famously distinguished between four different causes, which together form his theory of causality. First is the material cause, or the matter used to produce a given object. Second is the formal cause, which is the purpose for which the said object is intended. Third comes the efficient cause, that is, the agent that turns the object into its intended shape. Lastly, the final cause, the ultimate reason explaining the making of this object. Thus leather is the material (cause) needed to make a football; the formal cause is the design that the artisan, who represents the efficient cause, is following to make it; and the final cause is that the artisan wants to give his young son a football for his birthday. With this example, nothing in the chain of events is added on; everything is 'rational', in that it follows a logical path; and each stage is shown to lead on to the next.

For Aristotle, these four causes are necessary for any object to exist, for any cause to lead to an effect. The most striking feature of this theory is undoubtedly the final cause. Indeed, it implies that causality functions *in view of* its effect: not merely that it makes it possible, but that it actually aims for that particular final cause. This doctrine, called Finalism, is expressed thus by Aristotle: 'the nature of a thing is its end.'[2] As such, objects are not free to evolve; they are determined, not only by the causal chain of events as in 'normal' Determinism, but also by a drive to become what they must. That is to say that Finalism is a particular form of Determinism, in which the chronological succession of causes and effects is superseded by their being encompassed in the final result they are striving to attain.

Although a crucial figure in Western philosophical tradition, Aristotle attracted criticism for this doctrine, and several philosophers rejected Finalism while still defending Determinism. In his *Ethics*, for instance, Spinoza clearly argued against finality: 'Nature has set no end before herself, and […] all final causes are nothing but human fictions.'[3] And indeed in logical terms, final causes are not necessary for Determinism to hold firm. Whatever one's position on the issue, Aristotle's doctrine raises an important question: if there is indeed finality in nature, how can one explain it and where does it come

[2] Aristotle, *Politics* (New York: Colonial Press, 1900), Book 1, Part 2 <http://classics.mit.edu/ Aristotle/politics.html> [accessed on 5 September 2008].
[3] Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2001), p. 37.

from? In fact, this question is also at the root of Determinism, which, as highlighted above, implies the possibility of unravelling the mystery of the origin, of going back in time, stage by stage, to the point where all started.

Religious Determinism

Strictly speaking, two different kinds of Determinism can be said to coexist. Both share the basic notion that the universe behaves according to a watertight logic. However they differ as to the essence of what, precisely, underlies all things. Religious Determinism posits the existence of a divinity, or divinities, and that the world is thus the product or result of divine intervention. In this perspective, a Finalist or Determinist in possession of complete knowledge of the universe at instant I, deducing from it the state of the universe at I-1, then I-2 from I-1, and so on, could logically retrace its history up to God (like Laplace's demon). In this instance, then, God is the prime mover, the first cause: the father of Creation.

This status has many crucial implications, all of which have been developed, defended and criticised by theologians and philosophers through the centuries. In monotheistic religions, God is said to be perfect, the highest and purest form of being conceivable. As such, His powers are limitless and His knowledge total. Religious Determinism uses these arguments to show that all events that have occurred, occur and will occur in the history of Creation are, first, known to God (foreknowledge) and, second, designed by Him (preordination). Within this framework, it is clear that everything is determined for all eternity.

While the opposite is not true, Determinism is thus inevitably linked with Finalism. Preordination indeed is the ultimate primordial cause of all that is: God has assigned a particular path to the universe, and since He is perfect, the universe cannot but head in this precise, intended direction. Several religious concepts are founded on this form of Finalism, for instance eschatology (the belief concerned with death, the end of the world and the end of humanity), or the notion of destiny, which is premised on the belief that all given things or beings follow a path that is already laid out in front of them.

As the above paragraph hints at, another important implication of religious Determinism/Finalism is that it posits *intentionality* as being

at the root of the universe. God is conceived of as a being capable of wanting, and His Creation is the result of the manifestation of this ability. Being perfect, and being the prime mover, He chose to create the universe without any prior cause forcing him to do so: through producing what *is*, God spoke His will. In other words, religious Determinism/Finalism is also a form of Voluntarism, the theory which takes the will to be the dominant element in the world.

Materialistic Determinism

As the notion of fate, within religious Determinism, shows, the belief that a divinity has decided when and how one will live is probably as old as mankind. Although not as old, materialistic Determinism is nonetheless not a new theory. In fact, its first proponents are 5th century BC philosophers Leucippus and Democritus. Democritus, who studied under Leucippus and expanded on his teachings, founded Atomism, a doctrine positing the existence of atoms, that is to say, miniscule and irreducible particles of matter. In doing so, he also necessarily posited the existence of *emptiness*. From this fundamental duality, Democritus deduced movement and change: atoms fall vertically through space (made up of emptiness) and thus generate the lumps of matter that can be observed around us. The particularity of this process is that Democritus understands it as a law of nature:

> Now his principal doctrines were these. That atoms and the vacuum were the beginning of the universe; and that everything else existed only in opinion. [...] Everything which is made [man] looks upon as depending for its existence on opinion; but atoms and the vacuum he believes exist by nature.[4]

What this means is that the physical realm obeys strict physical rules: to account for the existence of lumps of matter through Atomism, while at the same time not contradicting his claim that the fall of atoms is entirely natural, Democritus had to defend a view of the world as materially Deterministic. According to this view, each cluster of atoms *had* to happen, and necessity reigns over the universe. Cicero explained it thus: 'And from this consideration, Democritus, the au-

[4] Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. by Charles Duke Yonge. Book IX, Part XII, 'Life of Democritus' <http://fxylib.znufe.edu.cn/wgfljd/%B9%C5%B5%E4%D0%DE%B4%C7%D1%A7/pw/diogenes/index.htm> [accessed on 30 January 2006].

thor of the Atomic Philosophy, preferred admitting the necessity of fate to depriving indivisible bodies of their natural motions.'[5]

Atomism, particularly through Lucretius, refuted the existence of Gods, and was purely mechanistic: it aimed to explain the universe in a rational way, without resorting to any immaterial cause. Despite the many centuries separating us from Lucretius, such an approach is easily recognisable as lying at the root of modern sciences: indeed science only started making major advances when philosophers stopped giving credence to the use of metaphysical theories in order to understand the physical realm. Instead, by focusing on the inner workings of material phenomena, they began unravelling the logical links between events. Whereas in the past an earthquake could be blamed on nothing other than divine anger, seismology revealed that it is in fact caused by two tectonic plates colliding.

Religious Determinism has therefore been replaced, at least partially, by materialistic Determinism; indeed, the rise of science might have offered an alternative to God. However, it has not changed the fact that the universe is ruled by an unflinching logic. It is this logic which Laplace explicitly referred to, and it is this logic which can be found in the writings of most contemporary scientists and philosophers: the world works according to set rules. Mathematics, physics, biology, but also philosophical movements such as Positivism and Scientism, function on a daily basis on that very premise.

Contrary to religious Determinism, materialistic Determinism, even in its Finalist form, does not postulate intentionality as being at the root of being. However, according to the internal logic of Determinism, it still considers that the origin of everything can be deduced from any given state of the universe. Democritus posited an eternal universe, in which nothing was created and nothing disappeared; a world where there was no origin, not because Determinism failed at the last hurdle, but because the universe had never started. Today, the most commonly accepted scientific theory of the origin of the universe is that of the 'big bang': clues found in the analysis of data collected from space seem to point to the explosion of a singularity (a zone of extreme concentration of matter which current physics does not as yet completely understand) from which current matter and anti-matter

[5] *The Treatises of M. T. Cicero: The Nature of the Gods; On Divination; On Fate; On the Republic; On the Laws and on Standing for the Consulship*, ed. Charles Duke Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), p. 273.

evolved. This theory would seem to suggest that the universe is not eternal. But research continues, and other explanations have appeared that challenge the perplexing simplicity of the big bang. What remains certain is that no answer is likely to be accepted that does not comply with the basic requirements of scientific inquiry, and therefore apply causality, and at least a degree of materialistic Determinism.

Interestingly, the question of the origin is also where both religious and materialistic Determinism may possibly be reconciled. Were God to be the first cause of a universe behaving in a totally mechanistic way, Deterministic scientists could only go back as far as the first effect (for instance, the big bang) sparked by God.[6] According to this hypothesis, the gap between the first cause and the first effect would be scientifically impossible to bridge, because God is supposedly not matter, nor any other element or entity falling within the grasp of science. Since science cannot prove or disprove what lies beyond its frontiers, the coexistence of both Determinisms is in the end an eventuality.

Free agency

Causality is a phenomenon that can be observed on a daily basis; its pertinence seems unquestionable. Hume showed that the cause-effect pattern was in fact founded on habit rather than absolute truth, but the acceptance of causality as reinforced by empirical data is still today taken for granted by many, and has led to major breakthroughs in numerous areas of knowledge, not least physics, engineering, biology, or economics. However, as soon as Determinism appeared, philosophers were quick to point to its most controversial consequence: the loss of free agency.

Whether or not our reactions and decisions are the fruit of divine decree or a logical development from the 'primordial soup' to the intricacies of the atomic level of the brain, the effect is the same for human freedom: free agency simply has no ground. Within Determinism, both religious and materialistic, this problem has led to two major sets of position being adopted: on the one hand hard Determinism, on the other, soft Determinism.

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[6] In this hypothesis, the God referred to is closer to a Deist God (who is removed from human affairs) than to an individualised Supreme Being specific to particular religious faiths.

Hard Determinism

Applied logically and uncompromisingly, Determinism leaves no room for choices and decisions. Rather, choices and decisions are already made for us. They seem to exist independently; we might believe we actually choose and decide, but this is an illusion. For the religious hard Determinist, God had planned, and knows, that I am going to steal an apple; for the materialistic Determinist, I am going to steal it because of a particular series of events, which itself stems from another particular series of events, and so on. At the heart of hard Determinism therefore lies the idea of *reductio*: because every action or event is the strict effect of a cause, and because this cause is itself the necessary effect of a previous cause, any convincing explanation requires a return to the very first cause, in other words the prime mover, whatever its nature.[7]

As a result, hard Determinism is by definition at odds with the concept of responsibility, in particular as regards morality. Indeed the loss of free agency implies that no blame can befall me: if I had no choice about stealing an apple, I cannot be found guilty. In his defInition of Materialism, clearly equated with Determinism, the 20th century French philosopher Luc Ferry summarises this strong link thus:

> [Le] matérialisme [est] la position qui consiste à postuler que la vie de l'esprit est tout à la fois *produite* et *déterminée* par la *matière*, en quelque acception qu'on la prenne. En clair: les idées philosophiques ou religieuses, mais aussi les valeurs morales, juridiques et politiques, ainsi que les grands symboles esthétiques et culturels n'ont ni vérité ni signification *absolues*, mais sont au contraire *relatifs* à certains états de fait matériels qui les conditionnent de part en part, fût-ce de façon complexe et multiforme. Par rapport à la matière, donc, il n'est pas d'autonomie véritable, absolue, du monde de l'esprit ou, si l'on veut, de transcendance réelle, mais seulement une illusion d'autonomie.[8]

Soft Determinism

Its negation of human freedom made hard Determinism a difficult theory to accept for many, and several arguments have been put for-

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[7] 'Le matérialisme doit […] assumer ses deux traits caractéristiques fondamentaux: le déterminisme et le réductionnisme.' André Comte-Sponville and Luc Ferry, *La Sagesse des modernes* (Paris: Pocket, 1998), p. 24.

[8] Comte-Sponville and Ferry. Original emphases.

ward to try to reconcile Determinism with a sense of free agency. Hence the alternative name given to soft Determinism: 'Compatibilism'. This theory posits the existence of a difference 'between causally determined behavior and constrained behavior'.[9] Classical Compatibilism is primarily associated with the thinkers Hobbes and Hume. For the former, free will is equivalent to finding 'no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to doe'.[10] Similarly, the latter defines it as 'a power of acting or of not acting, according to the determination of the will.'[11] Both views tend to describe freedom as the ability to choose out of desire, but other philosophers have proposed alternative descriptions, principally to resolve the problematic implication that animals too could be said to have free will, and thus to be responsible agents. Indeed animals behaving on the basis of a particular aim can be included in the aforementioned definitions. One such possible alternative is that of Plato, who understood the rational nature of humans as their ability to act upon what they saw as good. According to this argument, I am free in that I can will *against* my instincts.

The debate between hard and soft Determinism has been revived in the last fifty years, partly owing to the development of neuroscience and cognitive psychology. Experiments by Benjamin Libet, for instance, seemed to show that actions are taking place *before* the agent neurologically decides to adopt them.[12] If this result were to be proven correct, it would pose a major problem to Compatibilism, and fuel the claims of hard Determinists.

As regards religious Determinism, Compatibilists also believe that determination and free agency can work alongside each other. But here the issue is rather the influence of God on His Creation: what religious Comptabilists have to reconcile is indeed how the idea of a perfect being, the omniscient Creator of everything, can accommodate the notion of there being free agency in parts of the universe He created.

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[9] Weatherford, p.79.
[10] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. R.E. Flatman and D. Johnston (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), p.108.
[11] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1977), sect.viii, part 1.
[12] Benjamin Libet, 'Do We Have Free Will?', in *Oxford Handbook on Free Will*, pp.551-564.

Implications of Determinism for chance

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines chance as follows: 'Absence of design or assignable cause, fortuity; often itself spoken of as the cause or determiner of events, which appear to happen without the intervention of law, ordinary causation, or providence'; for its part, the American dictionary *Merriam-Webster* states that it is 'the assumed impersonal purposeless determiner of unaccountable happenings'. Understood thus, the most obvious implication of Determinism for chance is that, strictly speaking, the notion does not exist. In a world that is certain, where everything behaves in a perfectly logical way, where both the origin and the end of the universe are 'contained' in, that is, deducible or decipherable from any given state, chance, being purposeless, must be an illusion. It can only be an impression, derived from our imperfect understanding of the way the world functions. To return to the illustration cited above, a volcano erupting can be seen in two very different ways. An uneducated individual would experience the eruption as totally unexpected: he would have no means of foreseeing it, and his limited knowledge-base would not provide him with the intellectual tools required to make sense out of it. On the other hand, the seismologist who has been trained in tectonics, and is aware of the readings of several seismographs in the area of the volcano, would probably have been in a position to predict its imminent eruption. At the very least, he would have the intellectual and conceptual tools necessary to recognise the eruption as a perfectly logical natural phenomenon.

As a result, many Deterministes have regarded chance and ignorance as interchangeable. Voltaire for instance asserted that 'ce que nous appelons le hasard n'est et ne peut être que la cause ignorée d'un effet connu'.[13] Laplace developed the argument further:

> Suivant que les phénomènes arrivoient et se succédoient avec régularité, ou sans ordre apparent, on les faisoit dépendre des causes finales, ou du hasard; et lorsqu'ils offroient quelque chose d'extraordinaire, et sembloient contrarier l'ordre naturel, on les regardoit comme autant de signes de la colère céleste. Mais ces causes imaginaires ont été successivement reculées avec les bornes de nos connoissances, et disparoissent entièrement devant la saine philosophie qui ne

[13] Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 79.

> voit en elles, que l'expression de l'ignorance où nous sommes, des véritables causes.[14]

For his part, Hume wrote in his *Treatise of Human Nature* that ''tis commonly allowed by philosophers that what the vulgar call chance is nothing but a secret and conceal'd cause'.[15] For Determinism, chance has no validity as a concept, because it cannot be more than a subjective judgement passed upon a state of affairs which, provided one has the full 'data' at one's disposal, could have been logically explained, hence predicted, and its consequences foreseen. Chance is ignorance, blindness to the real cause of any given event. It does not matter that the state of knowledge at the instant I does not allow prediction of a particular event: Determinism is not a doctrine conditional upon what we know with complete accuracy about the world, but on the unconditional belief that nothing happens without a logical, determining, reason. Voltaire or Laplace were Determinists at a time when relatively few natural phenomena had been clearly understood, and the formation of mountains from movement of the earth's crust, for instance, was still a mystery.[16] But this ignorance was not taken as a failure of Determinism; instead, it was further motivation to engage in scientific research. In other words, Voltaire, Laplace and other Determinists did not substitute their ignorance of continental drift for the then pseudo-concept of chance. These two types of ignorance are mutually exclusive; they might apply to the same object, but they spring from two contradictory positions: 'chance-ignorance' fails to grasp that the universe behaves logically, and is thus permanent, while the Determinist's ignorance is fundamentally temporary.

The possibility of chance within Determinism

Deterministic the world might be, but just as free agency is held by many to be compatible with Determinism, some philosophers have

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[14] Pierre Simon de Laplace, *Exposition du système du monde* (Paris: BNF, [n.d.]) <http://visualiseur.bnf.fr/CadresFenetre?O=NUMM-88763&M=notice&Y=Texte> [accessed on 28 March 2007].

[15] David Hume, 'Of the Probability of causes', in *Treatise of Human Nature* (Nice: Université de Nice, [n.d.]), Book 1, Part 3, Section 12 <http://www.ac-nice.fr/philo/textes/HumeTreatiseOfHuman Nature.htm> [accessed on 6 April 2006].

[16] The theory of continental drift was not put forward until 1912 (by Alfred Wegener).

acknowledged the existence of chance within a strictly causal framework. One of the first to do so was, surprisingly, none other than Aristotle. After expanding his conception of the four causes in *Physics*, the philosopher goes on to write: 'chance also and spontaneity are reckoned amongst causes: many things are said both to be and to come to be as a result of chance and spontaneity'.[17] The declaration is puzzling, in particular when one recalls his fourth cause, namely the final cause, which leads directly to the notion of Finalism. But to Aristotle, the existence of chance was a matter of evidence, and he saw no contradiction between the two notions:

> The early physicists found no place for chance amongst the causes which they recognized – love, strife, mind, fire, or the like. This is strange, whether they supposed that there is no such thing as chance or whether they thought there is but omitted to mention it.[18]

The reason behind this paradox lies in the position chance is made to occupy within Aristotelian Finalism. Aristotle's definition of chance is 'that which is its own cause'.[19] Chance is created spontaneously: it is not itself an effect, the consequence of a previous cause. At its own level, therefore, chance could be seen as a prime mover. But once this concession is made, the philosopher prevents his conceptual frame of reference from collapsing by stating that chance 'is not the cause – without qualification – of anything.'[20] Chance, born outside of causality by being spontaneous, does not become part of it, either, once it has occurred; it is, strictly speaking, a 'freak of nature'. As a result, Aristotle makes a crucial distinction between 'essential' and 'accidental' causes, the former describing events that belong to the realm of causality, the latter those which evade it; both may coexist in the world, but only essential causes matter for Finalism.

This caesura stems from the Aristotelian notion of essences, from which everything in the universe, objects as well as ideas, origInates. Essences are by definition unchanging, eternal, hence the notion of finality: all objects and beings are guided at a distance by what they

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[17] Aristotle, *Physics* ([n.p.]: The Internet Classics Archive, [n.d.]), trans. by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, Book 2, Part 4 <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/physics.2.ii.html> [accessed on 21 June 2008].
[18] Aristotle, *Physics*.
[19] Aristotle, *Physics*.
[20] Aristotle, *Physics*.

correspond to, obviously predetermined. Within this teleological scheme, the existence of spontaneity, or chance, is of no consequence: first because it does not cause anything to be, and, secondly, because that which has no cause does not correspond to any pre-existing essence, and can therefore not fit into the established framework:

> Since nothing which is incidental is prior to what is *per se*, it is clear that no incidental cause can be prior to a cause *per se*. Spontaneity and chance, therefore, are posterior to intelligence and nature.[21]

Although Aristotle allowed of chance in Determinism, it is clear which of the two has for him the upper hand. Chance appears to be a mere *addendum*, an accident with no bearing whatsoever on the way the universe goes: this path is still very much logical and predetermined, and it is difficult not to agree with Ian Hacking's comment that, for Aristotle and most subsequent philosophers, even those making room for the concept, chance was 'a mere seeming', a 'face-saving […] idea'.[22]

Arguably the most prominent thinker to belong to this category after the Greek philosopher is 19th century French thinker Antonin-Auguste Cournot. His analysis of chance, however, differs in many ways from that of Aristotle. First of all, his analysis is part of a general reflection on probabilities, which lends it a scientific bias, as opposed to Aristotle's ontological stance. Secondly, the role afforded chance by Cournot is much more central. Although the notion was only one of the French philosopher's centres of attention, he owes much of his posthumous reputation to his definition of the concept:

> Le fait naturel ainsi établi ou constaté consiste dans l'*indépendance* mutuelle de plusieurs séries de causes et d'effets qui concourent *accidentellement* à produire tel phénomène, à amener telle rencontre, à déterminer tel événement, lequel pour cette raison est qualifié de *fortuit*.[23]

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[21] Aristotle, *Physics*, Part 6.

[22] Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 12.

[23] Antonin-Auguste Cournot, *Considérations sur la marche des idées et des événements dans les temps modernes* (Paris: Vrin, 1973 [1872]), p. 9. Original emphases.

This definition, better known in its simplified form as 'la rencontre de deux séries causales indépendantes', recognises the coexistence of two contradictory forms of logic, similar, in that sense, as Clément Rosset has indicated, to Aristotle's analysis.[24] The first one is that of cause-and-effect, or Determinism; the second that of an accident evading this particular framework. Interestingly, the aforementioned definition does not mention 'chance' directly, but chance is undeniably what Cournot wants to illustrate. His understanding of reality is dual: it is first made of a multitude of closed-in, mechanistic, systems:

> [de] petits mondes, dans chacun desquels on peut observer un enchaînement de causes et d'effets qui se développent simultanément, sans avoir entre eux de connexion et sans exercer les uns sur les autres d'influence appréciable.[25]

But if at a distance they fail to influence each other, these systems *do* interact with the outside, and this is where chance comes into play: 'les événements amenés par la combinaison ou la rencontre d'autres événements qui appartiennent à des séries indépendantes les unes des autres, sont ce qu'on nomme des événements *fortuits*, ou des résultats du *hasard*.'[26] This position explains why Cournot disagreed with the aforementioned consequence of Laplacean Determinism that the past is 'decipherable': for him, the existence of chance makes unravelling the history of the world, both physical and human, impossible. As Bertrand Saint-Sernin explains:

> L'idée qu'on puisse 'comprendre dans les mêmes expressions analytiques les états passés et futurs du Système du Monde', comme le dit Laplace, est aux yeux de Cournot une illusion. [...] Cournot, l'un des premiers, perçoit nettement le problème que pose à la science le cours irréversible du temps. Alors que les lois de la mécanique sont symétriques par rapport au temps, il note qu'il n'y a pas de symétrie entre prédiction et reconstitution du passé à partir du présent (ou rétrodiction).[27]

Cournot's vision is therefore at odds with Aristotle's somewhat 'benign' accommodation of chance (a cause 'outside' the theory of

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[24] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 317.
[25] Antonin-Auguste Cournot, *Essai sur les fondements de nos connaissances et sur les caractères de la critique philosophique* (Paris: Vrin, 1975 [1851]), p.34.
[26] Cournot, *Essai*, p. 34. Original emphases.
[27] Bertrand Saint-Sernin, *Cournot* (Paris: Vrin, 1998), p. 97.

causality): to the Frenchman, the concept appears on a footing equal to any Deterministic cause as regards the way the world and reality function. This new approach to Determinism is particularly reflected in his cosmogony, divided in three periods. Drawing on the mythical rendering of the origin of reality as steeped in chaos and disorder, Cournot calls the first period '*phase chaotique*, d'une durée infinie *a parte ante*, pendant laquelle les phénomènes se seraient succédé irrégulièrement'.[28] This primordial state transmutes into the second period, or '*phase intermédiaire* ou *génétique*', through the creation of a localised instance of stability, which slowly spreads to adjacent areas until in the last period reality becomes the concatenation of 'petits mondes' aforementioned.[29]

The salient point of this chain of events is that its origin is itself random; in other words, the emergence of stability, which differentiates phase 1 from phase 2, is not a causal one, since causality does not exist in chaos. At the same time, Cournot does not attribute this crucial change to divine intervention either. It therefore leaves him with only one possibility: the first 'cause' of stability, of order, of organisation, is none other than chance. This interpretation interestingly mirrors that of Epicurus, later expanded on by Lucretius in *De Natura Rerum*. Democritus' doctrine had left one major difficulty for Atomism: the vertical fall of atoms could not by itself explain the formation of lumps of matter. To remedy this weakness, Epicurus posited that the trajectory of atoms underwent slight changes, called *clinamen*, thus leading to the possibility of aggregates. Insofar as Atomism refuted the existence of gods but could not explain the *clinamen* in a mechanistic way for fear of falling into the trap of Determinism's *regressio ad absurdum*, Epicurus, like Cournot, had to root it in chance.

Mobilism: toward an alternative to Determinism

From what precedes, it would seem that there is, in actual fact, very little in common between Aristotle and Cournot, and even less so between Cournot and Determinism. It would, however, be a mistake to think so, and the best way to understand why is to look at what a

[28] Antonin-Auguste Cournot, *Matérialisme, Vitalisme, Rationalisme* (Paris: Vrin, 1979 [1875]), p. 50. Original emphasis.
[29] Cournot, *Matérialisme*, p. 50. Original emphases.

true alternative to Determinism is. This alternative is hinted at in Marcel Conche's *L'aléatoire*, in which the philosopher poses the Determinism debate in new terms. Instead of opposing Determinists and non-Determinists, Conche proposes a different set of notions: Substantialism and Mobilism.[30]

Substantialism

Both philosophical doctrines correspond to an opposite viewpoint on the conceptual pair substance-event. As the name indicates, Substantialism favours substance; it sees substances as the basis of ontology, thereby relegating events to the status of secondary concept and making them, in effect, ontologically irrelevant to philosophy.

What the notion of substance comprises varies according to different philosophers, but the hierarchy aforementioned remains untouched. Early Substantialists, such as the Stoics, trusted a substance to be a body, and events to be bodiless effects, consequently attributing to them a 'statut ontologique mineur'.[31] Events, because they are by essence fluctuations, ungraspable entities, are caused by the only thing that matters and is, alone, worthy of analysis: bodies/substances. Aristotle too thought along these lines, although he interpreted substances as closer to the notion of essence than body. For him, reality relies on the reality of substances, which he saw, importantly, as motionless. Naturally, the motionlessness essential to understanding substances excluded events from the start, insofar as these are, as is motion, quintessentially dependent on temporality. For the Greek philosopher, an event is nothing but the state of a substance at a given time; therefore an event does not, so to speak, happen *to* a substance, as he explains:

> One might even raise the question whether the words 'to walk', 'to be healthy', 'to sit' imply that each of these things is existent, and similarly in any other case of this sort; for none of them is either self-subsistent or capable of being separated from substance, but rather, if anything, it is that which walks or sits or is healthy that is an existent thing.[32]

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[30] Marcel Conche, 'Ontologie de l'aléatoire', in Conche, *L'Aléatoire*, pp. 145-173.
[31] Conche, p. 145.
[32] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* ([n.p.]: The Internet Classics Archive, [n.d.]), trans. by W. D. Ross, Book 7 <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.7.vii.html> [accessed on 2 September 2008].

As a result, Conche rightly dubs Substantialism 'l'événement subordonné à l'être'.[33]

It is easy to see how Substantialism impacts on the fate of chance. Because the notion defines a relationship between substances (or, to speak in less Substantialist terms, that it does not describe a positive concept but corresponds to that which is not caused, therefore being incompatible with both the materialistic and theological spheres of influence) chance is equated with the event: it simply cannot be granted the status of substance.

Mobilism

Contrary to Substantialism, Mobilism elevates the event to the pinnacle of ontology. This position does not however correspond to a simple reversing of Substantialism. If it were to do so, the event would take the place of substance, and vice-versa. But Mobilism, as Conche writes, 'réduit l'être aux événements', which means that this particular system does not recognise the existence of substances: the world as a whole is made up of events, and only events.[34]

As a result, reality undergoes a complete overhaul: it is not made up of 'petits mondes', as Cournot had it, but of a constant series of changes: 'l'on ne passe pas simplement d'un "état" (stable) à un autre, car le changement est ininterrompu, l'état lui-même étant déjà du changement'.[35] This view, shared by philosophers including Heraclitus, Montaigne, Nietzsche and Bergson, interestingly mirrors the perspective arising from the findings of modern science. As opposed to the outmoded model of reality as comprising blocks of matter interacting with each other only through a set number of laws (gravitation, physical contact, speed, etc.), a model which emphasises autonomy and stability, the current description stresses the fluidity of even the densest bodies: indeed each square millimetre of matter is constantly bombarded by billions of particles. In these conditions, the notion of stability, as well as that of identity, becomes problematic.

[33] Conche, p. 146.
[34] Conche, p. 151.
[35] Conche, p. 156.

> Cet 'absolu flux de l'événement', dont parle Nietzsche, correspond à la vision que la science moderne donne de la réalité. Car la science ne parle plus en faveur d'une philosophie de l'être, mais du devenir.[36]

'Du devenir': this explains why Conche, as a Mobilist, describes reality as 'aléatoire', since 'si ce qui est réel est ce qui se passe ou a lieu – ce qui arrive –, et si ''aléatoire'' se dit non seulement de ce qui arrivera mais de ce qui arrive, pour autant que ce qui arrive est en train d'arriver, est s'accomplissant et non accompli, on peut dire que la réalité, l'être même en tant qu'événement, est aléatoire en soi.'[37]

For Mobilism, the notion of essence becomes an illusion: nothing exists beyond flux and change. In this perspective, the use of the term 'ontology' itself proves problematic; it signifies a 'science of beings' and, historically, all 'ontological' systems have posited essences at the root of reality. This is why the present work will also use the term 'nontological' when referring to thinkers intent on founding reality on events.

This passage from ontology to nontology is precisely where Cournot, despite the importance conceded to chance in his system, remains firmly in Aristotle's camp, the camp of Substantialists. The first phase of his cosmogony might look like a concession to Mobilism, but where he parts company with Heraclitus and other philosophers is that, upon entering the second phase, the primordial flux leads, 'aleatorily', to the constitution of essences. In Cournot's conception of reality, cause and effect, although born out of chance (in two senses: they come *from* chance, and appear out of it *by* chance) change ontological status to become established principles that ultimately defeat their origin. A telling proof of this can be found in the faith he shows in probabilities. Not that Mobilists cannot use probabilities, but Cournot is led to reject the possibility of the improbable:

> L'événement physiquement impossible (celui qui de fait n'arrive pas, et sur l'apparition duquel il serait déraisonnable de compter...) est l'événement qu'on peut assimiler à l'extraction d'une boule blanche par un agent aveugle, quand l'urne renferme une seule boule blanche pour une infinité de boules noires; en d'autres termes, c'est l'événement qui n'a qu'une *chance* favorable pour une infinité de chances contraires.[38]

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[36] Conche, p. 155.
[37] Conche, p. 163.
[38] Cournot, *Essai*, pp.39-40. Original emphasis.

Such a view contradicts contemporary research into probabilities, but more to the point it reveals in Cournot's system a clear separation between phase 1 and 2 of his cosmogony and phase 2 and phase 3.[39] The 'phase chaotique' indeed evolves into the 'phase génétique' out of a freak event, that is, a statistical impossibility. Reality is therefore based on an 'événement physiquement impossible', but in phase 3 this link, for the philosopher, is radically severed.

This short discussion of Mobilism has only briefly presented the notion. The full extent of the way in which it constitutes a credible alternative to Determinism, as well as how it affects the concept of chance and its own relationship to Determinism, needs to be made clear. In order to attempt that clarification, the next section will focus on the thought of Clément Rosset, who, arguably more thoroughly than any other philosopher, has drawn the most radical implications from the Mobilist option.

[39] On the importance of the improbable in statistics, Nassim Nicholas Taleb's *Black Swan* is highly instructive (New York: Allen Lane, 2007).

3

The Philosophy of Clément Rosset

Setting the tone

The philosophical system developed in the last forty years by Clément Rosset is built entirely on chance. Chance is the premise on which he has based a coherent system of thought, at the same time as he provides an original analysis of the approach he labels 'Naturalism'.

Rosset was one of those rare French philosophy students at the Ecole Normale Supérieure who, when Marxist criticism, Deconstruction and Structuralism gained a near-religious status in France, did not follow the trend, but managed to go their own way.[1] Probably the chief reason for this resistance is that, prior to entering the ENS, he had already made up his mind about what he was to reflect on for the rest of his career and, as far as recent publications are concerned, of his life thus far. He had even recorded one of his two major philosophical intuitions in a book entitled *La Philosophie tragique* in 1960, a year before passing the ENS entry exams.[2] After teaching for two years at the University of Montreal as part of his compulsory military service, he obtained a post at the University of Nice in 1967, where he spent the rest of his academic career, eventually retiring in 1998, due partly to a 'mal bizarre' which he has baptised '*hasofin*'.[3]

Although not unknown in French philosophy circles, Rosset has never been successful as such, if we equate the term with 'fashionable'. His style of writing is very unlike that of many famous philo-

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[1] In fact, Rosset (who studied at the ENS from 1961 to 1965) claims, in his brief account of these years entitled *En ce temps-là* (Paris: Minuit, 1992) that the only other student to do likewise was Jacques Bouveresse, who became one of the leading specialists of logical Positivism in France, introducing Wittgenstein in particular.

[2] Clément Rosset, *La Philosophie tragique* (Paris: PUF, 1960).

[3] '*H*yper-*a*ctivisme *s*emi-*o*nirique de *fin* de sommeil': Clément Rosset, *Loin de moi* (Paris: Minuit, 1999), p. 13.

sophers of his time: whereas Derrida, Baudrillard, Althusser, Lacan and others often use complicated syntax and introduce cryptic concepts, Rosset does the opposite. In addition to using far-ranging examples taken from philosophy, music, literature, newspapers, films or even cartoons to make his philosophical points, he writes clearly (his is an almost 'classic' clarity, underlined by the frequent recurrence of syntaxic balance, opposition, epanorthosis) and articulates his reasoning pedagogically.

In addition to this, Rosset has always spoken his mind on what, in his opinion, is useless to philosophy. In fact it is not an exaggeration to say that all his books display, to some extent, a joyful irreverence with regard to the philosophical establishment: when others coin terms such as 'différance', 'quid et quod', 'être-jeté', 'ek-sistence' for some of their concepts, Rosset replies both seriously and teasingly by offering his own names, such as 'crapule', 'idiotie' or 'sottise'.[4]

The reader of *En ce temps-là* might be inclined to think that Rosset is now retrospectively trying to distance himself from his student years through a subtle criticism of the influences of major figures. But in 1965, Gallimard published his *Lettre sur les chimpanzés*, a parodic work in very much the same spirit as Sokal's article 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity'.[5] Here, Rosset takes the side of chimpanzees and, quoting philosophers such as Hegel, Pascal or Nietzsche, goes on to include the animals as a necessary part in the then fashionable idea of progress and 'Humanité totale'.[6] His ironical 'chimpanzés-pour-autrui-dans-le-monde' is an obvious parody of the way Heidegger's (and Jean-Paul Sartre's) concepts are rendered in French.[7] In the foreword to the second edition (1998) Rosset writes:

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[4] Clément Rosset, respectively *Principes de sagesse et de folie* (Paris: Minuit, 1991), p. 47; *Le Réel, traité de l'idiotie* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), pp.41 and 55.

[5] Alan Sokal, 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity', in *Social Text*, 46/47 (Spring/Summer 1996), pp. 217-252. This article, written by a scientist who wanted to parody and mock the poststructuralist fashion for less than rigorous use of scientific concepts and overcomplicated sentences, was sent to the famous peer-reviewed *Humanities* journal, and accepted. When Sokal announced the trickery, a major controversy, which *Intellectual Impostures* capped, ensued (Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures* (New York: Profile Books Ltd, 1999)).

[6] Clément Rosset, *Lettre sur les chimpanzés* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 59.

[7] Rosset, *Lettre*, p. 51.

> Certains esprits crédules, n'ayant pas flairé la supercherie, pensèrent que je prenais sérieusement le parti, au sens politique du mot, de nos amis singes. D'autres, tout aussi peu perspicaces, y décelèrent des intentions de vilaine nature et me félicitèrent de prendre la défense de valeurs occidentales menacées, selon eux, par l'influence grandissante des populations de couleur. Il ne s'agissait pour moi que de me distraire aux dépens d'un certain nombre de catéchismes bêtifiants qui faisaient autorité dans l'*intelligentsia* française à l'époque.[8]

In the last analysis, however, these traits are superficial, and it is more reasonable to see Rosset's failure to generate a fervent interest amongst the usual philosophy readership as rooted in his very ideas. In the lengthy chapter on Nietzsche in *La Force majeure*, the author, writing about what appears to him a generalised misinterpretation of Nietzsche's views, remarks that philosophers in particular, and mankind in general, seem to believe that thinking is only made possible by the experience of pain and sadness: 'Il appartient à la psychologie, ou peut-être à la psychopathologie, d'expliquer le lien mystérieux qui unit si souvent l'exercice de la pensée à l'expérience de la peine'.[9] His own interpretation of Nietzsche, on the other hand, dating from 1983, reads very much like a *pro domo* plea, and in general, in the seven subdivisions of this chapter, the name of the former could for the most part easily be replaced by that of Rosset himself.[10]

Outside of France, the thinker's impact has been equally limited, although the hispanophone world has in the last ten years shown some interest, with several translations as well as a dedicated essay: *La Fuerza Mayor*, *Lo Real y su Doble*, *Lo Real: Tratado de la Idiotez*, *Principio de la Crueldad*, and *Clément Rosset*.[11] In Britain and America, on the other hand, the philosopher is virtually unknown: none of his essays have appeared in English, his thought being only available through *Joyful Cruelty*, a selection of extracts translated and introduced by David Bell.[12]

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[8] Rosset, *Lettre*, p. 13.
[9] Clément Rosset, *La Force majeure* (Paris: Minuit, 1983), p. 34.
[10] Apart from the last subdivision on eternal recurrence, a distinctively Nietzschean concept.
[11] Respectively: Ediciones Acuarela 2000, Ediciones Tusquets 2002, Editorial Pre-Textos 2004, Editorial Pre-Textos 2004, Rafael Del Hierro Oliva Ediciones del Orto 2001.
[12] Bell, *Joyful cruelty*.

Chance and reality

As the brief introductory exploration of chance within philosophy illustrated, the majority of thinkers have paid cursory attention to chance, and when they did take it into consideration, it was in most cases in order to make it fit within a wider perspective: that of finality for Aristotle, and Determinism for Cournot, for instance. Rosset's position, insofar as it narrows the perspective down to chance, could therefore not be more radical, and it necessitates a complete rethinking of the concept. In *Logique du pire*, the philosopher distinguishes between four possible definitions of chance, and highlights their respective conceptual systems of reference: 1) fate, linked to the idea of finality; 2) 'rencontre', whose corollary is the idea of constituted causal series; 3) contingency, which refers to necessity; 4) and chance, which, contrary to the others, fails to be part of any pairing, and therefore cannot be approached through another concept.[13] This crucial difference leads Rosset to claim that these four distinct categories hint at a deeper dichotomy, separating 'hasard événementiel' and 'hasard originel'.[14]

With regard to definitions 1, 2 and 3, which belong to 'hasard événementiel', for chance to be considered an event, the prerequisite is that there is something prior to it. A flowerpot may fall off a windowsill and knock out a passer by. Here, the chance-event disrupts what should have been the 'normal' chain of events. The example is trivial, but it displays the overall characteristic borne by the first three levels of interpretation in question. In other words, for the chance-event to occur, there needs to be an initial state, or, in more philosophical terms, a *nature*: a stable basis against which the event can be seen as such.

Definition 4, which belongs on the contrary to 'hasard originel', is the one that interests Rosset. In *L'anti-nature*, he describes chance as follows: 'le hasard […] est *premier*, c'est-à-dire antérieur à la constitution de toute série causale et de toute organisation'.[15] As opposed to Determinism, in which God or some as yet unidentified primary material cause is responsible for what *is*, here chance endorses the role of *the origin*, the principle from which what *is* emerged. This anterior-

[13] Rosset, *Logique*, p. 74.
[14] Rosset, *Logique*, p. 83. I propose to translate these two expressions as follows: chance-event ('hasard événementiel') and chance-as-origin ('hasard originel').
[15] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 57.

ity rejects the possibility of reality's being created out of a decision, but it also refutes the fact, necessary for materialistic Determinism, that the causal pattern justifies itself. As the previous chapter emphasised, a coherent materialistic Determinist must either posit an eternal cycle of causes and effects, or provide a materialistic explanation for the beginning of what is. The stumbling block is that chance, as understood by Lucretius or Rosset, exists outside of causality:

> si loin que l'on remonte dans la série des causes, […] il vient toujours un terme où l'on se heurte à un irréductible, une existence déjà-là et déjà présente, antérieure à toute spéculation – une donnée première qui certes ne contredit pas la raison, mais qui lui est incommensurablement étrangère.[16]

Therefore, a materialistic Determinist using chance as the origin would be contradicting himself, founding causality on a-causality.[17] Rosset is hence not a materialistic Determinist; however, he is a Materialist, and he does not refute Determinism as such.

In the act of creating, chance, which belongs to the material realm, only produces matter.[18] As a result, Rosset rejects the existence of Gods, and his thought is therefore a form of Materialism, which, crucially, bypasses Materialism's internal difficulties as regards the question of the origin; Rosset is a Materialist *insofar as* chance is recognised as the first cause, the uncaused beginning. Therefore, the philosopher does not postulate that the world behaves at random. It is not because what *is* owes its existence to chance that order cannot exist: 'il ne s'agit nullement […] de nier l'existence de régularités appelées naturelles.'[19] Rosset recognises that Deterministic behaviours abound, and in this respect his system does allow for Determinism: 'rien de plus valable, du reste, que ces conceptions déterministes, qui ne sont pas seulement celles du savant mais aussi celles de chacun d'entre nous lorsque nous sommes placés face à un rapport entre deux événements physiques'.[20] But this concession is, of course, not equiv-

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[16] Clément Rosset, *Le Monde et ses remèdes* (Paris: PUF, 1964), p. 6.
[17] The term is meant as the opposite of causality, and does not refer to Jung's analysis of a-causality as a parapsychological concept, also named 'synchronicity' (Carl Jung, *Synchronicity* (London: Routledge, 1985)).
[18] 'La matière, c'est le hasard' (Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 11). This, as will be shown, does not mean that matter behaves randomly, but that chance is not related to the will.
[19] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 58.
[20] Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 11.

alent to denying occasional breaks in causality, which the primacy of chance always makes possible. More importantly still, it must be remembered that this concession is made from the standpoint of positing chance as the origin of all that is.

This order of priorities leads Rosset to defining being as follows: 'être = hasard + succès'.[21] Opposing a long and established tradition intent on advocating being as originating outside of matter, that is, positing a fundamental dualism, Rosset understands it in the same way as Conche; he understands it as a Mobilist. 'Nous pouvons maintenant assimiler les idées d'existence et d'événement': being has no reality other than that of the event; and, by definition, the event is temporary.[22] Nothing makes it eternal; it flows. The order (causality) that gets created in the world is also an event, an event whose only particularity is that of being highly unlikely, and whose presence is therefore best understood as a successful happenstance of chance, nothing more.

Mobilism is a form of monism; this means that it recognizes only one level of being. As has been shown earlier, this unique level of being is the event, chance, 'l'indéterminé', and because of its materialistic attributes, it is unable to produce anything other than its own kind.[23] Whereas substance, as tradition has it, is normally at the root of reality, and engenders more or less faithful images of itself, for Rosset and the other Mobilists no separation is possible, and certainly the event cannot grow into an abstract, transcendent, entity, or be derived from it, as it happens in Cournot.

Rosset, however, does not use Conche's terminology; philosophers such as Lucretius, Gracian, Hobbes and, implicitly, himself, he instead calls *Artificialists*. This difference is worthy of note, for it marks a significant change of perspective. Conche, in opposing Mobilists and Substantialists, focuses on the couple time-related/eternal, highlighting temporality. Rosset instead contrasts Artificialism with Naturalism; in doing so, he steers the argument toward the issue of appearances, highlighting identity. This will prove particularly significant in his analysis of duplication, and Naturalism as a whole, as will be demonstrated.

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[21] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 58.
[22] Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 14.
[23] Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 7.

In *L'anti-nature*, the philosopher refers to the classical distinction between chance, human beings and nature, as found for instance in Aristotle. Chance in this context belongs to the material realm (it concerns physical objects), human beings create artifacts (*addenda* to the existing reality), and nature reigns supreme, hovering between these two separate entities, being neither one nor the other.[24] According to this popular view, artifice is restricted to man; it is a creation that is added to the long list of what reality comprises, but neither adds anything to the essence of nature, nor subtracts from it, although it is attributed the occasional power to 'elevate' mankind above its station (the work of art, according to tradition, giving a glimpse into the truth). In short, what man does is of no consequence whatsoever to nature. The same, of course, applies to the creations of chance. Chance and mankind do not affect nature, both producing 'artifices', that is, accidents which only sporadically give a 'true' reflection of nature. Hence the common opposition: natural-artificial.

By positing chance as the first cause, however, Rosset comes to question the pertinence of the very concept of nature, as will be shown in more detail later. If nature, and its related essences, does not exist, our understanding of the creations of chance and human beings must be completely revised. For Rosset, indeed, these are the only traces of being, and the only possible creations. They are still *addenda*, but *addenda* to nothing, which marks the crucial difference. Therefore, the word 'artifice' loses the pejorative associations it used to have within a world based on nature. Without a reference point against which to contrast it, the 'artifice' becomes all that ever happens. All of which, it must be remembered, happens within Artificialism, which is 'une affirmation universelle du hasard'.[25] Mankind in general, or a being in particular, constitutes no less and no more than successful happenstances of chance; as such, and since nothing makes these happenstances transcend their origin, all they are able to produce is new occurrences of the same. Being an 'artifice' of chance, man in turn creates 'artifices', which add number (quantity) but still no difference (quality) either to his own being, or to the pre-existing reality, as Rosset explains:

[24] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 11.
[25] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 55.

> Nul doute que le 'donné' de l'être humain soit différent du 'donné' de l'être des choses, que la 'réalité humaine' ne puisse se confondre avec la réalité du monde qui nous entoure. Mais cette réalité humaine qui se caractérise par un relief sur le donné des choses ne signifie aucunement qu'elle ne soit elle-même un donné, différent il est vrai, mais tout aussi contingent.[26]

One of the most interesting corollaries to this line of reasoning is its effect on the notion of construction, of building up. Not that chance as the origin dispels all possibility of creating: again, man produces 'artifices', objects and theories which testify to his being able to generate, to produce. However, traditionally this ability has been seen as a victory over contingence, as a form of escape from insignificance. In Rosset's perspective, the primacy of chance makes this view impossible. Creating something might change one's individual circumstances, but on the ontological level, no event, no 'artifice', be it man-made or chance-made, can lead to any kind of differentiation. Creating is as meaningless as not creating: 'l'œuvre artificielle n'offre aucune nécessité, ne témoigne d'aucune vérité ni ordre'.[27]

For Artificialism, events in general, and works of art in particular, do not represent a model. As there is no nature nor essence, they invent what they represent, thus not really 'representing' but rather 'presenting'. There is no given that could be imitated: everything is event, and events, once again, are conspicuous by their fluidity; they ebb and flow, they do not last: events happen, and then disappear, replaced by a new string of events. If this is the case, then to attempt to illustrate the self, or truth, equates to attributing arbitrarily, to one event amongst many others, an inflated and disproportionate meaning. The self and truth, for Rosset, are myths: they imply the presence of a sentient nature, of an essence which transcends events, when in fact chance is stubbornly at the root of all things, rendering the constitution of any nature or essence impossible. The self and truth, as expressed in any given work of art, are one turn of events amongst many others, afforded in that creative production an importance belied by the facts. In this perspective, for the Artificialist, art and action do not *refer to* anything; they repeat the only available possibility, that of being an event without reason ('j'entends de ne provenir d'aucune cause, de se donner comme une contingence au regard de tous les systèmes et de

[26] Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 17.
[27] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 106, where 'l'œuvre artificielle' refers as much to a work of art as to any event.

tous les ordres explicatifs') and without goal ('de ne s'intégrer dans aucun système téléologique, de ne relever d'aucune considération finale').[28] That is, ultimately, a happenstance of chance.

This is where Rosset's definition of reality, which he alternatively calls 'donné', begins, a crucial step in his philosophy: it is indeed 'sans raison' and 'sans but', but two further qualities are conjured up. The first one, apparently contradictory, is that reality is 'nécessaire'.[29] Here Rosset introduces a distinction between 'la nécessité de ce qui est' and 'la nécessité de ce qui doit être'.[30] The latter is incompatible with reality's being 'sans raison' and 'sans but', for it implies finality (it posits necessity as primary, and then applies it to what is). However, the first quality, because it describes reality as something that cannot be avoided once it has happened, and that therefore cannot and should not be overlooked, is an essential characteristic of the 'donné'. This importance will be made especially obvious in the discussion of Rosset's analysis of duplication, presented below.

The necessity of reality is fundamental to the issue of identity, which as indicated above is central to the philosopher's distinction between Artificialism and Naturalism. Because reality exists out of necessity, because it is not other than it is, it leads Rosset to the conclusion that talking about reality is, in fact, impossible. *Le Monde et ses remèdes*, *Le Réel, traité de l'idiotie*, *Le Réel et son double*, *Logique du pire*, in short most of the philosopher's writings are concerned with this consequence. The event, which is what the 'donné' is, corresponds to an endless succession of other events. As such, reality is forever in transit, but not in progress, for it cannot reach any kind of completion. Being forever in transit, reality is not a whole; encompassing the totality of reality at any given moment, although an impressive feat, would only ever provide one particular state of the whole, thus leaving aside an infinity of other possible alternatives. Therefore, there is no way to summarise the 'donné' into one convenient definition: all attempts to do so are bound to fail, for it would mean excluding one element or another, hence giving a very partial view of the whole.

As a consequence, Rosset concludes that the only credible defInition of reality rests on tautology: A = A. The identity of reality *is* its

[28] Respectively Rosset *Le Monde*, pp.6-7 and p. 7.
[29] Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 7.
[30] Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 8.

identity. In other words, nothing can be said of it that we do not already know (it is already 'given' to us: '*donné*'), and no amount of philosophising can be applied to it. Nothing other than reality itself can help us understand reality. However, once again, the implied task is itself impossible, owing to the fluidity of events: 'le présent ne résume en effet qu'un ensemble de faits, lesquels sont susceptibles parfois d'une certaine résonance, limitée d'ailleurs, mais incapables de durer à long terme'.[31] The Rossetian tautology is a simple way of expressing the irreducibility of reality to any kind of intellectual prehension. The identity principle, reality = reality, means just that, and not that a listing of everything that reality is *equals* all that reality is. Such a listing would be an aberration, since as suggested above the 'donné' moves forward without any goal in sight, thus producing random events that are neither contained in the past nor liable to being inferred from the present.

Indeed, because reality rests on chance, and is thus indeterminate, it is necessarily separated from the past. The past only instructs us as to the present within a strict causal system. Rosset's 'donné' is disconnected from the past, hence its name: the 'donné' represents the *hic et nunc*, which nothing intelligible justifies. This emphasis explains Rosset's insistence on the spontaneous, the instantaneous, the present: 'L'artificialisme est une pensée du présent, c'est-à-dire de ce qui existe'.[32] Reality's dependency on the present consequently makes it *idiotès*, from the Greek 'single', 'unique'.[33] Furthermore, it also vindicates Rosset's description of reality as being 'silent': 'Le monde est [...] essentiellement muet. Lorsqu'on s'est défait des bruits du monde qui nous voilent le réel en nous l'assourdissant [...] on rencontre le silence'.[34]

The silence of reality complements the second additional quality of the 'donné'. Rosset, using another Greek term, identifies it as '*alogon*'.[35] The term is traditionally translated as the 'opposite of logos', but the philosopher proposes to understand it rather as 'privé de logos': not as contradictory to reason, but as 'étranger à la raison'.[36]

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[31] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 310.
[32] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 310.
[33] Clément Rosset, *Le Réel et son double* (Paris: Minuit, 1976), p. 52.
[34] Rosset, *Le Monde*, pp.47-8.
[35] Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 19.
[36] Both quotations from Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 19.

The implication of this status for a rational being such as man is the confirmation that reality cannot be understood. It cannot be grasped, and as a result mankind is unable to comprehend it. However, the fact that we have no way of getting hold of reality is not due to a particular failure of our species, nor of the intellect. As it belongs outside the realm of *logos*, which is precisely the medium man uses for thinking, and as it originates in chance, reality is devoid of meaning. It is not absurd, as Rosset insists, for the absurd is a form of Naturalism; but it is radically 'insignifiant': 'ce qui existe n'est [pas] sujet […] à interprétation (l'existence demeurant muette quant à elle-même, c'est-à-dire n'offrant à celui qui la considère aucune possibilité de perspective rationnelle ou justificatrice)'.[37] Trying to deny this state of affairs is thus seen as dangerous, and the best thing to say about it is to imitate reality, that is, to remain silent:

> Etant donné que le réel est indescriptible, inconceptualisable, il suffit que l'intelligence s'en mêle pour qu'il disparaisse, parce que – c'est exactement ce que disait Plotin – ce qui existe c'est l'Un. Pascal de son côté disait: je ferais trop d'honneur à mon sujet si j'en parlais avec ordre, puisque tout mon propos consiste à montrer qu'il en est incapable. Eh bien tout mon propos consiste à dire que l'être est indescriptible et indéfinissable, et que par conséquent je n'ai pas à le définir.[38]

'Le tragique', approbation and 'joie de vivre'

Once chance is posited as the origin, as the first step (from which results the absence of meaning attached to reality), the next stage for Rosset consists in proposing a reinterpretation of 'le tragique'. This notion, equally essential to the philosopher's thinking, signals Rosset's shift from the abstract, or the nontological, to man's response to it. 'Le tragique' (and what follows) no longer concerns itself with reality; all that can be said of it has already been said: reality = reality and chance is the basis of it. Instead it engages with a form of ethics: the ethics of chance.

Amongst the many possible reactions to the realisation that reality is meaningless, that it has neither foundation nor goal, Rosset advocates the only rational one: facing the silence. It is the only rational answer, because all others deny, partially or entirely, the fact that

[37] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 72.
[38] Private interview (4th March 2004), appendix 1.

chance is the root of being. For Rosset, the truth might be hard to accept, but coming to terms with it is the fundamental aim of philosophy, and all consolations are to be got rid of. In this respect, he joins all those philosophers, overwhelmingly Materialists, who have worked to open our eyes to superstitions and to what they consider to be the inconsistencies of belief systems based on religious reasoning.

Rosset readily admits that accepting to see reality as 'tragique' is not an easy task. With the world meaningless, nature absent, and existence a succession of mere temporary events, little seems left to man to rejoice about. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the philosopher often refers in his writings to extreme pessimists such as Schopenhauer, Pascal, or Cioran (for a time, his philosophy was even described by journalists as 'pessimisme chic').[39] That the consequence of reality is *idiotès* may indeed be hard to assimilate, but it has to be accepted if anything positive is to come out of life:

> Réconcilier l'homme avec ce qui existe, c'est mon message « moral », mon vœu: être en bon terme avec le réel [,] montrer à quel point l'intelligence humaine n'est pas en phase avec [la réalité].[40]

The notion of 'tragique' as used by Rosset or Nietzsche is, it should be stressed, quite different from usual definitions of the word. For Rosset, what is at stake in traditional tragedies is not a conflict between freedom and Determinism (or Fatalism), as is often claimed. What such tragedies do illustrate, however, is *man's inability to accept, or deal with, reality*: what Oedipus is told by the oracle in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* is what *will happen*, and everything he may try to do to avoid killing his father and marrying his mother will come to nothing. As Robert Solomon shows in an article on Nietzsche's conception of free will and Fatalism, 'Oedipus was ''fated'' to do what he did, whatever causal chain he pursued'.[41] But Oedipus' problem is, in Rosset's analysis, not one of compulsion or fate: the chain of events that befalls him is due essentially to his being unaware of what reality truly is (those he believes to be his parents are not in reality his blood parents). In other words, the deeper meaning of

[39] Private interview (4th March 2004), appendix 1. However, this categorising is a blatant misunderstanding of Rosset's thought, as will appear later.
[40] Private interview (4th March 2004), appendix 1.
[41] Robert Solomon, 'Nietzsche on Fatalism and ''free will''', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 23 (2002), pp. 63-87 (p. 66).

tragedy has been misunderstood: its true teaching is that reality *is*, and that inventing an alternative reality gives the (erroneous) impression that it is avoidable. *Oedipus Rex* is as a result interpreted by Rosset as an allegory of man's relationship with reality, not as a theatrical exemplification of the vagaries of man's freedom, or lack thereof.

This typical 'blindness' to reality is analysed at another level, in Oedipus himself, who at first believes that there are two characters involved in the oracle: he himself, and an unknown murderer.

> L'essentiel – et le ressort du tragique – est ici que deux choses apparemment distinctes sont en fait une seule et même chose. [Illusion] d'un Double qui s'évanouit progressivement, d'une duplicité qui apparaît successivement certaine au début (il y a Oedipe et il y a le criminel), puis comme seulement probable, puis très improbable mais encore possible, enfin impossible. La tragédie d'Œdipe est d'être bien une seule et même personne, qu'on ne saurait décomposer en ses différents rôles.[42]

The 'tragique' Rosset refers to is therefore very different from the notion that Oedipus's tragedy stems from his arrogance. As Solomon emphasises, 'Aristotle based his theory of tragedy on the notion of a "tragic flaw" or "*hamartia*" in the tragic hero's character, and today the tragedy of Oedipus is still "explained" by appeal to his obstinacy, his refusal to listen either to Teiresias or his wife/mother.'[43] For Rosset, in it purest form, the 'tragique' equates to an ending of illusions. Another way to explain this is to make clear the link between illusions (such as superstitions) and hope. Illusions are not just an erroneous interpretation of reality: they principally provide hope, and hence their importance to mankind. They are thus less the expression of a mistake than the embodiment of a desire. And this is precisely where the problem lies: the 'tragique' is the recognition that reality does not provide any kind of hope, and it therefore goes against a seemingly instinctive human inclination. Rosset therefore understands hope as a negative notion, for it implies a blindness to the truth, or the 'tragique'. Lucidity requires 'dés-espoir' (the logical, and deliberate, negation of hope) just as 'dés-espoir' depends on lucidity: any real sense of the 'tragique' relies on an individual's ability to identify the forms of illusion in what constitutes his or her surrounding world and contemporary cultural (philosophical, artistic, scientific) context.

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[42] Rosset, *Le Réel, traité de l'idiotie*, p. 16.
[43] Solomon, p. 67.

What is at work here is a mode of thinking that Rosset calls 'logique du pire', which can be translated as a 'worst case scenario': it is, in other words, a furthering of despair (and hence the attainment of lucidity) through the tireless revealing of the illusory structure of our hopes. This is also why the philosopher numbers amongst his favourite thinkers Lucretius, Pascal, Cioran, and Wittgenstein. It further explains why he has been so interested in Schopenhauer, the radical pessimist who reached an almost unequalled level of 'désespoir'; so much so in fact that Rosset entitled his principal study of him *Schopenhauer, philosophe de l'absurde*, in which the last word testifies to the 'despairing', or, as Rosset puts it, the 'terrorist' aspect of Schopenhauer's philosophy (and not to the 20th century literary and philosophical movement).[44] The German philosopher's pessimism is rooted in what Rosset calls his belief in the 'absence of causality', which, in the last analysis, corresponds to the absence of necessity.[45]

The 'tragique', derived from the realisation that reality is silent, and cannot be interpreted, consequently leads back to meaninglessness, or rather, serves as the only tool able to penetrate and discard any and all intellectual constructs designed to shield us from the truth. In *L'anti-nature*, summarising the thoroughness of the Artificialist's enterprise, Rosset distinguishes two fundamental levels of 'insignifiance'. First, intrinsic 'insignifiance': 'l'existence est agrégat, rencontre, fruit du hasard; elle ne présente pas de sens dans la mesure où elle ne peut s'autoriser d'aucune nécessité'.[46] Second, extrinsic 'insignifiance': 'l'existence est dérisoire par la situation qu'elle occupe, imperceptible, dans les séries de l'espace et du temps'.[47]

These two levels cater for a flawless and radical hope-lessness: on the one hand, born out of a fluke, existence is unable to offer us any meaning, while on the other, the mere idea of self-importance is refused to man by the simple fact of scale and proportion. Whichever way one looks at it, consolation in the form of a reason for existing, or of holding a privileged place in the universe, is denied to mankind.

In striving for a state of 'hope-freeness', of a joyful abandonment of hope, Rosset reaches a logical, yet surprising, conclusion. Since

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[44] Rosset indeed also calls this 'philosophie tragique' 'la pensée terroriste', thereby stressing its boundless destructive power.
[45] Clément Rosset, *Schopenhauer, philosophe de l'absurde* (Paris: PUF, 1967), p. 7.
[46] Rosset, *La Force*, p. 96. See also Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, pp.76-7.
[47] Rosset, *La Force*, p. 96.

hope stems from desire, then it follows that, because the adoption of the 'tragique' involves a rejection of hope, it also involves a rejection of desire. This implication is essential to Artificialism, and constitutes the platform from which the philosopher criticises all forms of Naturalism. Strictly speaking, Naturalism is simply the general name given to philosophical systems rooted in hope. Artificialists, on the other hand, do not desire; that is, they do not act in order to transform reality. To desire, for Rosset, necessarily implies giving a particular thought or object a status that is arbitrary, and therefore mistaken, for no one thing in particular stands out from chance. To desire means to conceive of something as having more importance than the rest, and to strive to change reality in order to make it coincide with our desire. As a result, to desire leads to a turning away from reality, which is monotonous, essence-free, and hope-less.

However, this freedom from desire advocated by Rosset does not correspond to refusing it: rather, the Artificialist is free from desire because there is nothing *to* desire:

> Désirer rien [signifie] uniquement la reconnaissance d'un besoin sans objet, nullement la reconnaissance d'un manque d'objet au besoin. Nuance d'importance: la nécessité de l'insatisfaction étant attribuée, non plus au caractère inaccessible de ses visées, mais à l'impossibilité où est le désir lui-même de se formuler, c'est-à-dire de se constituer.[48]

This stance directly links with Rosset's notion of 'acceptation', which Bell in *Joyful Cruelty* has rendered as 'approbation'.[49] It means to accept, or approve of, reality, but it also goes beyond the ill-defined requirement to accept the 'tragique'. Naturally, the Artificialist must accept those concepts evoked thus far, namely, chance-as-origin; reality as meaningless; life as 'tragique'. However, Rosset's approbation is more focused on everyday life. Whoever decides to abstain from desiring, who realises that nothing offers itself to desire, is left with nothing else other than that which, in actual fact, life provides him or her, both good and bad. This is possibly the challenge of the 'tragique' that is the most difficult to embrace: to be able to approve of life, whatever happens. The Artificialist's world is born out of chance, and is consequently devoid of essences; *everything* in this world is

[48] Rosset, *Logique*, p. 38.
[49] Bell, p. x.

artificial, every event an event amongst an infinity of others, which nothing differentiates from the rest of 'creation'. As a result, no happening will ever change the premise that chance encompasses all that is. As a result, the birth of Einstein is no more or less significant than the death of an ant.

Such an extreme form of approbation strongly echoes Nietzsche's eternal return, for he who approves of reality approves of it all, indiscriminately, and the prospect of reality's returning over and over again cannot, consequently, be a matter of disappointment.[50] Rosset's approbation is *unconditional*, a characteristic that makes it permanent.

The notion of approbation is the necessary requirement for the final stage in Rosset's philosophy. Strange as it may seem, this stage is that of 'joie de vivre', or 'force majeure', the title the philosopher gave to his major essay on the concept.[51] In practice, Rosset's 'joie de vivre' is one of the two possible responses to the 'tragique'. When he was confronted with it Pascal, whose analyses Rosset follows in many ways, devised his famous wager: faced with his miserable condition, man is invited to choose between God and atheism. The power of Pascal's wager is to show that there is much less to lose in taking the side of the former than in espousing the latter. In his own way, Rosset also poses a wager: the inescapable evidence of the 'tragique' forces man to choose between two alternative responses. But this time the first is sadness, which can take several forms, such as suicide, anger, drug-taking, apathy, pessimism or, more peculiarly, optimism, while the second is approbation, and consequently happiness.

To approve only partially of reality cannot lead to 'joie de vivre', and any form of happiness that rejects portions of it is flawed from the outset. Reality is 'tragique', and whoever refuses this statement falls into the first category of responses to Rosset's wager. Indeed the attitudes in the list aforementioned have in common, in one way or another, that they are a denial of reality. This is obvious enough in the cases which simply consist in taking practical measures, or adopting an attitude, designed to avoid the tragic aspect of existence (drug-taking, apathy, suicide), or set out to change reality (quests for utopias, metaphysics).

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[50] See Rosset, *La Force* and Rosset, *Logique*.
[51] Rosset, *La Force*.

The case of the pessimist seems less clear-cut: in one sense, pessimism looks reality in the face. But what differentiates it from approbation is precisely that it does not *accept* it. Nor, similarly, does optimism, which seeks to look beyond it. Here this refusal goes hand in hand with the conviction that something can be *done about* reality (a conviction which necessarily suggests to Rosset a less lucid insight into reality than pessimism, insofar as it reintegrates active desire into the equation). It is therefore easy to see that in optimism lies the theoretical, and often also practical, possibility of progress. However, as Rosset puts it:

> Tout « progrès » […] sous-entend en effet et inévitablement le projet fou d'une résolution des maux essentiels par une diminution des maux accidentels: comme s'il pouvait suffire d'une découverte scientifique ou d'une meilleure organisation sociale pour arracher les hommes à leur nature insignifiante et éphémère.[52]

This criticism of the idea of progress in the perspective of the 'tragique' is also comprised in a more general one, whereby Rosset's rejection of hope and the subsequent furthering of 'désespoir' come into full bloom:

> Tout ce qui ressemble à de l'espoir, à de l'attente, constitue […] un vice, soit un défaut de force, une défaillance, une faiblesse – un signe […] que le goût de vivre fait défaut et que la poursuite de la vie doit dorénavant s'appuyer sur une force substitutive: non plus sur le goût de vivre la vie que l'on vit, mais sur l'attrait d'une vie autre et améliorée que nul ne vivra jamais.[53]

Contrary to approbation and 'joie de vivre', optimism is therefore conditional, and thus always liable to deception, frustration: 'Ou bien la joie consiste en l'illusion éphémère d'en avoir fini avec le tragique de l'existence: auquel cas la joie n'est pas paradoxale mais est illusoire. Ou bien elle consiste en une approbation de l'existence tenue pour irrémédiablement tragique: auquel cas la joie est paradoxale mais n'est pas illusoire'.[54] From Rosset's perspective, approbation appears as fundamentally paradoxical (unsurprisingly, since it appears as anything but logical). But it is also paradoxical because it coexists with,

[52] Rosset, *La Force*, p. 29.
[53] Rosset, *La Force*, p. 28.
[54] Rosset, *La Force*, p. 24.

or posits as prerequisite, the ability not to blind oneself to what truly is, regardless of how 'unacceptable' this reality may seem.

This paradox explains why approbation is described by the philosopher as akin to 'grace'. In this respect again, the parallel with Pascal is striking, insofar as Pascal's faith is seen as a gift of God, a miracle, a quality that is given and cannot be worked toward, be it through reasoning, prayer or will. Approbation is indeed also devoid of any reason/cause, and this is what makes it, like faith, so powerful: 'l'homme véritablement joyeux se reconnaît paradoxalement à ceci qu'il est incapable de préciser de quoi il est joyeux, de fournir le motif propre de sa satisfaction.'[55]

Reflecting on the contradictory nature of joy, Rosset then proposes a summary in three points: 'la joie est, par sa définition même, d'essence illogique et irrationnelle'; 'la joie est nécessairement cruelle, de par l'insouciance qu'elle oppose au sort le plus funeste comme aux considérations les plus tragiques'; and 'la joie est la condition nécessaire, sinon de la vie en général, du moins de la vie menée en conscience et connaissance de cause.'[56]

Duplicates

Rosset's thought shows the strong links existing between chance, reality, 'le tragique' and 'joie de vivre'. In fact, it reverses one of the most commonly held of ideas, namely, that there is 'something' at the basis of reality, and follows the radical implications of such a seminal claim. As mentioned earlier, the philosopher opposes Artificialism and Naturalism. Now that Artificialism, the core of Rosset's thought, has been explored, the following development is going to focus on Naturalism, which will offer a rich critical tool.

Simply put, Naturalism encompasses all that contradicts Artificialism (such as hope, as was hinted at earlier). Thus, whatever does not fit in the 'causal chain' of Artificialism highlighted above immediately spills over into the other category. As the name indicates, Naturalism posits the existence of a nature of some sort, and in this sense, it overlaps with Conche's Substantialism. In Rosset's analysis, however, as indicated earlier, the onus is not so much on the problem

[55] Rosset, *La Force*, p. 8.
[56] Rosset, *La Force*, p. 26.

of essences as on that of identity. According to the tautology of reality, 'c'est justement la *définition* du réel que d'être sans définition […], ou du moins sans autre définition qu'une redite de son propre fait'.[57] Reality is equal to nothing but itself. For Naturalism, however, there is no tautology of reality: it can be grasped; it is possible to define it. The originality of Rosset is to shift the point of view, and to propose a criticism of Naturalism, or Substantialism, based on the denial of reality's *idiotès*-ness. As a consequence, Naturalism is made possible by the concept of *duplicate*s, and the process of duplication.

Just as seeing oneself requires a reflective surface, such as a mirror, Rosset posits that all essence-based philosophical systems work on the assumption of there existing a double of reality. In actual fact, the concept of essence can only be envisaged through that of duplication. To return to the analogy of the mirror, we only have an idea of what we look like when we look at ourselves in a mirror. The individual is unable to picture him/herself without the help of a double. For Rosset, in order to have an idea of 'what' he is, man creates such a duplicate, whose 'reflective' property allows him to have a grasp of himself. The same, naturally, goes for the world, or reality, in general: if man wants to talk about the world, or reality, he has to create an image of it. The whole problem goes back to reality's 'idiotie': to avoid the 'despairing' dryness of tautology, which the philosopher insists is the only discourse that can coherently be produced about reality, most people resort to a conceptual mirror, with the difference that this mirror is their own creation, and not an objective item. 'Essence', 'nature' and other such abstract terms designed to provide an idealised picture of what *is* rest entirely on this principle.

As a result, duplicates, because they are, by definition, not found in reality, come from a deep, often unconscious, desire, a desire which creates and projects an image of the world onto the silent reality, forgetting in the process its fundamental subjectivity, or arbitrariness: 'l'homme ne se trompe pas parce qu'il ignore, mais parce qu'il désire'.[58] Once this imagined duplicate exists in the mind, it offers an intellectual point of leverage with which to weigh, discuss and pass judgment on reality. Naturally, for the very reason that it is imagined, it does not offer any real insight into reality, no such insight existing

[57] Rosset, *Logique*, p. 35.
[58] Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 23.

anyway. However, with duplicates, Naturalists are able to turn a meaningless concatenation of events into an apparently meaningful whole. But this meaning, instead of being *unique*, and expressing the truth about reality, reflects the vast array of desires that pushes the man in the street and thinkers alike to seek to escape the 'tragique', and therefore takes on many different mantles.

As opposed to Artificialism's monism (*idiotès*-ness), Naturalism is quintessentially dualistic: the concept of duplication indeed inescapably leads to dualism, insofar as desire creates a picture that is *necessarily* in conflict with the 'idiotie' of reality. It decrees that reality should be this or that way, hence its strong link with morality, a concept Rosset dwells on at length in his essays. The main point of this dualism, it should be stressed, is to inject meaning, and therefore to reject the thought of the 'tragique', of a rootless and aimless reality. This is the very reason why Rosset rejects Naturalism: the main error, the major vice, of duplicates is to blind mankind to reality, channelling one's attention away from what is. Moreover, it places the absence of meaning in a separate subjective realm, unverifiable and therefore subject to all kinds of interpretation and misrepresentation. For this reason, explanation, in whatever shape or form, offers a kind of comfort: no answer will ever be found, but at the same time it diverts attention away from the evidence of the existence of a mute reality.

The advantages of duplication are numerous, but two are particularly significant: they provide a basis for hope, as well as a foundation for interpreting reality. Positing a supernatural being as the origin of existence allows thinkers to inject meaning into the world, for such a being implies a logic, and a reason for what is. In addition, this reassuring presence gives credence to the hypothesis that there exists an 'ideal' world. Judeo-Christian civilisation is built on the premise that mankind, following Adam and Eve's fall from grace, is disconnected from the realm of truth and the absolute. There therefore exist two very different spheres: one in which God evolves, and one in which mankind and the rest of Creation live. The example used here is taken from religion, but this dichotomy pervades the whole Western outlook. Plato, whose influence on Western philosophy has been so great, has given a rational veneer to this idea in his theory of Essences. In a discussion of art in *Timaeus*, Plato writes: 'The world has been framed in the likeness of that which is apprehended by reason and

mind and is unchangeable, and must therefore of necessity, if this is admitted, be a copy of something.'[59]

This duplication, for Rosset, thus serves to justify the idea of guidelines, directions. The duplicate of reality becomes the form that reality *should* take, and mankind must therefore strive to imitate it. Such striving applies to all areas: ethics, morals, justice or aesthetics. As a result, reality as a 'donné' is forgotten; it is looked at through the prism of a duplicate which, for the simple reason that it is engineered by desires, has no foundation whatsoever in reality: 'tel est bien le jeu de la démarche morale: elle invente d'abord un monde harmonieux, puis en explique l'absence par une série de lois et de considérations qui sont comme autant de contre-forces imaginaires s'opposant à la réalité effective de cette harmonie.'[60]

Following on from this first advantage, therefore, is the second: duplicates offer the possibility of interpreting reality. Thanks to the creation of doubles, reality is no longer silent. The existence of a far-away beacon of light and reason in the ideal world gives philosophers a tool to analyse what is supposed to be (hence the great number of essays on a concept such as 'nature', which is wrongly thought to describe the 'donné'). From the Artificialist's point of view, such a discussion is impossible; but once a duplicate is posited, the concept of nature becomes viable, because it is justified by an intentional, or at least logical, origin. In other words, reality can be talked about because the Naturalist has an idea of what it is supposed to be like, a reflection of what it is in his mind.

However, according to Rosset, what all Naturalistic discussions of reality fail to do is to define it. They will explain that reality is 'God', or 'nature', but when asked to provide a description of what they see as reality, they are unable to offer any positive definition: '[la nature] n'ayant jamais été honorée d'une définition […] toutes les propositions à son sujet sont promises à une indéfinie compossibilité et ne peuvent apparaître comme contradictoires qu'à la faveur de l'illusion selon laquelle il y a quelque chose de réellement pensé sous le concept de nature.'[61] This failure, naturally, is not surprising to Rosset, for the simple reason that nature is 'rien':

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[59] Plato, *Timaeus*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html> [accessed on 23 August 2008].
[60] Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 105.
[61] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 19.

> Incapable de se livrer elle-même, [la nature] fournit en revanche un point d'appui nécessaire et efficace à tous les thèmes métaphysiques dont la reconnaissance est tributaire de la reconnaissance d'une nature; car transcender n'est pas tout, encore faut-il transcender quelque chose. Le rien de pensé sous le concept de nature n'est donc pas un rien quelconque: il définit un rien à partir de quoi il devient possible de penser autre chose.[62]

Therefore, the main point of the (illusory) possibility of interpretation is to give Naturalists the tool necessary to create meaning where there is none.

The emphasis put on duplication by Rosset explains why, more than all other differences, it is the one notion that really differentiates Artificialism from Naturalism. Indeed any system of thought relying partly or wholly on duplicates immediately falls into the second category. This might sound obvious with regard to the cases of Plato (Essences), Kant (noumena versus phenomena) or Rousseau (denial of artificiality), for instance, but less so in the cases of optimism or Existentialism. However, as Rosset shows, the presence of duplicates in these latter two examples is also undeniable: as has already been stressed, optimism is conditional, insofar as it depends on the circumstances, and therefore dissipates as soon as life turns less kind; optimism expects life to be kind, as it is how the optimist feels it *should* be. As for Existentialism, Sartre's 'nausée', while clearly originating from the realisation of the 'tragique', equally clearly belongs to the first category of possible responses to Rosset's wager mentioned earlier, not in terms of denying reality as such, but in that it is unable to side with 'joie de vivre'. This siding with sadness, for Rosset, marks the underlying presence of a duplicate, or rather of the desire for a duplicate whose existence is, however, admitted to be a fiction:

> La facticité de l'existence […] ne signifie pas que l'existence n'a rien de naturel, mais que le naturel qui en est la trame est un naturel frelaté, et même à la limite un naturel hors nature […]. La nature existe […], mais elle est privée de tous les attributs « naturels » qui contribueraient à la rendre nécessaire. D'où la nostalgie naturaliste inhérente à l'existentialisme sartrien.[63]

[62] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 16.
[63] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 286.

Freedom

Materialism, when fully understood, takes as premise the belief that everything that *is* belongs to the material realm: objects, as is obvious, but also ideas and thoughts. Rosset subscribes to this interpretation. Will is not foreign to matter, and as such it is the latter which rules over the former. In other words freedom, understood as the radical ability to choose, is a myth. The ability to choose exists, but it must be carefully thought out within the conceptual framework of determination. What we normally think of as freedom is merely our making a decision that we have been led to by what has constituted our life thus far:

> Lorsque je veux et désire, cette volonté et ce désir sont-ils à eux-mêmes un libre départ dont l'origine est ma personne en tant que libre, ou sont-ils au contraire déjà des données dont je dépends?[64]

Freedom is nothing more than a network of hidden causes that make us act in one way or another. There are compelling reasons for what we do; we cannot decide to pursue what these determinations exclude. To deny this amounts to a rejection of the 'donné': as the name indicates, it marks what precedes, and is given to, us ('le donné'), and not what we can impart to it ('je donne'). 'Il faut choisir entre la liberté et l'être,' writes Rosset. 'Ou bien je suis libre, et l'être est à mon service. Ou bien je dépends du donné, et mon apparente liberté est au service de l'être.'[65] Naturally, the denial of determination is shared by many and, as indicated in the introduction to chance in philosophy, subtle arguments have been put forward to try and accommodate either complete freedom, or at least a sense of freedom, within an otherwise Deterministic world.

The affirmation of freedom falls squarely, in Rosset's analysis, within his theory of duplication. Indeed it reveals the individual's refusal to face the 'tragique' of life by giving the illusion that he/she has power over what is. As such, freedom comes after the realisation of the anguishing state of a world in which man has no special role whatsoever. Freedom is, in fact, the byproduct of this anguish; the only way, in the end, to keep painful reality at bay:

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[64] Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 91.
[65] Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 92.

> Qu'elle qu'en soit la forme, et celle-ci est souvent des plus ingrates et obscures, l'idée de liberté a pour mission de défendre un dogme qui se maintient identique à travers les différents visages que revêt la liberté: il s'agit, coûte que coûte, de maintenir la possibilité de la distance entre le soi et le donné, d'écarter avant toute chose le spectre terrifiant de l'être nécessaire, antérieur à toute disposition humaine.[66]

Conclusion

Rosset is *the* theoretician of chance. In his system, the concept is central, and the philosopher carefully examines the snowball effect the seminal gesture of basing his system of thought on chance has within philosophy. In particular, it provides him with a powerful critical tool, duplication, which enables him to deconstruct other systems and show their reliance on desire, itself based in the mostly unconscious realIsation that reality is, indeed, unique, causeless and devoid of direction.

The philosopher, a keen musician, is no stranger to the worlds of visual arts, literature or music. Some of his points are even made through the study of particular creative works, as in the case of his treatment of the Oedipus myth, wherein the character's mistake over the identity of his parents is used to reveal the illusory and, eventually, pernicious nature of duplication. In the course of his essays, Rosset identifies several Artificialist creative artists, the composer Offenbach and the writer Nerval amongst others.

But never, surprisingly, has he considered the case of artists whose work explicitly gravitates around chance, a position which would seem, in appearance, automatically to dispel doubts of Naturalism. This is an intriguing omission from the theoretician of chance. But can chance as a subject be taken to imply chance as a system? The first aim of this study is to answer this question, to examine whether working with chance, and constantly affirming its power, automatically makes one a Rossetian Artificialist.

Its second aim is directly related to the radicality of the approach of the individuals under consideration, which necessarily raises the following question: is it possible completely to harness chance in creative production? Can a work of art embody, and restrict itself to putting into practice, chance, as conceptualised by Rosset?

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[66] Rosset, *Le Monde*, p. 89.

Part II

4

The Dialogue of Chance and the Arts

A close bond

Art and chance are related, even necessarily related. Scientific discoveries involve a close dependence on the scientific context: for instance, Einstein's theory of relativity could not have been elaborated in ancient Greece, because ancient Greeks lacked, amongst other things, the adequate mathematical and conceptual tools. On the other hand, works of art are much less obviously dependent on the artistic context, for they do not seem to be *primarily* the result of successive layers of knowledge being put together. In this sense, while it is generally supposed that, had Einstein not existed, the theory of general relativity would have been discovered by another scientist, it is hard to argue that *Les Misérables* or *Ulysses* could have been written by anyone other than Hugo or Joyce. In other words, there is a general consensus that there is an internal necessity to science, whereas art is somehow, and essentially, both more personal and more arbitrary.

Of course, there exist a number of elements that exert an influence on works of art: they are not created *ex nihilo*. Such contributory factors include doxa regarding style, genre, topics; past creators and their legacy; the socio-political climate, amongst others. Nevertheless, these aspects do not contradict the general 'arbitrariness' underlying the existence of works of art (arbitrariness in the sense that cause and effect cannot *obviously* be traced between an artist's time and environment and his creative works), but simply indicate that a certain number of determinations run through this overall aleatory process.

There is therefore no specific reason for a work of art to *be*, in the sense that nothing can fully and completely explain its being, and art can thus be described as being contingent. But chance is also involved at another level, that of the practical coming into being. It was long

believed that the idea of a work of art was infused into the artist by a Muse: a piece of art was a present from the Gods, and the artist a chosen human being who had been given the possibility of revealing to others the secrets of, amongst other things, beauty. This conception influenced centuries of philosophy of, and discourses on, art. Tellingly, artists, and more surprisingly scientists alike, often talk about *inspiration* when having to describe the advent of their work, and the latter even talk of 'beautiful' or 'elegant' solutions.[1]

But if one were to leave the hypothesis of the Muse aside, what can the word 'inspiration' mean, if not that out of nothing, something is engendered; that, by mere chance, nothingness gives birth to an imminent entity? Whatever one thinks about the coming into being of a work of art, the fact remains that a 'micro-necessity' has arisen from a complete absence of necessity.[2]

Chance: a new history of literature

In *Le Hasard en littérature*, Erich Köhler stresses that the way societies perceive chance has a deeper effect on shaping works of art than might at first be thought, and attempts a sociological history of literature through the study of the different conceptions of chance in significant writers. Spanning almost ten centuries, from Chrétien de Troyes to Michel Butor, taking examples from a vast corpus of European literature (Spanish (Cervantès, Lazarillo de Tormes), Italian (Boccaccio, Croce, Dante), German or germanophone (Novalis, Kafka), and French (Balzac, Beckett, Chamfort, Mallarmé, Lafayette)) Köhler distinguishes three periods in which chance took on a demonstrably different meaning and gave rise to major changes in the literary production: he terms these 'la fin de la providence', 'la contingence', 'l'absurde'.[3]

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[1] Cf Poincaré, *Science et méthode* and Henri Poincaré, *La Science et l'Hypothèse* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990).

[2] Just as any past event is a necessity (not contingent: it has occurred and nothing can change that fact), any work of art can be called a micro-necessity, in relation to its size. See Luc Ferry, *Le Sens du beau* (Paris: Le livre de poche, 2001); Marc Jimenez, *Qu'est-ce que l'esthétique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

[3] Köhler, p. 120.

'La fin de la providence'

The first 'epoch' (broadly speaking, the Enlightenment) evoked by Köhler corresponds to a time when it was first felt that God probably did not in fact have the upper hand in man's state of affairs. The consequences of such a discovery were varied, and are essentially visible in two ways. First, it gave writers an argument for opposing the hierarchical structure of society, accepted beforehand without question (Diderot, Marivaux, Lazarillo de Tormes, Sorel). Second, it showed that if chance did not contradict necessity (for, as this epoch came to learn, necessity is what *is*, not what is *about to be*) it had a role to play in making the possible truly possible.[4] Whereas under God's rule the category of the possible was of a much less likely reality than that of the probable, 'la fin de la providence' revealed how in fact both were on a same level of probability, thus attributing to chance and self-determination, or self-determination through chance, a new status.

'La contingence'

In the 'contingency' period (broadly the 19th century), chance appears to lose its positive qualities. Ceasing to be a guide, it becomes part of a necessity that has changed nature: instead of being based on a divine essence, necessity equates to the way social mechanisms work. Therefore, chance proves to be no more than the contingency resulting from the functioning of a world devoid of purpose. To the emancipating virtues of chance in 'la fin de la providence', the reign of 'la contingence' opposes mere mechanised arbitrariness, whose main characteristic is to remain out of control, for chance now seems to give rise to micro-necessities that, more than ever, are liable to be destroyed at any moment by the same means that first brought them to life.[5] Mechanised arbitrariness appears for instance in the growing belief in a fortuitous biological Determinism, that is, a Determinism caused by a chance-inspired process and for that very reason deprived of any kind of freedom and meaning. This is eloquently evoked by the Goncourt brothers:

[4] Köhler, p. 18.
[5] Köhler, pp.49-50.

> Le hasard des écus met au lit un homme et une femme (le hasard charrie le sperme à travers les trompes de Fallope), le hasard allume la vie chez ce zoophyte vissé aux entrailles de la mère; le hasard du forceps te jette au monde complet ou ébréché, intelligent ou crétin; le hasard de l'éducation, de la fortune, des amitiés te fait honnête ou scélérat; le hasard des événements qui ballottent ta petite personnalité te fait célèbre ou anonyme; le hasard des constitutions, des maladies, des accidents de l'amour te fait vivre ou mourir.[6]

This general observation led some writers, such as Théophile Gautier and Stéphane Mallarmé, to separate art from a realm affected by an arbitrariness which seemed to justify an outburst of Utilitarianism and Opportunism (the rise of industry, the birth of Capitalism), and champion art for art's sake, a 'return' to 'purity' in art, and in poetry specifically. Significantly, Mallarmé's motto spoke of 'defeating' chance, of 'le hasard vaincu par le mot', since chance belongs to the everyday, and defeats the work of 'l'esprit'.[7]

However, this endeavour could not but fail, for the very reason highlighted above: chance can only be annihilated through an act based on chance itself. Mallarmé suggested that 'le hasard' could only be suppressed as such if all its possible combinations were made to occur, as a result of which absolute chance would shade into absolute necessity.[8] Still, such an 'absolutisation' is mere wishful thinking, and Mallarmé returned to a less extreme, more conciliatory, view in *Un coup de dés*, published the year of his death, in which is expressed the idea that 'jamais le hasard ne détruira le hasard, mais tout acte créateur est une victoire partielle sur la contingence'.[9] The work of art imposes a spirit-made necessity (spirit understood as the essence of man) on the 'alienated causality' of the world, and thus forces contingency to serve a creative process which defies chance-governed reality.[10]

Clément Rosset, in *L'anti-nature*, reaches conclusions similar to Köhler's, but takes them further and finally reverses their consequences: to him, the writing and thought of Mallarmé show that, while the outside world is unable to display any kind of necessity (following

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[6] Les frères Goncourt, 'En 18…' <http://freresgoncourt.free.fr/texen18/texte.htm> [accessed on 8 October 2006].
[7] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 387.
[8] Köhler, pp.56-57.
[9] Köhler, p. 59.
[10] The title of the Köhler's chapter partly devoted to Mallarmé is 'Causalité aliénée et contingence' (Köhler, pp.39-59).

Köhler), poetry too fails to develop a compensatory order. Even in the event of the most artistic, Mallarmé-inspired 'coup de dés', the work of art will not, even partially, defeat chance, and, in the words of Rosset, is doomed to remain within the realm of 'artificialisme': 'l'artifice (the work of art) se révèle incapable de produire du nécessaire, ce qui signifie que la production artistique, si élaborée soit-elle, ne diffère finalement pas de la réalité sur fond de laquelle elle prétendait prendre relief'.[11] Consequently, whereas in the end Köhler uses Mallarmé to serve his Marxist interpretation of the history of literature, thus granting the poet a Hegelian turn of mind, Rosset implies precisely the contrary.[12] Mallarmé is, indeed, in his very own words, the 'chercheur d'un mystère qu'il sait ne pas exister, et qu'il poursuivra, à jamais pour cela, du deuil de son lucide désespoir, car *c'eût été* la Vérité!'[13]

'L'absurde'

To return to Köhler, in the final period (which corresponds approximately to the 20th century), what seems paramount to the critic is the twofold realisation that, firstly, chance sees the possible triumph over the probable and secondly, taking the epoch of contingency's conclusion further, that what *is*, owing its being to mere accidents, is meaningless. What *is* could have been different, and there is no explanation for its being the way it is, as opposed to the way it could have been. 'Un déterminisme qui ne résulte d'aucune loi (sauf de celle de ce qui n'a pas de loi, de la contingence absolue) est un démenti au concept traditionnel de causalité. *Il est plus total, plus pessimiste, plus déprimant que celle-ci*.'[14] As shown here, the birth of absurdity, as developed for instance by Beckett, Camus or Sartre, is rooted in the very counter-principle of chance: the impossibility of justifying the

[11] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 105.
[12] Köhler's argument is to show that contingency is in fact the element through which freedom gives mankind the ability to invent its own Determinism: 'L'introduction du hasard dans la dialectique historique ne se fait pas au prix de l'abandon de celle-ci. Elle lui évite bien plus de retomber constamment dans un déterminisme qui ne laisserait à l'activité des hommes aucune marge pour organiser l'avenir dans une pratique humaine à la fois libre et nécessaire.' (Köhler, pp.120-1).
[13] Letter to Odilon Redon, 2nd February 1885 (Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 280).
[14] Köhler, p. 67. My emphasis.

coming into being of what is, and its philosophical absence of necessity. In the words of Jean Duvignaud, writing on Alain Robbe-Grillet: 'C'est là une véritable découverte: tout est possible et le réel n'est point nécessaire […]. Ce qui arrive n'est qu'une des versions possibles de ce que la vie peut formuler.'[15]

Whereas 'l'absurde' is often linked to a pessimism tinged with nostalgia, for Köhler, André Breton suggests an apparently divergent interpretation of the phenomenon. Absurdity, that is, radical contingency, turns for the Surrealist into hope: to him, the historical shift from probable to possible points to the next step, the advent of the improbable, which Breton associates with desire and an intertwining of both objective and subjective realities.[16] To what extent this translates into the Surrealist's writing and affects his exploitation of chance will be studied in the next chapter.

Chance as a theme

Given that chance is, in a long tradition, the exact reverse of necessity, it appears from Köhler's interpretation that, in discussing the latter, writers have, consciously or not, necessarily said something about the former. As a consequence, it becomes obvious that a phenomenon of communicating vessels is at work here: the history of literature is bearing witness to a change in hierarchy with regard to this issue, contingency taking over from causal Determinism to rule perhaps not the whole world (in particular physical, as is sometimes suggested in *Le Hasard en littérature*) but at least some important writers' conceptions of life and, therefore, of their art.

Interestingly, if one excepts Mallarmé, Breton, and a rapid allusion to 'art aléatoire', the writers studied by Köhler always display a common characteristic: at one level or another, they used chance as a *theme*.[17] It may well be a structural theme, as for instance in the case of Diderot or Proust, that is, a device which determines the shape of the end product through the creation of new necessities caused by for-

[15] Jean Duvignaud, 'Alain Robbe Grillet: La maison du rendez-vous', *Nouvelle Revue Française*, 14, I (1966), pp. 327-339 (p. 331).
[16] Köhler, pp.71-6.
[17] Köhler, p. 85.

tuitous events.[18] In other words, the emphasis is put on the evolution of time and events according to chance, or at least to one seminal chance event. It is easy to understand why Köhler insisted on this particular use of chance, when reading the fourth chapter of his essay, for this is precisely how he defines history, and therefore backs up his Marxist interpretation of reality.[19] It therefore discards what are often more pragmatical uses that do not fit within this precise framework. This one-sided vision finds an interesting confirmation in the pages dedicated to Breton, whose only works mentioned are prose texts (*L'Amour fou*, *Nadja*), rather than the thornier examples of automatic writing, surrealist poetry and objective chance.

Fruitfulness

So far, chance has been discussed, as Köhler explored it in his essay, as the mere opposite of necessity. However, this is only one of the pairings possible when considering a concept which, in the last analysis, is an 'anti-concept', and therefore allows many levels of interpretation.[20] This is why through the last millennium, 'le hasard' has served various purposes other than simply contradicting necessity: counter-principle to order, logic, structure, meaning, boredom, lack of inspiration, amongst others, most of which it is true derive from the initial ontological opposition between chance and necessity, but bear differing implications.

Fatras *and* fatrasie

In the 13th century, at the apogee of the first classic age of French poetry, two new types of poem appeared, 'fatras' and 'fatrasie'.[21] Both obeyed strict prosodic rules, but nonetheless gave the impression of being mere 'jeux incohérents de non-sens' '[ayant] souvent l'apparence de bouts-rimés absurdes', hence resembling randomly assembled

[18] Köhler, pp.35-8 (Diderot, *Jacques le fataliste*); pp.65-71 (Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*).
[19] The chapter in question is entitled 'Le hasard et l'histoire' (Köhler, pp.89-102).
[20] Rosset, *Logique*, p. 73.
[21] Paul Zumthor, 'Fatrasie', in *Encyclopedia Universalis* [accessed on 13 November 2007].

texts.[22] This impression was due to a concerted accumulation of morpho-semantic disruptive processes and antiphrastic techniques, and it would therefore be an exaggeration to assimilate the *fatras* and *fatrasie*'s general incoherence to mere chance. Here is an extract, quoted by Zumthor, from a *fatrasie*:

> Le son d'un cornet
> mangeait au vinaigre
> le cœur d'un tonnerre
> quand un béquet mort
> prit au trébuchet
> le cours d'une étoile

Here, the disordering of the grammatical and logical pattern clearly impedes meaning, which, as Zumthor puts it, allows one to perceiving 'une très lointaine analogie avec l'écriture automatique moderne'. This parallel was, as it were, first acknowledged by the surrealists themselves: in March 1926 *La Révolution surréaliste* published five instances of such poems, three anonymous, two others by Philippe de Beaumanoir.[23]

Aleatory Mozart

Moving away from literature and concentrating on music prior to the 20th century, a particularly noteworthy use of chance is to be found in specific 18th century 'musical games'. The most famous name linked to these games is Mozart's, or supposedly so, but as Leonard Ratner has highlighted, they were very much in fashion at the time, and numerous games making the aleatory composing of musical pieces possible were devised.[24]

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[22] Zumthor. 'La fatrasie est constituée par une strophe de six pentasyllabes suivis de cinq heptasyllabes sur deux rimes. Le fatras enchâsse, en vue d'un effet supplémentaire de contraste, ces onze vers, réduits à l'isométrie, entre les deux vers d'un distique emprunté à quelque poème connu, généralement à thème amoureux.' (Zumthor).

[23] *La Révolution surréaliste*, n°6 (March 1926), pp.2-3.

[24] It is not rare to find his authorship of such pieces doubted: cf. 'Aleatory music', *The Routledge Encyclopedia of philosophy* [accessed on 11 February 2005] [on CD-ROM]; Lars Ratner, 'Ars Combinatoria: Chance and Choice in Eighteenth-Century Music', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Music: A Tribute to K. Geiringer on his 70th Birthday* (1970), pp. 341-348 (p. 343).

As in the case of *fatras* and *fatrasie*, these techniques kept within traditional structures, ranging, amongst others, from minuets to marches and 'contredanses'. However, unlike the two forms of poetry, musical games did rely on an objective randomising process. The title of a booklet published circa 1800 and attributed to Mozart reads: 'Instruction pour composer autant de walzes que l'on veut par le moyen de deux Dez sans avoir la moindre connoissance de la Musique ou de la Composition'.[25] The actual score depended on the throwing of two dice, which, once cast, produced a number that corresponded to a note or any other musical element in a given grid. It is worth noticing that contemporary music theorists see in this type of game the first expression of what has become in the 20th century 'computer' music: there exists 'une filiation directe entre ces jeux musicaux et les premières tentatives modernes de composition algorithmique (John Pierce and Lejaren Hiller).'[26]

In the particular framework of 18th century salons, chance thus compensated for ignorance, and it should not be forgotten that these techniques blossomed in a society preoccupied with artistic and 'spirItual' occupations.[27] Nonetheless, or perhaps consequently, and perhaps for the first time in history, chance was being used, deliberately, as a creative force and, more strikingly still, resulted in what might be termed a negation of subjectivity. Once again, this negation is a way of 'getting round' the players' lack of knowledge in composition, but it indirectly raises issues that will become crucial in 20th century art, as will soon become clear.

Was Mona Lisa's smile inspired by a crack in a wall?

A particular use of the concept in painting can highlight with special emphasis the organic linking of chance and art hinted at above. Leonardo da Vinci, in his *Traité de la peinture*, wrote of a technique he used to tell his students about which consisted in examining old walls to get inspiration from shapes in them:

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[25] Cited in David Lorrain, 'Réalisation de jeux musicaux du XVIIIe siècle: Mozart et Stadler' <http://jim2003.agglo-montbeliard.fr/articles/lorrain.pdf> [accessed on 20 March 2005].

[26] Lorrain.

[27] The extremes of which are for example illustrated in Patrice Leconte's 1996 film *Ridicule*.

> Si tu regardes des murs souillés de beaucoup de taches, ou faits de pierres multicolores, avec l'idée d'imaginer quelque scène, tu y trouveras l'analogie de paysages au décor de montagnes, rivières, roches, arbres, plaines, larges vallées et collines de toute sorte. Tu pourras y voir aussi des batailles et des figures aux gestes vifs et d'étranges visages et costumes et une infinité de choses que tu pourras ramener à une forme nette et compléter.[28]

Chance here is comprised in the way the idea of a work of art is helped into existence through the chance happening upon a medium that is both independent of the visual artist and apparently patternless, disorderly. Da Vinci's teaching makes more evident the role that 'patternlessness' plays in engendering order, and the way art relies, ontologically, on apparent nothingness. The cracks and stains on a wall are auxiliary prompts, partly freeing the painter from the effort of imagination. Of course, at a second level, the random locating and examining of the walls trigger the imagination, chance therefore appearing as a new kind of inspiration, very different, however, from that suffused by the Muse: instead of the visual artist being helped by some divinity, thus earning a privileged status, he infers masterpieces out of arbitrariness.

This interpretation was taken up and elaborated upon at the end of the 18th century by the English painter Alexander Cozens, whose most famous work, *A New Method for Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* (1785), theorised 'blots', i.e. stains randomly scattered on a sheet, as means of enhancing the creative process.[29] In 1920, the scientist Rorschach elaborated a psychological test relying on exactly the same principle. Still in use today, the test consists of the psychological assessment of an individual's state of mind through the latter's association of a series of inkstains on paper with real objects or scenes.[30]

It is easy to see how this 'Tachism' *avant la lettre* can be related to 20th century practices, in particular within Dada (Arp, Ernst, Dominguez), Abstract Expressionism (Pollock, Kline, Still), and, of course, *Tachisme* itself (Michaux, Fautrier, Bryen).

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[28] Léonard De Vinci, *Traité de la peinture* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2003), p 124.
[29] Alexander Cozens, *A New Method for Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* (London: Black, 1952).
[30] See for instance John Exner and Philip Erdberg, *The Rorschach: A Comprehensive System: Advanced Interpretation* (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc, 2005).

Summary

Any form of art involves some level of interaction between artist and chance (although whether this aleatoriness is primarily seen as the expression of a divine will, or as a stroke of luck, is a subjective matter).[31] This has led to artists recognising it as a necessary part of art, with many works integrating the unexpected as one of their components or their themes.

However, after the emergence of chance as a scientific concept and as a philosophical reality, avant-garde radicalism turned the traditional acceptance of 'chance as part of art' on its head, challenging the purely thematic role of chance, and giving it a role that Mozart, Balzac or Cozens surely never thought possible. Thus only in the 20th century could artists put forward the idea that not only was chance a part of art, but that art actually could be guided by it. All the elements briefly looked at in this section set the scene for the exploration of the three individuals studied in detail in the remainder of the present work, as well as of the varying degrees to which they used the concept in their own artistic productions.

[31] The term 'aleatoriness', although not readily found in dictionaries, is for obvious reasons used frequently in texts discussing chance. Here are two precedents, spanning more than sixty years: Stanley Legerbott, 'Chance and Circumstance: Are Laws of History Possible ?', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 41, No. 15 (Jul. 20 1944), pp. 393-411 (p. 394); Lucy O'Meara, 'Atonality and Tonality: Musical Analogies in Roland Barthes's Lectures at the Collège de France', in *Paragraph*, 31:1 (2008), pp. 9-22 (p. 12).

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André Breton

Chance in the works of André Breton

André Breton, the founder of the Surrealist movement, wrote articles and essays about the movement's tenets whose aim was to convey its theoretical ideas, and to discuss related issues. At the same time, he published poems and texts that do not belong to this didactic genre. These poems and texts were written with the aim of putting into practice specific methods of producing Surrealist pieces, methods which were either invented or appropriated by the movement, and, in the perspective of the present work, it is on these methods that the following exploration will focus.

For analytical clarity, two separate characteristics of some of the texts have been isolated: the 'writing techniques' Surrealism developed, and the apparently more 'playful' approach embodied by the Surrealist 'games'. A third category will also be discussed: that of 'objective chance'. As will be demonstrated, the latter cannot be classified as a *method* as such, and unlike the writing techniques and games, it appears either in theoretical writings or in theoretical passages of creative texts, but any discussion of chance in Surrealism would be incomplete were it to be overlooked.

'Writing techniques'

Over the lifetime of the movement, Surrealism invented an impressive number of 'writing techniques' (this expression is used to refer to a method, with specific rules or conditions, intended to bring about the

production of a text of some length).[1] These numerous techniques can be divided into four major categories. As a doctor during the First World War, Breton took to jotting down soldiers' dreams. In the March 1922 issue of *Littérature*, he published accounts of three of his own dreams, thereby launching a long-lasting fashion amongst Surrealists.[2] This first technique is most commonly known as 'dream reports' ('récits de rêves').

The second writing technique, directly linked to the first one, emerged as early as September 1919, when the poet René Crevel introduced Breton, Desnos and Morise to a spiritualist experiment, first recounted in Breton's 'Entrée des médiums'.[3] This episode revealed the hidden advantages of hypnosis, and the habit consequently grew rapidly amongst the group, so much so that *La Révolution surréaliste* 'donna […] la priorité aux récits de rêves, transcripts comme des compte-rendus de l'indicible.'[4] The discovery had such an impact on Aragon that he wrote an account of that period under the title *Une vague de rêves*; Maurice Nadeau, for his part, dates the true beginning of Surrealism from this period.[5]

The third technique, put into practice in *L'immaculée conception*, which was co-written by Breton and Eluard in 1930, draws on comments made in 1924 in the *Manifeste du surréalisme*. *L'immaculée conception* is the result of the co-authors' simulating several pathological conditions: 'après la débilité mentale, sans tricherie, par le seul pouvoir de la poésie, Breton et Eluard simulèrent la manie aiguë, la paralysie générale, le délire d'interprétation et enfin la démence précoce'.[6] (In much the same vein, and at about the same time, Dali invented his famous 'méthode paranoïa-critique').

The last Surrealist technique is, undoubtedly, the most significant one for the purposes of this study. The *Manifeste du surréalisme*,

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[1] The official dates of Surrealism are 1924-1966, although it is commonly accepted that Breton's scission from Dada marks the real birth of the movement in all but name.

[2] Béhar, *Le Surréalisme*, p. 187.

[3] Breton, *Les Pas perdus* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), pp.122-31.

[4] Béhar, *Le Surréalisme*, p. 189. See also this telling remark by Breton: 'Aujourd'hui Desnos *parle surréaliste* à volonté.' (André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 40).

[5] Louis Aragon, *Une vague de rêves* (Paris: Commerce, 1924); Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1964).

[6] Béhar, *Le Surréalisme*, p. 198.

which marks the official birth of Surrealism, contains many theoretical developments presenting the movement, but on the practical level, the essay consists of an introduction to and a promotion of automatic writing, which quickly surfaced as the keystone of the movement.[7] Starting with the definition of metaphor by Reverdy: '*L'image est une création pure de l'esprit. Elle ne peut naître d'une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées*', the treatment of automatism only really ends with the conclusion of the essay itself.[8] From the Surrealist point of view, the technique dates from 1919, and was widely used afterwards, as the pages of all Surrealist journals, from *Littérature* to *Le Surréalisme, même* and *L'Archibras*, confirm.[9] Breton always defended automatism, and to the end of his life was eloquent about its merits and potential. His describing automatic writing as 'une infortune continue' in the 1930s was essentially a rallying call for a truer form of automatism, which by then was often used as a mere tool for 'embellishing' poems, in particular by Aragon and Eluard.[10]

The way Breton discovered automatism is well-known: one evening, about to fall asleep, he was struck by a very peculiar phrase which, as it were, imposed itself upon him *by chance*: 'Il y a un homme coupé en deux par la fenêtre'.[11] Struck by the intensity and the novelty of this image, he decided to find a way to produce more of the same kind. Thanks to his knowledge of Freud's ideas, he was able to call on the principle of free association, which consists in writing as fast as one can, thereby apparently avoiding the possibility of judging, or editing, what is being produced, and thus inviting chance to intervene in the creative procedure.

The element of speed plays an important role in this technique. As Breton explains in 'En marge des *Champs magnétiques*', an article published in 1930, eleven years after the original publication of *Les*

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[7] Only in two instances does automatic writing actually occur in the *Manifestes*: pp.39-40 and 51-2; they mainly consist of short quotations from fellow Surrealists.
[8] Quoted in Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 31. Original emphasis.
[9] Although for a few years only. But the relative brevity of this use does not at all imply a rejection of the automatic principle.
[10] Quotation from André Breton, *Point du jour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 171. Automatism came to be used as a mere substitute for inspiration, a provider of images of striking beauty, therefore making it, in Breton's view, a particularly limited poetic tool (Béhar, *Le Surréalisme*, p. 181).
[11] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 31.

champs magnétiques, differing speeds correspond to differing effects. The faster the speed of the writing, the 'hazier' the subject of the text. It is, however, noteworthy that even the fastest speed, referred to as 'v' (for 'vitesse'), seems to allow the Surrealists to respect the rules of language, or syntax, a point which Breton highlights on several occasions.[12]

The importance of this technique is hinted at in the very definition of Surrealism, as given in the *Manifeste*:

> SURREALISME, n. m. Automatisme psychique pur par lequel on se propose d'exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée. Dictée de la pensée, en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale.[13]

In this seminal definition, the technique is hailed as allowing one to express one's true self through a 'dictée', thus bypassing the influence of reason. The name 'automatism' itself reflects its ambition: if such spoken or written thought is automatic, that is, mechanistic, reason and the intellect play no part in it whatsoever. The individual has no power, or should not have any, over a text produced under such conditions. This naturally implies a passivity on the Surrealist's part, as Maurice Blanchot noted in the article 'Continuez tant qu'il vous plaira': 'L'écriture automatique tendait à supprimer les contraintes, à suspendre les intermédiaires, à repousser toute médiation, mettait en contact la main qui écrit avec quelque chose d'originel, *faisait de cette main active une passivité souveraine*'.[14]

To turn to actual examples, here is a first passage, taken from 'La Glace sans tain', one of the texts collected in *Les Champs magnétiques*:

> Prisonniers des gouttes d'eau, nous ne sommes que des animaux perpétuels. Nous courons dans les villes sans bruits et les affiches enchantées ne nous touchent plus. À quoi bon ces grands enthousiasmes fragiles, ces sauts de joie desséchés? Nous ne savons plus rien que les astres morts; nous regardons les visages; et nous soupirons de plaisir. Notre bouche est plus sèche que les plages perdues; nos yeux tournent sans but, sans espoir. Il n'y a plus que ces cafés où nous nous réunissons pour boire ces boissons fraîches, ces alcools délayés et les

[12] Breton, *Point du jour*, p. 171. See also André Breton, 'En marge des Champs magnétiques', *Change*, n°7 (1970).
[13] André Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 36.
[14] Maurice Blanchot, *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 126. My emphasis.

> tables sont plus poisseuses que ces trottoirs où sont tombées nos ombres mortes de la veille.[15]

The second extract is from to 'La mort rose', a poem from *Le revolver à cheveux blancs*, a collection published by Breton in 1932:

> Les pieuvres ailées guideront une dernière fois la barque dont les voiles sont faites de ce seul jour heure par heure
> C'est la veillée unique après quoi tu sentiras monter dans tes cheveux le soleil noir et blanc[16]

The most remarkable features of these texts are their striking juxtapositions, their density, and the difficulty one has in homing in on a particular meaning. This last characteristic arises from the bringing together of words that produce an impression of ellipsis, of missing links as, for example, in 'animaux perpétuels', 'sauts de joie desséchés', 'pieuvres ailées' or 'tu sentiras monter dans tes cheveux'.

Such combinations, *because* of their striking qualities, and seemingly random juxtapositions, are exactly what automatism, and most of Surrealism, aimed at. Breton calls these combinations *sparks* (or 'étincelles'), and according to the speed at which an automatic text is written, the nature of this spark varies, as *Les champs magnétiques* makes clear.[17] As will be shown later, such a conception owes much to Pierre Reverdy's definition of the image, cited above, which Breton quotes and discusses at length in the *Manifeste*.

Games

Games differ from the aforementioned 'techniques' in that their results are much more restricted in length. Yet they are as much part of Surrealism as their less 'playful' counterparts, and they also offer a different perspective on chance.

These Surrealist games, like the 'writing techniques', take various forms, and to talk of them as a single unit would be misleading. Covering the period from 1921 to 1962, Emmanuel Garrigues' compilation *Les Jeux surréalistes* charts the shifts in Surrealism's emphases: 'on ne peut présenter les jeux surréalistes sans, d'une certaine façon,

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[15] André Breton, *Œuvres complètes I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 67.
[16] André Breton, *Clair de terre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 106.
[17] Breton, 'En marge des *Champs magnétiques*'. See also *Manifestes*, pp.49-50.

aller au cœur du surréalisme même, ni retracer leur histoire sans, du même coup (de dé), revivre son histoire.'[18] As the critic rightly remarks in his introduction, a specific Surrealist journal is often associated with one particular game. For instance, 'liquidation' and 'quelques préférences de…' bear the marks of the movement's fight with the influence of Dada, and thus appear in *Littérature*, founded by Breton as an echo chamber for his ideas and opinions.[19] Nonetheless, despite these differences, the common denominator is again the extent to which the games display chance-like results.

Amongst them, from the perspective of this exploration, two are of particular interest, in that they represent arguably the category's best attempts at exploiting chance. These are the 'cadavre exquis', and what is simply termed the 'dialogue'.[20] Breton describes the former as 'Jeu de papier plié qui consiste à faire composer une phrase ou un dessin par plusieurs personnes, sans qu'aucune d'elles puisse tenir compte de la collaboration ou des collaborations précédentes.'[21] The most famous example is the first sentence created according to these principles: 'Le cadavre – exquis – boira – le vin – nouveau.'[22] 'Dialogue', on the other hand, is a generic name for a variety of games revolving around the same rule: two players make up a sentence (question-answer; when x, then y; if x, then y; etc.), each being unaware of what his/her counterpart is writing.

> Qu'est-ce que la fourrure?
> L'oiseau-mouche qui se souviendrait du déluge, en jouant avec l'ombre des poissons.[23]
>
> Qu'est-ce qu'une sphère?
> Substance analogue au soufre.[24]

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[18] Emmanuel Garrigues, *Les Jeux surréalistes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 9.
[19] 'Liquidation' was first published in *Littérature* in 1921; 'quelques préférences de...' in *Littérature* in 1922.
[20] Examples of these games can be found for instance in Breton's complete works (*Œuvres complètes I*, pp.527-536, pp. 560-564). For a more in-depth overview, see Garrigues. It can be argued that all subsequent games are little more than variations on these two.
[21] André Breton and Paul Eluard, *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*, in Breton, *Œuvres complètes III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. 796.
[22] Breton, *Œuvres complètes III*, p. 796.
[23] Béhar, *Le Surréalisme*, p. 239.
[24] Béhar, *Le Surréalisme*, p. 239.

In both cases, the result is, as with automatism, utterly unexpected, and hence, to use Breton's terminology, successful in producing a 'spark'. The clear signifying which one normally expects from language is simply absent; the outcome appears to be random, chaotic.

The main difference between this particular category and that of automatic writing is thus not to be found in the outcome, which looks similar and equally striking, but in the *process* employed to produce it. Automatism comes from within the individual. In contrast, the Surrealist games can be seen as a negation of the individual as subjectivity. As Garrigues notes in his introduction to *Jeux surréalistes*: 'Il existe des jeux solitaires, certes, mais l'écrasante majorité d'entre eux implique l'autre, le groupe, le collectif.'[25] This collective element perhaps explains the apparent randomness of Surrealist games: two or more strictly distinct subjectivities are mixed, or blended, in order to produce a totality. Each part is unrelated to what the other parts of the whole will be, and this is all that matters, because the objective of this technique is, precisely, to produce a whole that has no precedent or connection. In other words, Surrealist games correspond to the complete negation, or bypassing, of the individual, of his inner life and thought. The 'cadavre exquis' overlooks the players' self in order to produce a 'collective' sentence, which has a set number of particIpants, yet no single overall architect.

Objective chance

Objective chance is a difficult concept to grasp, in part because it encompasses phenomena that might not at first seem amenable to being linked together: 'Le hasard objectif, c'est *l'ensemble de ces phénomènes* qui manifestent l'invasion du merveilleux dans la vie quotidienne'.[26] Although appearing for the first time in *Les vases communicants*, the term covers phenomena that the Surrealist had been openly focusing on since *Nadja*, which constituted the first stepping-stone into the matter. Other noteworthy texts on this question are the *Second*

[25] Garrigues, p. 18. On other occasions, the critic explains that he discarded certain 'techniques' from this opus because they only involved one individual at a time, Duchamp's Rrose Selavy puns, Leiris's *Glossaire: j'y serre mes gloses* (in Michel Leiris, *Mots sans mémoire* (Paris: NRF, 1969)) amongst others.

[26] Carrouges, p. 246. My emphasis.

manifeste du surréalisme; 'Lettre aux voyantes'; and also *L'amour fou*, *Arcane 17* and 'Signe ascendant' (1947).[27]

In order to grasp what pushed Breton to create this somewhat cryptic concept, it is of use to consider a few examples. On the 6th October 1926, Breton reports in *Nadja*, while sitting by a fountain in the Parc des Tuileries with the poet, the eponymous character suddenly begins to liken thoughts to the jets of water fusing together in the fountain; Breton then reveals that he had very recently, and for the first time, come across this particular image *by chance* in a book by the philosopher Berkeley. Later the same day, in the Place Dauphine, Nadja tells Breton: 'Vois-tu, là-bas, cette fenêtre? Elle est noire, comme toutes les autres. Regarde bien. Dans une minute elle va s'éclairer.'[28] And the predicted light appears.

In *L'Amour fou*, at the flea-market in Saint-Ouen, Breton and Giacometti each feel drawn to purchasing a specific object that they chance upon (the former a wooden spoon and the latter a mask) without being aware of a particular need for either. Both these objects prove particularly useful, helping Giacometti overcome a longstanding problem in his painting and providing the founder of Surrealism with Cinderella's long sought-after slipper. On another occasion, Breton discovers that an automatic poem written more than eleven years beforehand, entitled 'Tournesol', describes in detail the very circumstances of his encounter with the woman 'qui traverse les Halles à la tombée de l'été' and with whom he has just fallen in love.[29] Lastly, before *L'Amour fou*'s epilogue, which takes the form of a letter to his daughter, Breton recalls a walk with his wife near a house in Brittany. Without warning, the mood between them suddenly became uncomfortable and a series of unusual reactions and emotions ensued. Back at his parents' home, the poet found out to his surprise that this particular house had some years previously been the scene of a tragic murder.

These few examples should suffice to highlight what Breton is evoking when talking about objective chance: the coming together of

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[27] All references by André Breton, respectively: *Manifestes*; *Point*; *L'Amour fou* (Paris: Gallimard, 1937); *Arcane 17* (Paris: Sagittaire, 1947); *Signe ascendant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

[28] André Breton, *Nadja* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928), p. 96.

[29] Breton, *L'Amour fou*. The poem was collated in *Clair de terre*, and published in 1923 (*Clair*, pp.85-86).

two causally unrelated events, the inexplicable influence of elements apparently unconnected to one another, a form of coincidence taking on the appearance of a mysterious resolution.

In *Les Vases communicants*, the term 'objective chance' appears in a definition wrongly attributed to Engels: 'La causalité ne peut être comprise qu'en liaison avec la catégorie du hasard objectif, forme de manifestation de la nécessité'.[30] Elsewhere, in his *Entretiens* for instance, Breton traces it back to Hegel. However, Marguerite Bonnet, editress of the complete works of the Surrealist in the three volumes of *La Pléiade*, interestingly insists in an endnote that she has not been able to locate any such expression in the works of either philosopher.[31] Broadly speaking, objective chance follows the same principles as Surrealist techniques, for it is also an incidence of two distant realities coming together, a Cournot-like encounter, unpredicted and powerful. But this is where the parallel ends, because objective chance is not a 'technique' as such. In the case of automatism and games, the 'spark' produced by the encounter occurs as a result of the setting of rules which have been devised to make it possible, and this is exactly why the term 'techniques' can be applied. On the contrary, objective chance does not follow any rule, and occurs independently of the individual: man has no power over it. As a result, the most the Surrealists, or any interested party, can do as regards objective chance is to be 'available', as Breton puts it: to display receptiveness: 'Aujourd'hui encore je n'attends rien que de ma seule disponibilité, que de cette soif d'errer *à la rencontre* de tout'. This receptiveness, the essential ingredient of objective chance, relies on the Surrealists' key ability to wait and keep watch:

> J'aimerais que ma vie ne laissât après elle d'autre murmure que celui d'une chanson de guetteur, d'une chanson pour tromper l'attente. Indépendamment de ce qui arrive, n'arrive pas, c'est l'attente qui est magnifique.[32]

[30] André Breton, *Œuvres complètes II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 168.
[31] Commenting on a passage in an interview where Breton attributes the expression to Hegel, the critic writes: 'Dans *Les Vases communicants*, c'est à Engels que Breton attribue la paternité de la notion et de l'expression de 'hasard objectif"; en fait nous ne l'avons pas plus trouvée chez Engels que chez Hegel.' (Breton, *Œuvres complètes II*, p. 1303).
[32] Both quotations from *L'Amour fou*, p. 39.

This short exposition of automatism, games and objective chance has indicated some of the more demonstrable ways in which chance may have been thought to permeate Surrealism. Taking stock of these writing methods, the next section will study the conceptual background put in place by Breton, in order to establish the exact role played by chance in the movement, and the reason behind its use.

Chance in the thought of André Breton

The legacy of Dada

To begin an exploration of the place occupied by chance in the thought of Breton, it is of use briefly to return to the description of Surrealism appearing in the *Manifeste du surréalisme* and cited above (*supra*, page 88). In this definition, the specific term 'hasard' does not appear.[33] However 'en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison', by association, clearly points to it. Reason is indeed synonymous with logic and order, and in negating it, Breton seems to suggest that Surrealism is inextricably linked with illogic and disorder, two terms frequently associated with the concept of chance.

Such a claim would not, however, be overly problematic if this seminal definition did not put it on the same level as 'dictée de la pensée' and 'fonctionnement réel de la pensée'. In short, Breton does no less than equate disorder or chaos with the purest and most authentic form of thought. This apparent paradox at the very heart of Surrealism is in fact perfectly logical, but at the same time it implicitly reveals two different understandings of chance in Breton's writings and theories, between which he hovers according to his needs.

In order to clarify this duality, it is important to remember that Surrealism is, in many ways, the heir of Dada. The history of Dada, although relatively short in its official form (1916-1924), is made complex by its network of international contributors and the fact that, resisting as it does the designation 'movement', it is better defined as a frame of mind, therefore making precise dating difficult. In their study *Dada, histoire d'une subversion*, Henri Béhar and Michel

[33] Closer attention will be paid below to the precise vocabulary Breton employs when referring to the phenomenon.

Carassou start their chronology of Dada in 1911, when Duchamp, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Gleizes and Picabia, amongst others, would meet in Puteaux, and locate its end in 1925, with the first and last issue of *Œsophage*, Mesens and Magritte's journal.[34] But they also insist that the spirit of Dada remained a constant influence throughout the 20th century, influencing later movements such as Pop art, Fluxus, or performance art.

In 1919, Breton, Aragon and Soupault launched the journal *Littérature*, and published 'Maison Flake', a text by Tzara, in its second issue. By that time, the Parisian literary *milieu* was well aware of Dada's deeds and ideas: as early as 1917, *Nord-Sud* (Pierre Reverdy's journal) had published some of the Romanian's poems, quickly followed by *SIC*, another influential journal at the time.[35] The esteem was obviously not unilateral, since 'in 1918 Breton, Soupault, Aragon, Ribemont-Dessaignes contributed to Zurich Dada'.[36] As a result of this mutual respect, when Tzara finally arrived in France in 1920, Breton and his friends welcomed him with open arms and henceforth took an active part in the group's activities.

'Automatisme', the first word in the definition of Surrealism, translated in practice, as already shown, as a writing technique called automatic writing. Interestingly, Breton sees it as a major Surrealist tool, but it is one that he inherited from Dada. Hans Richter, for instance, claims that it had been discovered and used in Zurich well before it appeared in 1919 in *Les champs magnétiques*.[37] Breton does not dispute this, and in fact does not claim to have invented it; he even cites examples of automatism dating back to the 19th century. However, Dada's automatic writing fitted within the group's philosophy, which Béhar summarises thus:

> Vomissement de la civilisation européenne et des valeurs bourgeoises; entreprise de démoralisation; scandale, destruction, négation: Dada incarne la révolte, sur tous les plans. Tout ce qui entrave son propre épanouissement est condamné. […] Refus des frontières, des catégories établies, Dada emprunte ce qui lui semble bon ici et là, rejette les étiquettes, les contraintes et proclame avec Tzara: «une seule base d'entendement, l'art», dans le même temps qu'il accepte tout ce

[34] Henri Béhar and Marc Carassou, *Dada, histoire d'une subversion* (Paris: Fayard, 1990).
[35] Béhar, *Dada, histoire*, pp.231-2.
[36] Hans Richter, *Dada* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), p. 167.
[37] Richter, *Dada* (see for example p. 28).

> qui rejette l'art. Il importe de le souligner: cette ambiguïté est bien constitutive du Mouvement qui pose, conjointement, l'affirmation et la négation, sans résolution des contraires. Ce en quoi il déroute nos habitudes logiques, nos systèmes de pensée.[38]

Two important characteristics are worth noting: Dada is vehemently anti-tradition, and its correlative aim is destruction, by any artistic means possible. In this perspective, the advantage of automatism is its visible incoherence, its absurdity, the fact that it goes against the grain of what until then had been praised in art, namely, order, control, reason, logic. It is easy to see how chance fits into this picture: it is the polar opposite of reason and all that reason represents, hence the close proximity of chance and automatism. Automatic writing therefore fulfills the two major ambitions of Dada, in that in ridiculing aesthetic, moral and rational codes it also destroys them, and vice-versa.

The destructive imperative of Dada, then, is what marked it out (and still does so today) as the most nihilistic of artistic endeavours. As a member of the group, Breton was well aware of this, and for a time revelled in the Dadaist *tabula rasa*, as articles in *Les Pas perdus*, for instance, reveal.[39] The proposition 'en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison' in the definition of Surrealism thus evokes, through its negation of reason and the refusal to allow control, a throwback to Dada. It also simultaneously implies the notion of chance, through that of disorder and freedom from the rational. This is chronologically Breton's first experience of chance as a creative tool, and although he would come to suggest a second way of understanding it, this primary level would always be a necessary ingredient of Surrealism, at least with regard to its radical rejection of tradition. Indeed, disagreement over the Dadaist correlative of the refusal of positivity, that is, destruction, would be the starting point for Breton's elaboration of a second understanding of automatism in particular, and disorder, illogic and chance in general.

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[38] Henri Béhar, 'Dada comme phénomène européen', *Rilune*, 6 (05/2007), pp. 14-28 (p. 18).
[39] Breton, *Les Pas perdus*.

The legacy of Freud

In 1922, after a period of close collaboration that lasted over a year and a half, Breton and Tzara publicly acknowledged their differing points of view, and the former seceded. The main point of contention was the Nihilism of Dada, and its constant refusal to move on to some kind of rebuilding. This rift surfaced for the first time in the Maurice Barrès trial (1921), and crystallised in the January-February 1922 crisis of the 'Congrès international pour la détermination des directives et la défense de l'esprit moderne'. In his dismissal of Dada, it would have been easy for Breton also to dismiss chance, given its strong ties with a movement he rejected. But he simply rejected one half of it: the relentlessly destructive power.

The challenge for the Surrealist was therefore to accommodate a technique based on apparent disorder and chaos (automatic writing) with a constructive philosophy: in other words, to include chance within a positive artistic credo. The first clue to a solution dates from 1919, and is to be found in *Les champs magnétiques*, co-authored with Philippe Soupault. Entirely written using the automatic writing technique, this collection of texts sets the approach within a radically different context from the Dadaists: while Dada stopped at the surface of automatism, hence focusing on its incoherent and illogical properties, Breton posited that it had a deeper dimension. In *Manifeste du surréalisme*, he explains:

> dans l'ensemble, [les textes] de Soupault et les miens présentaient une remarquable analogie: même vice de construction, défaillances de même nature […]. [Leur] '*absurdité immédiate* cédait la place à tout ce qu'il y a d'admissible, de légitime au monde: la divulgation d'un certain nombre de propriétés et de faits non moins objectifs, en somme, que les autres.[40]

As soon as the first instances of automatic writing came about in the 19th century, the question of who or what was writing elicited two very different answers. The first response was that of the Spiritualists, who believed a deceased person was expressing him/herself through the body of a living individual (hence the frequently noted discrepancy between the subject's usual voice, style, authority, mannerisms, vocabulary, etc., and those observable in the texts produced by

[40] Breton, *Manifestes*, pp.34-5.

those apparently channelling the thoughts of the deceased). The second was that of the pioneers of psychology and/or parapsychology, such as F. W. H. Myers, Théodore Flournoy, Pierre Janet and, later, Sigmund Freud, who proposed the new notion of an 'instance' hidden within man himself: the unconscious.[41] Although he was well-read in the Spiritualist tradition, Breton repeated tirelessly that he did not agree with its basic assumption.[42] Roger Cardinal, in 'André Breton and the Automatic Message', puts it thus:

> Despite a few pieties about verbal automatism, 'Le Message Automatique' is essentially an expression of its author's deep fascination with Mediumistic Art, and of its relevance for the project of Surrealism. Even so, nowhere in the text does Breton actually couch such a position in clear-cut terms, so that the reader is bound to ask just how wholehearted his advocacy is. As it happens, there is an obvious explanation for this apparent hesitancy. It appertains to the surrealist spokesman's reluctance to be associated with the belief structures underlying Spiritualism, of which mediumism is a manifestation. Given that Surrealism always defended a strictly atheist position, it would be monstrous to suppose that it should ever flirt with notions of a deity or an afterlife.[43]

For Breton, therefore, the second interpretation prevailed: automatic texts had to come solely from *within* the individual.

Although the term 'unconscious' existed before Freud, in the early 1920s the founder of psychoanalysis had recently established that it represented one of the elements at play in man's mental apparatus, and was the seat of repressed impulses and drives. This repression is the work of consciousness which, through the use of various defence mechanisms, conceals certain memories, appetites or desires from the conscious part of the individual. The unconscious, posits Freud in his essays, manifests itself in various guises, such as dreams, Freudian slips, artworks, or neuroses. Up to this point, Breton is in complete agreement with the psychoanalyst, but his analysis

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[41] The term 'subconscious' is also sometimes found in the secondary literature, especially American, to describe what is here called the 'unconscious' ('das unbewuβte' in the original German).

[42] As is shown in his work on several occasions, especially in 'Le message automatique' (Breton, *Point du jour*) and *Entretiens* (André Breton, *Entretiens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952)).

[43] Roger Cardinal, 'André Breton and the Automatic Message', in *André Breton – the Power of Language*, ed. Ramona Fotiade (Exeter: Elm Bank Publications, 2000), pp.23-36 (p. 26).

differs greatly when it comes to the significance he believes should be given to the varying manifestations of the unconscious.

The psychoanalyst's standpoint is therapeutic: the unconscious is only to be explored when a problem arises in the conscious life of the individual to which it may help provide the answer. Indeed, in many cases, psychological problems can be resolved through the location of key 'material' held in the unconscious. On the other hand, Breton believes the unconscious to be the source of the 'fonctionnement réel de la pensée'. As Béhar puts it: '[Les] buts de l'analyse, chez Freud et chez Breton, n'étaient […] pas identiques. L'un et l'autre reconnaissent la puissance du désir, mais le premier vise sa sublimation, le second sa réalisation'.[44] Linked to the unconscious, for the Surrealist, is therefore the idea that it represents the authentic 'heart' of the individual, his or her fundamental truth.

A phenomenon of communicating vessels is at play here: the more consciousness is at the helm, the less the unconscious can be 'tapped' into. In the same way as for Freud, the reason for this relationship is that consciousness hampers, distorts or silences the unconscious. But while the psychoanalyst understands this as normal, and part of the necessary nature of man's development, Breton deplores it. For him, our education, our cultural heritage, our societal habits and personal history act as a barrier between our surface and our true selves. 'Il ne tient qu'à l'homme de s'appartenir tout entier', claims the *Manifeste du surréalisme*.[45] According to Jean Starobinski, Breton was in fact more in tune with Myers' theory of the unconscious than with Freud's; this theory states that 'le *moi subliminal* est un inconscient valorisé: il recèle, si l'on en croit Myers, un courant de pensée plus riche et plus authentique que le tissu dont est fait notre moi extérieur, notre personnalité supra-liminale'.[46] As Starobinski shows, Breton knew Myers' works perfectly well, in particular *La Personnalité humaine*, since most of the data in 'Le message automatique' on the question of automatic writing in 19th century parapsychology literature is taken from it.[47] The Surrealist's approach on the question is therefore exclusive: consciousness is to be fought against, and the unconscious revealed. This explains the inclusion in

[44] Béhar, *Le Surréalisme*, p. 208.
[45] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 28.
[46] Jean Starobinski, *La Relation critique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 333.
[47] Starobinski, *La Relation*, p. 325.

the definition of Surrealism of the proposition 'en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison': the 'fonctionnement réel de la pensée' in question is only accessible through the avoidance of reason, or consciousness.

In this perspective, the technique of automatism is understandably heralded as crucial by Breton, as it prevents consciousness from making a contribution to what is produced, notably through the already mentioned speed of writing. The absence of logic displayed by these texts worked as accepted proof of the fact that the censorship of consciousness had been eluded.

However, in order to turn chance into a positive notion, as distanced as possible from the connotation of destruction which seemed attached to it, in particular since Dada, Breton had to show that the 'absurdité immédiate' representative of automatism, and equated to the unconscious, did display meaning: were the unconscious to produce only chaotic and random content, Surrealism would indeed not succeed in its endeavour to promote a positive philosophy. Here, Breton joins Freud once again, for they both agree that the unconscious has its own language. Emile Benveniste expressed this idea thus: 'L'inconscient use d'une véritable rhétorique qui, comme le style, a ses figures et le vieux catalogue des tropes fournirait un inventaire approprié aux deux registres de l'expression.'[48]

This statement has one major implication: all languages have meaning, and they can as a result be subjected to decipherment, or interpretation. 'Tout rêve apparaît comme une production psychique qui a une signification', wrote Freud in *L'Interprétation des rêves*.[49] As a consequence, the 'absurdité' noted by Breton in automatic writing is 'immédiate', that is, only apparent; a mediate approach dispels this impression. Here again, psychoanalysis provides the Surrealist with a rich arsenal of techniques and keys destined to interpret the productions of the unconscious. In his most important discussion of theories relating to this topic, *Les vases communicants*, Breton recognises his debt to the psychoanalyst:

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[48] Emile Benveniste, 'Remarques sur la fonction du langage dans la découverte freudienne', cited in Gérard Durozoi and Bertrand Lecherbonnier, *André Breton, l'écriture surréaliste* (Paris: Larousse, 1974), p. 24.

[49] Sigmund Freud, *L'Interprétation des rêves* (Paris: PUF, 1994), p. 11.

> Tout ce qu'à cet effet il me paraît nécessaire de retenir de l'œuvre de Freud est la méthode d'interprétation des rêves, et ceci pour les raisons suivantes: c'est de beaucoup la trouvaille la plus originale que cet auteur ait faite […]; c'est là par excellence qu'il a rapporté de son exploration quotidienne dans le domaine des troubles mentaux […]; enfin, c'est là de sa part une proposition de caractère exclusivement pratique'[50]

Consequently, Breton's analyses of automatic texts and other Surrealist productions often used a distinctly psychoanalytic vocabulary, or at least adopted a psychoanalytic reasoning. In the decipherment of a dream dating from 26th August 1931, for example, Breton remarks, with regard to the appearance of a giraffe, that 'la hauteur insolite du cou chez la girafe est utilisée ici comme moyen de transition pour permettre l'identification symbolique de la girafe et de la cravate au point de vue sexuel.'[51]

The existence of the unconscious gives automatism a pedigree, as it were. Dada praised the technique for its power of destruction: destruction of meaning, destruction of beauty, destruction of content. But in promoting the unconscious to the fore, Breton was able to go beyond this first level of analysis. In other words, he did not turn his back on the illogical, on the disordered, on chance, but showed that it was chance (the opposite of rationality, systems and organization) which provided the best point of access to the unrepressed, authentic, self. Dada was against order, logic and reason. Breton shared this stance, but only insofar as their negation produced another, *different*, level of order, logic and reason. Béhar pertinently phrases the divergence thus: Surrealism 'présuppose […] une cohérence que Dada ne conçoit pas, une cohérence qu'exige sa démarche même: *l'exploitation rationnelle de l'irrationnel*.'[52]

When considering the phenomenon of chance, therefore, Surrealism plays on two different, and complementary, ways of understanding it. First is the conception of chance as inherited from Dada: chance as a corrosive and scandalous concept which always carries with it connotations of Anarchism, of the destruction of tradition. Second is the perception of chance as the necessary step required to sample the unconscious. As the definition of Surrealism shows, both levels coexist inextricably: 'dictée de la pensée, en l'absence de tout contrôle

[50] André Breton, *Les Vases communicants* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 32.
[51] Breton, *Vases*, p.50.
[52] Béhar, *Le Surréalisme*, p. 208. My emphasis.

exercé par la raison' implies that one is dependent upon the other, the first understanding applying to the level of appearances, and the second to that of hermeneutics; 'absurdité immédiate' (in the Dadaist understanding) directly leads to 'la divulgation d'un certain nombre de propriétés et de faits non moins objectifs, en somme, que les autres' (in the Surrealist understanding).

Surreality

The fundamental connection between the various Surrealist techniques, however different their *modus operandi*, is in the bringing together of distant realities. In *Manifeste du surréalisme*, Breton agreed with every aspect of Pierre Reverdy's definition of the image. However, he specifically developed certain points in order precisely to delineate what constituted the Surrealist image. *Du Surréalisme en ses œuvres vives*, for instance, explains that it consists of 'certains traits de feu reliant deux éléments de la réalité de catégories si éloignées l'une de l'autre que la raison se refuserait à les mettre en rapport et qu'il faut s'être défait momentanément de tout esprit critique pour leur permettre de se confronter'.[53] Reverdy's initial proposition ('L'image est une création pure de l'esprit') is therefore fine-tuned: 'l'esprit' in question is foreign to rationality, the adjective 'critique' clearly referring to consciousness.

The direct consequence of this exclusion is that Surrealist images cannot be voluntarily brought about: in fact, they do not display 'le moindre degré de préméditation'.[54] Hence Breton's frequent recourse, in his theoretical writings, to adjectives and characterising propositions revolving around the theme and the semantic field of chance, a habit which contributes to giving a confusing picture of his position in regard to the concept. To take a few examples: the *Manifeste du surréalisme* is literally replete with kindred terms: 'absence de toute rigueur', 'utilité arbitraire', 'contingence', 'l'état anarchique', 'sans […] détermination préalable', 'gratuité', 'très haut degré d'*absurdité immédiate*', 'arbitraire', 'désordre', or 'rapprochement fortuit' are all evoked in it.[55]

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[53] Breton, *Manifestes*, pp.170-1.
[54] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 48.
[55] In order of appearance: Breton, *Manifestes*, pp.13, 14, 15, 28, 29, 32, 34-5, 42, 46, 49.

Surrealist images, then, are fortuitous, not in that they are found at random, but in that they do not rely on reason. However, these two characteristics do not justify Breton's interest in the 'coming together of distant realities'. As Reverdy's definition shows, intensity varies according to the distance separating them. 'La valeur de l'image', comments Breton, 'dépend de la beauté de l'étincelle obtenue; elle est, par conséquent, fonction de la différence de potentiel entre les deux conducteurs.'[56] The spark in question, that is, the impact any given image has on the individual, determines its value. But what is the nature of this value? For Breton, the Surrealist image plays a *cognitive* role, and this is what makes it so decisive. 'Les images', he writes, 'apparaissent […] comme les seuls guidons de l'esprit.'[57] A few lines later, he adds: '[l'esprit] s'aperçoit bientôt qu'elles flattent sa raison, augmentent d'autant sa connaissance.'[58] Between the lines, the reader is invited to read that there is something to be *learnt from* the spark created by successful images.

The nature of this knowledge is naturally related to the source providing it, the unconscious. As a result, the knowledge gained through the Surrealist image is of a very particular nature. Breton insists on its 'réalité suprême', thus seeming to contradict our usual experience: images are productions of the mind, and as such they are not 'real' (in the sense of being verifiable by others).[59] But Breton does not deny reality; he merely posits the notion that 'sparks' provide us with another kind of reality: a 'higher' kind. This 'higher' kind, he named Surreality. His disdain of Realist novels, of artistic conventions and of tradition stems from the fact that they limit reality to what he interestingly, given the Rossetian use and analysis of the term, calls the 'donné': 'le réel, trop longtemps confondu avec le donné, pour l'une comme pour l'autre s'étoile dans toutes les directions du possible et tend à ne faire plus qu'un avec lui.'[60]

This 'donné' amounts to a rationalist approach to life and to emotions. Breton, by promoting a redefinition of 'réel', which equates it with 'possible', widens it significantly. It also helps to explain for instance his outspoken defence of imagination and freedom, and helps

[56] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 49.
[57] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 49.
[58] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 49.
[59] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 49.
[60] André Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), p. 354.

put into context his famous declaration: 'Tranchons-en: le merveilleux est toujours beau, n'importe quel merveilleux est beau, il n'y a même que le merveilleux qui soit beau.'[61]

The crucial contribution of Surrealism is thus to be found in its emphasis on this widened reality, a reality encompassing the possible, and called Surreality. Automatism, hypnosis, dream reports and games, in that they display instances of the 'spark', provide the actualisation of desire. The Surrealist image offers the individual a direct contact with his deep-seated wish for a reconciliation of consciousness and the unconscious. Within a rationalist framework, the world has an independent existence, and man can only influence it insofar as he 'meddles with' its material side. Within a Surrealist framework, however, man and the world cease to be separate. Surreality is, in actual fact, the 'spark' applied to the macro-level: it proposes to unify the two distant entities that are dream and reality.

> Tout porte à croire qu'il existe un certain point de l'esprit d'où la vie et la mort, le réel et l'imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l'incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d'être perçus contradictoirement.[62]

This unification aims to restore totality or, in Breton's terms, 'le champ psychophysique total'.[63] Reality on its own, or dreams on their own, are only partial sections of it. Such unification is what Breton, citing Rimbaud, calls 'la vraie vie'.[64] Indeed, it gives life its fullness, and the individual his lost authenticity. It is as a result not surprising that Breton should compare the experience of Surreality with the state of childhood: 'l'enfance où tout concourait […] à la possession efficace, et sans aléas, de soi-même', for what the inclusion of dreams in essence achieves is to give desire the power to show existence in a new light.[65]

Several aspects of Surrealism deal precisely with giving the unconscious free rein to change reality. Breton describes, for instance, the game 'l'un dans l'autre' as follows:

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[61] Breton, *Manifestes*, pp.24-5.
[62] Breton, *Manifestes*, pp.72-3.
[63] Breton, *La Peinture*, p. 96.
[64] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 52.
[65] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 52.

> [L]'un de nous 'sortait' et devait décider, *à part lui*, de s'identifier à tel objet déterminé (disons, par exemple, un escalier). L'ensemble des autres devait convenir en son absence qu'il se présenterait comme un autre objet (par exemple une bouteille de champagne). Il devait se décrire en tant que bouteille de champagne offrant des particularités telles qu'à l'image de cette bouteille vienne se superposer peu à peu, et cela jusqu'à s'y substituer, l'image de l'escalier.[66]

Here is a prime example of how the apparently rigid notion of identity can be remodelled by the imagination. It must be noted that, in this game, the Surrealists '*[n'ont] pas rencontré un seul échec*.'[67] The same principle is also true of 'Surrealist objects', a topic in which Breton was particularly interested. Functioning as a sort of material automatic text, such pieces as Giacometti's *La table surréaliste* (1933), Duchamp's *Porte-bouteilles, séchoir à bouteilles ou hérisson* (1914), or Dali's *Le taxi pluvieux* (1938) incorporate several existing objects in order to create a new one with no ascribable utility. Writing about these, Breton explains that 'la fin que je poursuivais n'était rien moins que l'objectivation de l'activité de rêve, son passage dans la réalité.'[68] What in games and automatism remained on the level of language is here transformed into a tangible reality, concrete objects, hence the term 'objectivation', of which more later.

Surreality, born out of the deep-rooted seat of the true self, is the cemetery of contradictions, where desire is all-powerful. Under these conditions, it is easy further to understand Breton's praise of children: just as is the Surrealists' ambition, children live according to the pleasure principle, as opposed to the reality principle dominant in adulthood. 'Freud a montré qu'à cette profondeur ''abyssale'' règnent l'absence de contradiction, la mobilité des investissements émotifs dus au refoulement, l'intemporalité et le remplacement de la réalité extérieure par la réalité psychique, soumise au seul principe de plaisir.'[69]

Thus the difference between automatism and games becomes even clearer. What unites them is the 'spark', hence the crack in the usually rationalistic fabric of life that allows access to the unconscious. But in automatism, the 'spark' stems directly from the tapped source. With regard to games, to assert the same would require an explanation capable of linking the independent coming together of

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[66] Quoted in Garrigues, *Les Jeux*, p. 221.
[67] Quoted in Garrigues, *Les Jeux*, p. 221 (original emphasis).
[68] Breton, *La Peinture*, p. 356.
[69] Breton, *La Peinture*, pp.96-7.

words, or propositions, with a form of unconscious that would subsume all the participants. Insofar as they rely on the concatenation of subjectivities and the unconscious of each contributor, Surrealist games negate all possibilities of attributing to any of them the role of sole creator of the 'spark'. In other words, it is clear that chance must play an active part in the games.

However, to leave the investigation here would be to miss the very reason why the Surrealists were so interested in these activities, and would imply that Breton and his followers revelled in putting end to end words that were linked to each other by nothing other than arbitrary decisions. But the true richness of the games lies in the fact that the 'spark' thus produced *appeals to* the unconscious, rather than originates in it, as it does in automatism. In automatism, meaning exists prior to the 'absurdité immédiate'. In games, however, meaning is *added*. In the former, the 'spark' *reflects* the unconscious. In the latter, it *projects* the unconscious.

Surrealism thus makes a strong statement: chance itself can be shown to contain meaning. This claim may seem contradictory, since chance and meaning are normally polar opposites. But Breton does not try to define chance. What he does instead is show the extraordinary powers of the unconscious. That chance can display meaning, even in a 'Surrealist way', is not argument against it; it is rather testimony to how much the individual can transform, alter, and expand the field of reality. Games emphasise the creative side of the unconscious, and they do so by stimulating it by means of the 'spark' created 'aleatorily' – created *by chance*.

The dialectics of objective chance

In the light of these considerations, the Surrealist concept of objective chance can appear puzzling. First, the name suggests a clear separation between chance and the individual: objectivity is the opposite of subjectivity, which is essential to the movement. Secondly, objective chance is a descriptive notion covering instances, occurrences (as opposed to techniques) and might at first be seen as radically different from what Breton has concentrated on before.

All the examples of objective chance aforementioned recount events that are causally unrelated to the individuals involved, and as such they differ from Surrealist techniques or games, since both these

latter cases are the result of decisions. The 'objectivity' present in objective chance therefore seems to take its name from this exteriority. The second component in the expression, 'chance', is self-explanatory, and in fact is simply a repeating of the first: chance is *necessarily* objective, in that it is detached from subjectivity, exterior to it. What this component adds, however, is an emphasis on the lack of causal relation between the elements contributing to the event thus described.

From this description, the concept would seem simply to acknowledge chance as *addendum*, and as such, to be radically different from automatism or the exquisite corpse. But to understand objective chance fully, one must realise that Breton sees it, too, as meaningful. Objective chance does not describe the general encounter of two independent causal series, as Cournot understands it, but the encounter of two independent causal series, one external and one internal, which, properly analysed, can deliver a *message*.

In fact, objective chance is crucial to Breton, essentially because it represents the culmination of the Surrealist quest. In *L'Amour fou*, he writes that 'Le hasard serait la forme de manifestation de la nécessité extérieure qui se fraie un chemin dans l'inconscient humain.'[70] The pattern at play in Surrealist techniques and games is therefore reproduced here, but on a grander scale: where in the latter, desire shaped the associations of words, in objective chance it shapes the associations of events. 'Il s'agit de voir', says Breton in *Entretiens*, 'de révéler ce qui se cache sous les apparences': chance appears as the conjunction of unrelated series, but for the Surrealist the fact that 'la lueur qui résulte de cette fusion est si vive' is in truth indicative of a faulty understanding of it on our part.[71]

> Tout se passe comme si […] l'on était victime d'une machination des plus savantes de la part de puissances qui demeurent, jusqu'à nouvel ordre, fort obscures. Cette machination, si l'on veut éviter qu'elle entraîne, par simple confusion de plans, un trouble durable […], il importe au plus haut point de la *démonter*.[72]

A proper understanding is possible, but requires analysis, a critical examination of the events which, tellingly, often contain forerunner signs: '[un] concours de circonstances […] n'est nullement in-

[70] Breton, *Oeuvres II*, p. 814.
[71] Breton, *Entretiens*, p. 139.
[72] Breton, *L'Amour*, p. 163.

explicable et [il est possible de] mettre en évidence les liens de dépendance qui unissent les deux séries causales (naturelle et humaine)'.[73] It is for instance through this kind of analysis that Breton is able to connect the poem 'Tournesol', written in 1923, with the encounter in 1934 with the woman who was to become his second wife: 'Je crois avoir réussi à établir que [les faits les plus humbles et les plus significatifs de ma vie] admettent un commun dénominateur situé dans l'esprit de l'homme et qui n'est autre que son *désir*.'[74] Ultimately, Breton comes to question the very existence of chance, or rather, he casts doubt on the notion that it is an independent phenomenon. This idea is repeated several times in *L'Amour fou*, but its most telling expression is to be found in *Du surréalisme en ses œuvres vives*, where objective chance hints at what Breton calls a 'cryptogramme':

> Cet extraordinaire gréément d'étincelles […] mène l'esprit à se faire du monde et de lui-même une représentation moins opaque. […] Le monde, à partir de là, s'offre à lui comme un cryptogramme qui ne demeure indéchiffrable qu'autant que l'on n'est pas rompu à la gymnastique acrobatique permettant à volonté de passer d'un agrès à l'autre.[75]

Just as do Surrealist techniques and games, objective chance reveals the workings of the unconscious, which here joins forces with the external, objective, sphere. The coincidental event will trigger a reaction calling for the individual to produce an analysis, which will in turn reveal his desires to him. In this regard, it is not surprising that one of Breton's recommendations should be that one makes oneself 'available', for this availability is the key to an openess of the mind necessary fully to measure the importance and power of objective chance.

This concept, therefore, does not highlight the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity, as it may at first have seemed. Rather, the 'objective' component should be read as meaning 'objectivation': the turning of desire (subjective) into a real-world object, or event (objective). Objective chance, designated by Breton as '*le problème des problèmes*' in *Entretiens*, is in the end the most intense form taken by

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[73] Breton, *L'Amour*, p. 32.
[74] Breton, *L'Amour*, p. 37.
[75] Breton, *Manifestes*, pp.170-1. The concept of 'cryptogramme' will be explored in the next section.

the synthesis of opposites, a Surrealist form of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the overcoming of contradictions and the subsuming of these into a fundamental, Surrealist, inter-dependence.[76]

Summary

The study of the conceptual framework informing Surrealist techniques and other writing methods has confirmed Breton's interest in chance. However, it has also revealed two important facts about Surrealist chance. The first is that the concept acts within the movement's aesthetics as a form of intermediary: it is designed to connect man with his true self. Chance therefore seems to play the role of Charo in Greek mythology, as the only possible link between two irrevocably separate entities: namely the individual and surreality.

The second characteristic of Breton's chance is that it seems to carry *meaning*. Beyond being simply a point of connection, it is suspected of being 'more than' a simple encounter. Causally unrelated it might be, but Breton is keen to emphasise the presence of signs, and ultimately the presence of meaning, within objective chance in particular, thus calling into question the very validity of chance as it is understood in a materialistic frame of reference. The view that chance is synonym of ignorance is never expressed by the Surrealist, but it indirectly surfaces in his suggestion of the existence of a 'cryptogramme', amongst other things.

It now remains to be seen whether the Surrealist conception of chance agrees with Rosset's analysis of the notion. From what has been shown in this section, such agreement seems unlikely. But if this is really the case, what are the analytical grounds upon which to base this impression? The next section will attempt to answer these questions by comparing the way Surrealism and Artificialism conceive of chance.

[76] Breton, *Entretiens*, p. 140. Original emphasis.

Breton's chance, Rosset's chance – comparison and contrast

Owing to the acknowledgement and exploitation of chance in Surrealism as detailed above, it might seem to follow that the movement is, in Rossetian terms, an Artificialism (it will be recalled that Rosset defined such an approach as, essentially, 'une affirmation universelle du hasard'). The fact that Breton uses chance as a means rather than an end would not automatically disqualify the movement from this definition. The visual artists, writers and composers Rosset hails as Artificialists indeed rarely have a *direct* interest in the notion of chance, and their works are often produced by means of traditional, inherited techniques: the philosopher cites, for instance, Offenbach, Montaigne, Vermeer, Nerval. The judiciousness or otherwise of linking Artificialism and Surrealism must therefore be established by an examination of the correlations between the philosophical system of the Surrealist movement, and that of Rosset, as well as a critical exploration of Surrealism's practical writing tools.

The question of the origin/source

The origin or source of all in Rosset's system is, unequivocally, chance. It is the origin of the physical world, but as it is the origin of all that there is and can be, it is also the origin of the psychological sphere: in other words, our minds eventually reflect this primordial void, and that they have become what they are today highlights no more than the improbability of their existence.

On the subject of the origin in the first sense, that is, nontological, Breton does not provide any comment. This omission shows his lack of interest in the matter, a fact understandable given that, as a Modernist and avant-garde writer, he was inclined to disregard past creative activity on the one hand, and to be fascinated with the future on the other: 'l'esprit nous entretient obstinément d'un *continent futur*'.[77] As a movement of action, Surrealism conceives of the past as irrelevant to it and to its identity, because it cannot be affected; it cannot be changed. The future, however, is the recipient of present

[77] Breton, *La Peinture*, p. 17. Breton was well aware of artistic tradition, and for instance helped promote poets such as Rimbaud or Lautréamont. But he was only interested in them insofar as their texts and attitudes might seem to prefigure Modernity.

efforts, and as such, it justifies them. It is only thanks to there being a future that the concept of transformation is credible, in that it links one action, or cause, with a reaction, or consequence.

> Toute notre impatience vient de ce que nous savons qu'un jour, en ayant bien fini avec tous ceux qu'on nous compare encore, nous aurons seuls à *intervenir*.[78]

It is from this faith in the value of the future that Surrealism was born out of Dada, and that same belief helped it become a fully-fledged movement. It would champion a revolution of the mind, and later, a revolution of society, both of which would have been illogical without that strongly held conviction.

The same is not true, however, of Breton's view on the origin in the second sense, that is, on 'what' our minds proceed from. Man's psychological life, in his understanding, stems from a particular original state, which it is Surrealism's aim to revive. This original state is evoked throughout Breton's writings and is associated with notions of purity, authenticity, unity. It is, to be precise, the stage at which the external and internal spheres are combined, hence embodying Surreality. The only way to catch glimpses of this original state is of course to explore the unconscious by tapping into it in those ways mentioned above (automatism, dream reports or games).

But Surrealist techniques are not the only way to witness this unity. If anything, they only offer a fragmentary experience of it. Confronted with the Surrealist image, '[l'esprit] vérifie alors, fragmentairement il est vrai, du moins *par lui-même*, que ''tout ce qui est en haut est comme ce qui est en bas'' et tout ce qui est en dedans comme ce qui est en dehors'.[79] The cause of this fragmentation, the reason behind this incompleteness, is consciousness. Following Freud, and producing his own evidence to assert it, Breton emphasises the fact that dreams are not incompatible with conscious life: 'selon toute apparence le rêve est continu'; both spheres coexist, and if this fact seems to contradict experience, it is for the sole reason that one instance is hiding the other.[80]

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[78] Breton, *La Peinture*, p. 35.
[79] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 171. The quotation used in this passage in taken from Hermes Trismegistus.
[80] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 21.

For him to whom consciousness is given, the unconscious is destined to be secondary: all expressions of it will be gained, so to speak, at the expense of consciousness. For Freud this opposition reflects an objective reality; it is therefore perfectly normal, and in most cases this balance allows human beings to lead a life free of significant psychological problems. Consciousness and the unconscious do not so much conflict with each other as serve each other's purpose. Breton's position as regards the concept of origin and Surrealism's ultimate objective, added to the unequivocal words he uses in reference to consciousness in *Manifeste du surréalisme*, for example, puts a clear emphasis on the unconscious. This does not however amount to Breton's relinquishing consciousness altogether. On this point he agrees with Freud, seeing both as necessary components of the human mental apparatus. Surrealism, as Béhar points out, is essentially a rational movement intent on revealing irrationality, a contradiction meant to enrich the latter with the former (*supra*, page 101).

As a result, Surrealist techniques all bear the marks of this fundamental duality, or dualism; they aim to probe the unconscious by temporarily, and consciously, silencing consciousness and overriding its defence mechanisms. In other words, their exploration is indirect, mediated. It therefore comes as no surprise that Surrealists, and Breton in particular, showed a specific interest in childhood, madness, and primitive art. As mentioned above, the *Manifeste du surréalisme* likens Surreality to 'la meilleure part de l'enfance', but Breton also compares its impact to the effect of a drug, such as opium, and sides with 'la folie', whose only fault is in his view to lead some people 'à l'inobservance de certaines règles'.[81] Hence his and Eluard's interest, already highlighted, in attempting to emulate and reproduce various mental disorders in written texts; hence also Dali's interest in making of Paranoia his muse, and seeking to achieve a creative state of deliberately-induced psychosis. As regards primitive art, Breton was an avid collector, and he spent parts of his exile in America visiting Amerindian reserves, Mexico and Caribbean islands.

The reason why Breton was particularly interested in these different states comes from their remoteness from consciousness, or rather, the traces of what, in consciousness, he most despised. These include the Christian heritage of Western societies ('rien ne me récon-

[81] Respectively: Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 52, p. 48, p. 15 and p. 15.

ciliera avec la civilisation chrétienne'), as well as 'l'empire romain, la montée de la bourgeoisie au XIIIe siècle, l'affirmation du positivisme bourgeois du XVe au XIXe' and their derivative: logic, in his view misguidedly applied 'à la résolution de problèmes d'intérêt secondaire'.[82] Here therefore is further confirmation that Breton is not advocating the discarding of consciousness: it is rather that reason and logic have been misused, focused on the wrong side of experience, and hence need to be reorientated.

> Si les profondeurs de notre esprit recèlent d'étranges forces capables d'augmenter celles de la surface, ou de lutter victorieusement contre elles, il y a tout intérêt à les capter, à les capter d'abord, pour les soumettre ensuite, s'il y a lieu, au *contrôle de notre raison*.[83]

Given this stance, Surrealism is naturally attracted to states that are, one way or another, safe from or unsullied by the cultural heritage of the West. It is indeed Breton's belief that such separation implies a better use of the powers of the unconscious, a fuller understanding of the connections between dreams and consciousness, and as a result a greater individual, as well as social, unity. Primitive peoples, insofar as they are untouched by the influence of civilisation; children, insofar as their minds have not yet been shackled into a restrictive mode of thinking by their education; and people suffering from psychological disorders, insofar as their trauma allows them to bypass the inherited limitations of a Western frame of mind – each of these groups represents a stage of development deemed more in tune with Surreality, and as a consequence more authentic. They point, in temporal terms, to the beginning, in particular children and primitive peoples: both indeed are close to the origin (of life for the former, and of mankind for the latter); by implication, they also point to what the Surrealists see as the source of psychology, that 'ab-original' state where 'la résolution […] de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité' is held to take place.[84]

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[82] Respectively: Breton, *Entretiens*, p. 267 and p. 281; Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 20.
[83] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 20. My emphasis.
[84] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 24.

The 'cryptogramme'

The positing of an identifiable, although abstract, origin is crucial to Surrealism, for it provides it with its *raison d'être*. Surreality involves man's mental apparatus in its purest form, and the aim of the group is to be able once again to access man's initial state of being. This is the precise point at which Surrealism differs radically from Dada: the objective of the former is positive, it consists in working toward a constructive goal, while the latter's intention was to attain as complete a dismantling of positives as possible. In identifying and naming the aim he had in sight, Breton irrevocably broke away from Tzara: not because of a clash of personal feelings, nor as a result of vague and abstract differences, but for the reason that the Surrealist had found an explanation for the disfunctioning of society and, correlatively, man.

The belief in the existence of a positive initial human condition that is, furthermore, accessible, is what separates the two movements. Indeed what this belief encouraged is a rationalising of what appeared to the Dadaists as the irrational direction taken by mankind, in particular with the First World War. For, from the theoretical moment the claim is made that such a primal state existed, Breton implied that another force worked against it, and also posited that it could be fought against, in order to reconnect man with this primal state. In doing so, he made two important gestures: first, he gave a real direction to Surrealism, and second, he put forward the notion that meaning underlines our existence. The advantage of identifying a sole cause to man's separation from the full possession of his unconscious is that it channels attention and efforts, but more importantly, it allowed Surrealism to structure itself around a common enemy, hence reinforcing its internal cohesion, and pointing toward a goal: construction, therefore, albeit through destruction.

As a result, the positing of the attainment of Surreality as Surrealism's prime goal created a strong sense of the value placed upon meaning. This notion had several avatars in the movement, but they all stemmed from this seminal one: in accepting authenticity and unity as defining qualities of the origin, Breton denied all possibility of its being chaotic (and as such *devoid* of meaning). Automatism, dream reports, hypnosis and even games revealed the presence of the unconscious, and analysis of Surrealist productions showed that what was inspired by or drawn from the unconscious does *signify*. However, in

Du surréalisme en ses œuvres vives, Breton insisted on an even greater dimension of meaning, already hinted at, when he evokes the idea of the cryptogram (*supra*, page 109).

The choice of the term 'cryptogramme' to express his conception is highly revelatory: it is made up of the Ancient Greek *kruptos*, 'hidden', and *gramma*, 'letter'. Here, Breton was not talking about the unconscious, but about the world, implying that both function in the same way: their structure, their 'language', hence their meaning, although hidden, is demonstrably present. And, much as does the unconscious, the world starts to make sense once one begins to analyse its events and coincidences. Breton's concept of objective chance was held as testimony to this.

That the Surrealist should engage with historical Materialism therefore comes as no surprise: identifying the ills of man from the point of view of psychology (as due to consciousness), he also explained the ills of man from the point of view of society (as due to capitalism). But Marxism, whose declared intent is that of liberating mankind from a political system hailed as pernicious, crucially rests on the assumption that history follows an identifiable logic. In the *Second manifeste du surréalisme*, Breton agrees with Trotsky, whom he quoted:

> Il est certain qu'un moment viendra, dans le développement de la société nouvelle, où l'économique, la culture, l'art, auront la plus grande liberté de mouvement – de progrès. […] Dans une société qui se sera débarrassée de l'accablant souci du pain quotidien […] le dynamisme de la culture ne sera comparable à rien de ce que nous connaissions par le passé. Mais nous n'y arriverons qu'après une longue et pénible transition, qui est encore presque toute devant nous.[85]

Communism therefore works on the same pattern as Surrealism, hence Breton's understandable allegiance to it: the positing of an origin, the singling out of a cause for mankind's present problems, and the clear identification of a goal and of the means necessary to reach it. All of which, once again, implies a cryptogram's dual notions of concealment and meaning.

[85] Breton, *Manifestes*, pp.105-6.

Is Surreality a duplicate?

In Rosset's analysis, the positing of an origin other than chance, an origin from which the deduction of meaning is made possible, must rest on the preliminary presence of a duplicate. According to this point of view, it would therefore seem to follow that Surrealism is based on the mechanism of duplication. But is this really the case?

Breton was a keen reader of works from the Esoteric tradition. His references to some of them are numerous and well documented. Famously, in *Second manifeste du surréalisme*, soon after quoting Nicolas Flamel and mentioning Hermes Trismegistus and the 'pierre philosophale', he asked for 'L'OCCULTATION PROFONDE, VERITABLE DU SURREALISME'.[86] In the same vein, *Arcane 17* and *L'Art magique* unequivocally confirmed his interest in this field.[87] Michel Carrouges, in his *André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme*, has shown how much in the movement is inherited from Esoterism: 'Au fur et à mesure que l'on pénètre plus profondément dans le surréalisme, on s'aperçoit que l'hermétisme en est la pierre d'angle et qu'il en inspire les conceptions fondamentales.'[88] Taken at face value, this parallel would seem to suggest the nature of Surrealism's duplication. Indeed Esoterism itself is based on the assumption that there exist two different worlds. In short, it posits a duplicate of reality of a straightforward transcendent nature.

However, as already mentioned, Breton always clearly distanced himself from this characteristic: 'l'exogénéité du principe dictant, autrement dit l'existence d''esprits'', [n'est autre qu'] une croyance déraisonnable'.[89] His allegiance to historical Materialism, in this perspective, only serves to highlight his rejection of transcendence. Contrary to appearances, it would therefore seem that Surrealism cannot be said to rest on duplication of this particular nature. But, as Rosset has shown, duplication does not only characterise the straightforward opposition immanence-transcendence: 'la nature […] est une source à la fécondité inépuisable pour l'alimentation de l'idéologie naturaliste

[86] Breton, *Manifestes*, pp. 123-128.
[87] André Breton, *L'Art magique* (Paris: Phébus, 1991).
[88] Carrouges, p. 22.
[89] Breton, *Point*, p. 173.

dont les différentes idéologies religieuses, métaphysiques et morales ne sont peut-être que des variantes.'[90]

The fundamental opposition of Surrealism, in fact, lies in its very name: Surreality indeed consists of an expansion of reality. It is the sum, or the combination, of reality and imagination, dark and light, consciousness and the unconscious. Breton is adamant: 'tout ce que j'aime, tout ce que je pense et ressens, m'incline à une philosophie particulière de l'immanence d'après laquelle la surréalité serait contenue dans la réalité même, et ne lui serait ni supérieure ni extérieure.'[91] It would thus appear that Carrouges is right to conclude that 'le surréel ne se confond pas avec l'irréel, il est la synthèse vivante du réel et de l'irréel, de l'immédiat et du virtuel, du banal et du fantastique.'[92] Surrealism is a dualism in that it distinguishes between two levels of reality, but at the same time, it ascribes to both of these levels a radically immanent nature. Although not divinity-based, duplication is therefore co-substantial with the movement. That both reality and Surreality at least theoretically belong to the world of the empiricist does not affect this statement: structurally, Surrealism is rooted in the belief of a division.

What this and the previous points made about meaning inescapably imply is that Surrealism is indeed a form of (Rossetian) Naturalism. In other words, in the terms of the philosopher, Surrealsm amounts to a rejection of reality. This might seem surprising: Breton's devotion to immanence might indeed appear to suggest the contrary. Surreality is 'no more than' a higher form of reality; 'higher' because reality, in Breton's terms, falls short and must be remedied. But this is precisely where the Naturalistic nature of Surrealism lies: reality as it is does not, for the poet, embody what reality, as seen by Surrealism (or Surreality) should be. Each and every text written by Breton bears witness to his dissatisfaction with the world as experienced. Observations such as 'la pensée [est en proie] à un servage toujours plus dur' or 'la perversion complète de la civilisation occidentale' evidence this discontent, as did the siding with the Communist revolution.[93] This reaction stemmed from the fact that, for Breton, the 'réel' was not

[90] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 21.
[91] Breton, *La Peinture*, p. 69.
[92] Carrouges, p. 24.
[93] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 73; Breton, *Point*, p. 45.

restricted to the 'donné'.[94] For Rosset, the 'donné' encompasses all that is, and nothing exists beyond it. For Breton, on the other hand, the 'donné' was a shrunken version of what reality *should* be, that is, Surreality.

Such a position leads him to assert that Surrealism rejects 'l'idée de la seule possibilité des choses qui ''sont''': to deny reality its purely material quality, and hence to redefine it as the concatenation of both reality and imagination.[95] 'Il y a […] ce que je vois différemment de ce que voient tous les autres, et même ce que je commence à voir *qui n'est pas visible*', Breton writes in *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture,* his clear message being, once again, that there is more to reality than meets the eye.[96]

This duplication of reality is strongly echoed in Breton's aforementioned obsession with the psychological origin, or the self. The Surrealist self consisted of the ideal unification of consciousness and the unconscious, which would signal the end of all contradictions. But such a notion requires examination, first for what it reveals and also for what it hides. The Surrealist self is buried beneath the layers of one's education. Reaffirming that self thus depends on the overcoming of what is, of the 'donné'. As a result, Breton's goal therefore rests on an intuition. As Rosset has it:

> L'oubli de la vision coutumière se double d'une retrouvaille avec une vision pure permettant à l'objet dissimulé sous les strates de l'habitude de venir frapper directement le regard épuré.[97]

The self as such has no basis in reality: here assimilated to purity and authenticity, it refers to an object of desire, which implies it is a duplicate. One's cultural layers would ideally be discarded, and the intuited self would manifest itself. Breton's preoccupation with these layers, or habits, was rooted in the fact that, as Rosset emphasizes, habits are believed to obscure access to what lies beyond: '*l'habitude cache*, ou, plus précisément, […] l'habitude cache *quelque chose*'.[98] The *repetition* of that which does not exist hence paradoxically leads to the belief that it does: 'passage de l'idée de répétition à l'idée selon

[94] Breton, *La Peinture*, p. 354.
[95] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 77.
[96] Breton, *La Peinture*, p. 11. Original emphasis.
[97] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 48.
[98] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 48. Original emphases.

laquelle la répétition répète quelque chose'.[99] The Surrealist self existed not because it was proven, but because its non-existence was glossed over by the repetition of its claimed existence. This pattern was common in Surrealism, and particularly so when one considers Breton's ambition to create a new myth. In *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste*, for instance, before discussing the possible existence of 'les grands transparents', mythical beings whose presence could solve many a question as regards objective chance in particular, he asks: 'dans quelle mesure pouvons-nous choisir ou adopter, et imposer un mythe en rapport avec la société que nous jugeons désirable?'[100]

The second characteristic of the Surrealist self is that, as is the case with all duplicates, it is static. It is identified as a fixed state: the origin, in all its splendour and omnipotence. This conception has the advantage of providing a direction, for that which is fixed can only be in one place, and hence can be reached. Breton was quick in pointing the way: it was children and primitive people who held the key. In fact the positivist, or rational, approach Breton advocated for Surrealism was only possible in the case of a static target. This is not to imply that the aim of Surrealism was not a complex one, nor that it was reducible to a simple, or single, formula. But that aim defined a state that was self-contained, for it represented perfection, or authenticity.

Reality, however, is not static: 'la réalité est essentiellement mouvante' writes Rosset, echoing Heraclitus' famous comparison of life and a river.[101] Stemming from chance, which incarnates movement *par excellence*, reality is a succession of events that fail to conglomerate into something 'worthy of note', something that defeats the general flux. Authenticity, be it material or psychological, would contradict this by requiring a nature self-created, a nature elevating itself above the temporary and artificial by inventing permanence.

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[99] Rosset, *L'Anti-nature*, p. 28.

[100] Breton, *Manifestes*, pp.161-2 and p. 156.

[101] Clément Rosset, *Fantasmagories* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 2006), p. 33. On the matter of Heraclitus's comparison, Plato wrote in *Cratylus*: 'Heraclitus, you know, says that everything moves on and that nothing is at rest; and, comparing existing things to the flow of a river, he says that you could not step into the same river twice' (Plato, *Cratylus* <http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/greek /plato/cratylus.html> [accessed on 21 September 2008]).

Morality

In Rosset's perspective, Naturalism is inextricably linked to a moral stance. Born out of a desire to replace the absence of meaning by meaning, it looks at reality, the philosopher's 'donné', from the point of view afforded to it by the version of reality it holds as true: 'Ce monde-ci, qui n'a par lui-même aucun sens, reçoit sa signification et son être d'un autre monde qui le double, ou plutôt dont ce monde-ci n'est qu'une trompeuse doublure.'[102] This truth-value of the duplicate is what allows the development of the moral stance: in that the imagined reality possesses certain imagined characteristics, it enables he who embraces it to criticise reality as it is for the differences noted between the two versions. Reality falls short of its idealised form, and as a result, measures must be taken to try and align the former with the latter.

This correlation between morals and Naturalism is amply confirmed by Surrealism. The primary evidence of this moral inclination of the movement is found in its desire to achieve Surreality by means of revolution. Surreality is reality in its true form; as a result, 'normal' reality is depicted as faulty, as a problem which can be solved through 'dictée de la pensée'.[103] When he wrote about Surrealism and the ambitions he had for it, Breton's choice of superlative adjectives and adverbs was, in this matter, particularly revelatory: 'absolu', 'purement', 'réel', 'toujours', 'supérieure', 'définitif' or 'définitivement'.[104] All highlight the Manichean view that Surreality represented the end of all ills, while by contrast reality was the opposite, that is to say relative, impure, unreal, partial, inferior and temporary. In other words, it is easy to see that, for all of Surrealism's insistence on immanence, the group, and Breton in particular, perpetuated a very metaphysical notion, that of essence, most notably put forward by Plato. In fact, in more ways than one, Breton was retelling, in his own words, the allegory of the cave. To Durozoi, this comes as no surprise:

> De tous les surréalistes, […] Breton est le plus (le seul?) métaphysicien, au sens étymologique du terme: celui que ses préoccupations essentielles conduisent

[102] Rosset, *Le Réel et son double*, p. 55.
[103] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 36.
[104] Respectively: Breton, *La Peinture*, pp.39 and 15; Breton, *Manifestes*, pp. 24, 28, 36, 13 and 36.

> sans relâche au-delà de la nature, vers la ‘‘vraie-vie’’ qui, ‘‘toujours absente’’, selon le mot de Rimbaud, est peut-être surtout ailleurs. Ne pouvant chercher cet au-delà dans l’espace spirituel que recouvre cette expression au sein d’un contexte religieux, construire son aire dans aucune niche écologique transcendante, il était condamné à cette quadrature: inventer un au-delà ici-bas, composer sa transcendance à lui avec de l’immanence toute pure. Là est sans doute le secret du surréalisme.[105]

The moral imperative has, in fact, shaped the whole of Surrealism. Its history is replete with summary dismissals of members: Artaud, Dali, Char, Aragon, Eluard, Desnos, Limbour and Vitrac, amongst others, were at different times ousted by Breton. The reasons for these expulsions always centred around the question of the purity of Surrealism: different emphases in analysis were condemned for straying away from what the creator of the movement perceived as being true, and were thus to be rejected.

Breton wrote an important number of theoretical texts and articles, which again displayed absolutist tendencies. This is evidenced in the polemical style of the manifestoes; their ambition to provide the very definition of the movement; the peremptory tone often used (in ‘La confession dédaigneuse’, ‘Lâchez tout’, ‘Refus d’inhumer’ for instance).[106] Breton, as the creator of the movement, was also responsible for the vast majority of essays attempting a totalising view: *Manifestes du surréalisme*, *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, *Qu’est-ce que le surréalisme?*, *Position politique du surréalisme*, *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*, *Situation du surréalisme entre les deux guerres*.

Similarly, Breton’s interest in Communism, as well as highlighting his desire to better the social conditions of mankind, reverberated with the moral high ground that his Naturalism provided. As was stressed earlier, the common underlying structure of Surrealism and Communism is what brought them together, for both rest on an analysis rooted in an immanent duplicate of reality that, by itself, allowed them to make claims as to what should be, and what should not. Until the late 1920s, Breton was concerned with the psychological aspect of what he saw as man’s deterioration, a less than satisfactory

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[105] Gérard Durozoi, ‘*Les Vases communicants*: Marx-Freud’, in *Surréalisme et philosophie* (Paris: Descamps Christian, 1992), p. 98.

[106] Articles published respectively in Breton, *Les pas* (pp 7-22) and Breton, *Point* (pp 108-10 and 31).

human condition; his moving toward Communism reproduced on the socio-political level his initial mode of thinking: Surreality was to be the construction of a new, enlarged, reality, and Communism, the construction of new and fairer material conditions. Both looked to the future for improvements, and both, in contrast with Dada, firmly underlined the necessity for positivity and for action.

However, the association of Surrealism and Communism, as a political grouping, did not last long, mainly owing to Communism's rejection of Breton's conviction that the liberation of mankind had to encompass not only the political, but also the psychological sphere. But this disagreement ran deeper: it in fact stemmed from the very nature of the morality advocated by Breton. His was indeed a morality of 'désir':

> *Pouvez-vous fonder une morale [sur le désir]*?
> Oui, du moins dans une autre société conçue précisément en fonction de cette certitude que toutes les passions sont bonnes […] ou, plus exactement, qu'il n'appartient pas à l'homme de changer leur nature ou leur but mais bien de modifier leur marche ou essor en fonction de l'équilibre général.[107]

From Rosset's point of view, the nature of Surrealism's morality would seem to present a particularly arresting illustration of Naturalism. It must be remembered that, for the philosopher, all conceptions of a 'nature' stem from desire, and in most forms of Naturalism, the morality that ensues from this duplication is practical: the Ten Commandments, for example, viewed from this angle, constitute a famous illustration, insofar as they purport to proffer 'rules to live by' originating from God. In other words, the first obligation of morality is to eliminate all suggestion that it is nothing other than the offspring of imagination, or desire. Its strength resides in the fact that it is believed to come, in most cases, from a transcendent source.

Surrealism, as has been shown above, exhibits the characteristics of Naturalism, and as such displays moralistic traits and is intent on providing moral guidelines. But it is also the only Naturalist movement that does not hide its connection with desire. In fact, it posits desire as the origin and the end. However, this radical immanence, together with the apparent failure to found the Surrealist duplicate on an unassailable source, that is, a source separate from desire, does not

[107] Breton, *Entretiens*, p. 252.

lead to a deconstruction of the movement's Naturalism. If anything, it reinforces it: Surrealism does not need to hide the source of its convictions, the origin of its system. The structure of Naturalism is in this case stripped to its bare bones, and through this simplification, Surrealism attempts to give man his creative powers back, to hand over to mankind, finally, the reins of life.

Pessimism

Underlying Surrealism is dissatisfaction. Unsurprisingly, this *ethos* is portrayed by Rosset as a characteristic of Naturalism, and therefore of all revolutionary movements. Surrealism is, therefore, in essence pessimistic. Breton objected several times to this description, explaining for example in an interview with Jean Duché that 'je formule d'expresses réserves sur le prétendu "pessimisme" surréaliste.'[108] For him, as he stressed in this discussion, the only element of pessimism in Surrealism is concerned with 'la maladie de notre temps et la plupart des remèdes communément envisagés', and dissipates in the light of 'un optimisme largement anticipatif'.[109] Breton also highlighted the differences between Camus' attitude and that of Surrealism, explaining that where the former saw Sisyphus as an allegory of mankind's lot, the latter believed that Sisyphus's rock 'un jour ou l'autre […] va se fendre, abolissant comme par enchantement la montagne et le supplice'.[110]

Surrealism's claimed optimism is therefore grounded in hope. This, incidentally, fuels the group's interest in the future, change, action and revolution as developed above. Characteristic of this orientation, *L'Amour fou* reveals Breton's fascination with 'attente', 'trouvaille' and 'appâts'.[111] What positives life has to offer, in short, are forever on the side of what is going to happen, and this makes Breton's optimism dependent upon the attainment of Surreality and social revolution. As a result, it is, in the words of Rosset, 'conditionnel'. But hope is unable to turn optimism (linked to Naturalism) into 'joie de vivre' (linked to Artificialism), because it implies a strict rejection of the 'donné'.

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[108] Breton, *Entretiens*, p. 251.
[109] Breton, *Entretiens*, p. 251.
[110] Breton, *Entretiens*, p. 251.
[111] Respectively: Breton, *L'Amour*, pp.21, 21 and 22.

> Pourtant il n'est pas de force plus douteuse que l'espérance. […] Tout ce qui ressemble à de l'espoir, à de l'attente, constitue en effet un vice, soit un défaut de force, une défaillance, une faiblesse – un signe que l'exercice de la vie ne va plus de soi, se trouve en position attaquée et compromise.[112]

Rosset's stance with regard to hope, and therefore to all attempts to improve on reality, is that it fails to recognise the essential character of the problem. Despite appearances, it is not a *particular* given aspect of the world that Naturalism disagrees with: it is reality itself, because it is necessarily incommensurate with the duplicate created. The heart of the problem lies, once again, in the fact that reality is *idiotès*: it is both devoid of meaning, and based on chance. Interestingly, although Breton described Surrealism as an optimistic movement, intent on changing the social context as well as the place and understanding of desire in man's life, he would seem to be in agreement with Rosset on this specific point:

> Il est […] puéril de croire qu'une rectification même radicale des conditions de vie mettrait fin à tous les conflits: ils se reproduiraient sur d'autres plans, en raison de la puissance du désir chez l'homme et de son insatisfaction fondamentale.[113]

This admission, dating from 1948, is striking, and decisively highlights Surrealism's fundamental pessimism, as well as Breton's understanding of the reasons underlying an unavoidable embracing of this attitude. Desire, given central position by the group, promoted as the 'point suprême', indeed hailed as the only valid motor of change and improvement, was also acknowledged as liable to shifting.[114] What Breton implied in this interview with Jean Duché was therefore no less than the fact that whatever Surrealism were to achieve, whatever happiness it were to engender, this would necessarily be short-lived, condemned to be temporary. The logic of desire is therefore the best argument for Breton's claim that Surrealism consists in 'révolte absolue', that is, total and, inescapably, permanent.[115]

From a Rossetian point of view, Breton is unmistakably shying away from the tragic meaning of life, an attitude which consequently

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[112] Rosset, *La Force*, p. 28.
[113] Breton, *Entretiens*, p. 272.
[114] Carrouges, pp.22-34.
[115] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 74.

prevents him from becoming 'joyful', since only unconditional approbation of what *is* can lead one to 'the overwhelming force'.[116]

Freedom

Through the attainment of Surreality, Surrealism sought to empower mankind. This empowerment would be provided by the coming together of all that man can achieve, in particular the alignment of internal and external necessities, desire and reality. It is therefore not surprising that the theme of liberation, closely linked to that of revolution, should often appear in Breton's writings: 'le seul mot de liberté est tout ce qui m'exalte encore' (*Manifeste du surréalisme*); 'si pressant que nous en soit venu l'ordre de n'avoir à compter pour la libération de l'homme […] que sur la Révolution prolétarienne' (*Second manifeste du surréalisme*).[117]

Implied in this search for liberation was the idea that, as things stood, mankind, particularly Western civilisation, was shackled by its self-imposed rigid rules and obsessive rationality. The question of freedom in Surrealism is as a result not as clear as it first seems. It does not appear as universal, for the reason that it is *potential*, a latent possibility that not everyone is aware of. This begs the question of the nature of Surrealist freedom. In the sense that this particular freedom is dependent upon the realisation that consciousness and unconscious do not have to be opposites, it is of course closely linked with desire: indeed an individual's liberation consists in reassessing the place desire is afforded in his or her life. The scope of Surrealist freedom is narrower than in other systems, although, fundamentally, what it defines is still the ability to decide and escape external constraints.

However, to nominate desire as man's (only) gateway to freedom is not wholly unproblematic. Freud, the first thinker to identify the unconscious and recognise its hidden influence on one's behaviour, was tellingly a strict Determinist. By referring to his discovery as the third narcissistic wound of mankind, the psychoanalyst conveyed his conviction that, insofar as the unconscious dictated part of our actions, we were deprived of ultimate control over our own lives. But the Surrealist outlook was very different, and this is one more area where the

[116] Translation of 'la force majeure' proposed by David Bell (p. viii).
[117] Breton, *Manifestes*, respectively pp.14 and 102.

differences between Freud's and Breton's thought are most visible. Freud only intended to deal with the unconscious when the conscious life of a patient so required. Breton, however, tried to change consciousness so that it could also encompass the unconscious. While the doctor saw a clear separation between the two, thus contributing to his psychological Determinism, the thinker sought to bring about a possible union. In this union, the psychological determinations become conscious: desires are accepted and their influence on one's behaviour and actions is no more hidden.

Surrealist freedom was, consequently, not so much a liberation from determinations as a complete understanding of them, which is doubtless what made Breton claim that 'l'homme […] est encore libre de *croire* à sa liberté. Il est son maître'.[118] For only then was the ultimate union of internal and external spheres possible. Logically, this freedom was heavily rooted in subjectivity. In fact, it was *only* attainable through one's subjectivity, which implies that freedom was multiple rather than unique, relative to each and every individual. Were they paintings, poems, games, sculptures or indeed instances of 'le hasard objectif', intangible noted moments of synchronicity, all Surrealist works were explorations of their creator's psychological life, and did not reflect any general characteristic of freedom. Surrealism therefore established, more than a connection, an equation whereby freedom = subjectivity.

That Surrealist freedom was latent makes it doubly interesting in the perspective of Rosset's analysis. Firstly, because on the general level it openly contradicts the Determinism of Artificialism, and hints at a Surrealist Naturalism. But, secondly, this latency makes the Surrealist conception of freedom another clear example of Naturalism's ability to turn the hidden into the visible, and to give what is concealed added value. Mankind is not free; freedom is gained through Surrealist self-discipline: the hope of liberation rests on the intuition of a presence supposedly conspicuous by its absence. Breton's reference to children and primitive tribes does not modify this situation: he alone posited the possibility of this freedom, and in doing so, attempted to wrest solid ground from the 'tragique' of life: in other words, to produce his own version of a primary nature.

[118] Breton, *Manifestes*, p. 137.

The doubts raised by the role played by chance in Breton's thought are confirmed when the Surrealist system is compared to that of Rosset: the assumptions on which the movement grew, its implications and conditions of possibility, are virtually all in opposition to those of Artificialism. Surrealism is a Naturalism; the above exploration has revealed the complexity and the true nature of the role of chance within Surrealism.

Conclusion

It would be difficult to find a poet and thinker for whom chance played a more important role than André Breton. It is no exaggeration to claim that the concept is ever-present in his creative writings, and even more so in his thought: his collections of poems are rooted in automatism; his spare time was spent devising games ever more centred on raising the stakes as regards fortuitousness; and, when not writing articles on the subject and related matters, even his 'novels' discussed it at length, and repeatedly, from *Nadja* to *Arcane 17*.

To start a study of the radical use of chance in art with Breton was therefore logical. Interestingly, however, the Surrealist's commitment revealed itself to be more complicated than appearances suggested. First, chance appeared as double-layered: while Breton continued to see the concept in a Dadaist way throughout his career, he progressively enriched this understanding with another level, in which it became not only the source of a *tabula rasa*, but also of the reconstruction succeeding it. Following on from this, chance thus became an auxiliary, an intermediary between Breton and his ultimate goal. This change in status from centrepiece to tool, however, did not lead to a trivialisation of chance; on the contrary, the concept asserted its place at the very heart of Surrealism as not just any tool, but as a tool necessary, in fact essential, to Breton's pursuit.

This shift had a major consequence for the concept; it led to a redefinition of it, whereby Surrealist chance gained as attribute the unexpected trait of *meaning*. As opposed to the otherwise undisputed fact that chance is contradictory to anything approaching logic and reasoned information, Breton saw it as clue to the existence of an underlying, and unifying, level of human apprehension. Tellingly, he did not disagree with the accepted notion that chance connects events

together in an a-causal way; in other words, it does not ensue from his conception that Materialism must disintegrate. However, Breton hinted at a level of reality beyond Materialism, in which the logic of desire could somehow trace a link between events.

The complexity of Surrealist chance stems from this duality: it is at the same time chance and not chance, does not connect events causally but connects them otherwise. This is why there is no possible clear-cut answer as to Breton's position as regards chance, because it depends on the frame of reference used to look at it. This quality of malleability explains why the proper incidence of chance within the movement must be evaluated indirectly: hence the comparison between Breton's and Rosset's thought. And from this, it soon appears that, whatever the role of chance for the poet, Surrealism as a system belongs to the category of Naturalism. The conditions of Artificialism – which, in the end, consists in a fundamental acknowledgement of chance – are simply not met by Breton.

The case of the Surrealist therefore raises the questions of whether or not chance can be used *for itself*; and if so, *how*; and furthermore, whether or not the use of chance within artistic creation can be part of a *system* centred around it. In order to try and answer these questions, the next section will focus on the visual artist François Morellet.

6

François Morellet

Short contextualisation

François Morellet is a painter and installation artist whose experimentation with chance has taken a great number of forms. As his is not as famous a name as those of André Breton or John Cage, it is of use here briefly to contextualise his artistic career, before examining those of his works and ideas most relevant to the present exploration of the role of chance in creative production.

The Second World War had a profound effect on the world art scene: many famous European visual artists, such as Max Ernst, Marc Chagall and Fernand Léger, amongst others, fled to the USA to escape the atrocities of the war years. Their presence, through articles, conferences, interviews, lectures, debates, deeply influenced the young American visual artists, who gained confidence and developed a certain aesthetic radicality. By 1946, most European artists had gone back to Europe, but the seeds they had sown on the other side of the Atlantic had thrived, and the end of the war effectively saw the most important shift in art ever witnessed: whereas Paris had been the world capital of the arts before the war, New York took over thereafter.[1]

Across the Atlantic De Kooning, Pollock and Rothko, amongst others, soon became known as 'Action Painters', and Europe in general, with France in particular, followed in their footsteps: Jean Dubuffet founded 'La compagnie de l'art brut' in 1948; the same year

[1] A situation not helped by the fact that many 'European masters' died around that time (Klee in 1940, Delaunay in 1941, Kandinsky in 1944, Matisse in 1954, Tanguy and de Staël in 1955, Brancusi in 1957).

COBRA was born; in 1951 the term 'Paris School' was created to encompass painters such as Soulages, Bazaines, or Mathieu.[2]

The overwhelming trend of Abstract Expressionism does not, however, totally annihilate the other face of abstraction (more in line with the decisive works of Mondrian and Duchamp) which is more objective than subjective, or, one could say, simply more 'abstract'. In Paris, the Denise René gallery exhibited works by Victor Vasarely as early as 1944, but it was not until eleven years later that the same gallery staged an important collective exhibition (Vasarely, Duchamp, Tinguely, Calder, Soto, Jacobsen, Agam and Bury) able to counter the dominant 'lyrical abstraction'.[3]

It is against this vibrant background that François Morellet is to be contextualised, and his contribution to art explored. Morellet, a self-taught painter, was born in 1926 in the French provincial town of Cholet. After studying Russian in Paris at the *Institut des Langues Orientales*, he returned to his native town in 1948, and took up a post at the family's toy-car company. He still lives in Cholet with his wife, Danielle, a retired professional pianist.

Although he started painting in 1940, aged 14, it was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s, at the time Conceptual art was thriving, that his work came to sell and that he received commissions.[4] The first (French) critical writing on Morellet came out in 1966, though it was only distributed in Cholet.[5] In 1971, other studies were published abroad, in Holland and Italy notably, which again did little to help his cause in his native country as a whole.[6] Eventually, eleven years later, and despite being mentioned by name in articles and books as early as 1954, Morellet did inspire a critic to write an article dedicated solely

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[2] COBRA was influenced by Surrealism and Dada, and counted amongst its most famous members Asger Jorn, Karel Appel and Pierre Alechinsky. The term 'Action Painting' was coined by the American art critic Harold Rosenberg in 1952.

[3] This is the expression used to describe the French version of Abstract Expressionism.

[4] In 1971, for example, near the building site of Beaubourg, Morellet was commissioned to paint his grids on three facades (François Morellet, *Reconnaître* (Nancy: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2003), p. 66).

[5] *Morellet. Catalogue de l'œuvre depuis 1946*, ed. Bernard Blistène and others (Cholet: [n. pub., n. p.] 1986); Blistène, *Morellet*, p. 216.

[6] *Morellet in van Abbe* (listed in *Reconnaître*, p. 67); *François Morellet* (listed in Blistène, *Morellet*, p. 216).

to him.[7] This slow recognition highlights the usefulness of his 'proper' job at the family factory which, as well as providing money, also allowed him time to remain artistically active.[8]

On the concrete level, Morellet's work varies from traditional, canvas-based painting to indoor and outdoor installations, from hand-crafted to computer-based pieces. Spanning a period of over fifty years, his career made use of a wide range of material such as oil paint, screenprints, trees, neon light bulbs, water, acrylic, house façades. Although Morellet produced a great number of his works out of personal drive, he also accepted several commissions, either from public organisations or galleries and museums.

The biographies that appear in catalogues of Morellet's exhibitions always list the first appearance of new 'techniques' being employed (the artist is constantly experimenting), but do not provide a date by which a previous one might have been abandoned. They thereby indicate when he has added a direction to his work, but also imply that he has not abandoned previous ones. There are only two exceptions, marked by both a beginning and an end: '1960-1968 – membre du Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel' and '1948-1975 – industriel'. As of 1971 indeed, and especially from 1974 onwards, his exhibitions became more numerous and international, and he was able more or less permanently to earn a living from his art and devote himself full-time to it.[9] Interestingly, and this is where examining his work in detail will start, these biographies always associate 1958 with chance.

[7] The most notable of these references to Morellet's work came in an article by Vasarely (*Morellet*, p. 216). The dedicated article in question is: Gabriel Gassiot-Talabot, 'Morellet et l'objet', *Opus International*, n°36 (1969), pp.1441-1453.

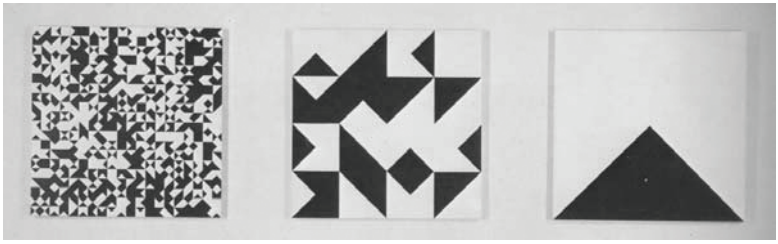
[8] In 2007, several publications marked Morellet's 80th birthday.

[9] 12 exhibitions of his work were held in 1971 and 1972, 16 exhibitions in 1973, but 27 exhibitions in 1974 (*Morellet*, pp. 212-3).

Chance in the works of François Morellet

Since 1958, the year he first took the decision deliberately to introduce chance into his works, Morellet has experimented with many different ways to implement its inclusion. Three general trends, however, appear amid the profusion: the first one can be labelled 'fixed works', the second 'changing works', and the last one 'in-progress works'.

Fixed works

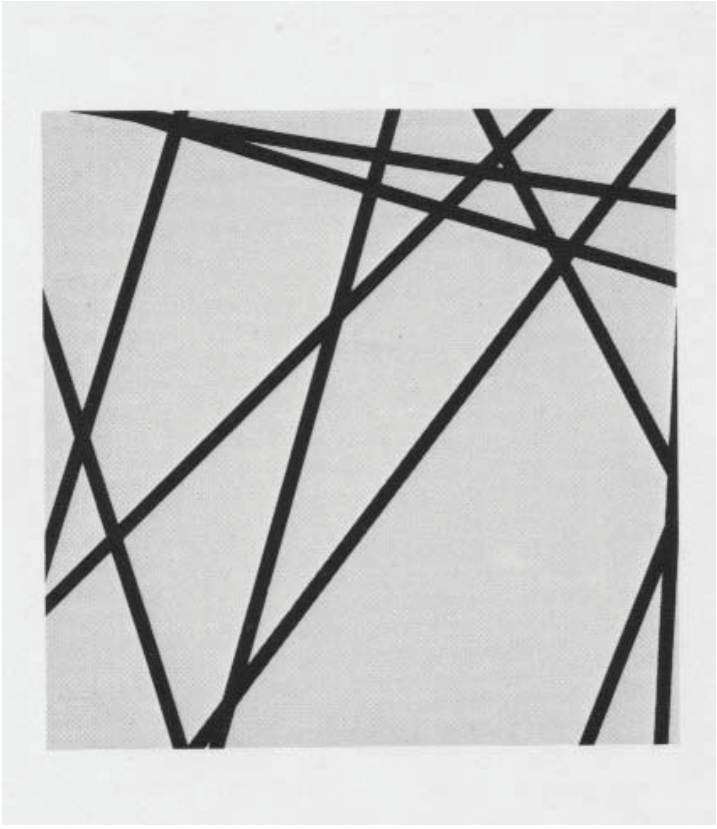


François Morellet, *Répartition aléatoire de triangles selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du bottin téléphonique*, 1958

This particular category is, chronologically, the first one in the visual artist's career. In the early screenprints of *Répartition aléatoire de triangles selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du bottin téléphonique* (1958, reproduced above) and *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du bottin téléphonique* (1961) for instance, systematically collected data in the telephone directory determines several parameters of the pieces (it will be noted that Morellet's titles often describe the procedures employed to create the piece to which they refer). For the latter work, the visual artist attributed a colour (blue) to even numbers, and another (red) to odd ones. Then, consulting in order the first forty thousand numbers in the directory, he coloured each 0,5cm² square on the grid on his canvas accordingly.

A similar principle favoured by Morellet relies on replacing the phone book by the mathematical constant pi to achieve a similar effect, attributing a specific colour to odd and even numbers, as in *6 répartitions aléatoires de 4 carrés noir et blanc selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du nombre Pi* (1958). The mathematical number is also at the base of works such as *10 lignes au hasard* (1971), where

one edge of the canvas is used as an axis from which segments depart at an angle determined by the decimals of pi.[10]



François Morellet, *10 lignes au hasard*, 1971

These works are created from aleatory principles: the actual shape taken by the painting is determined by parameters over which the artist has no control. The telephone directory and pi are external sources with no connection other than accidental with the field of aesthetics. This is the first level of aleatoriness. But there also exists a second, in that the succession of odd and even numbers in both systems is itself random: apart from the alphabetical order of family

[10] As a rule, a zero is added to each decimal: the 14 in 3.14 does not mean angles of 1° and 4°, but of 10° and 40°.

names (independent of the work), no logic justifies the internal ordering of phone numbers, just as pi's decimals are patternless.

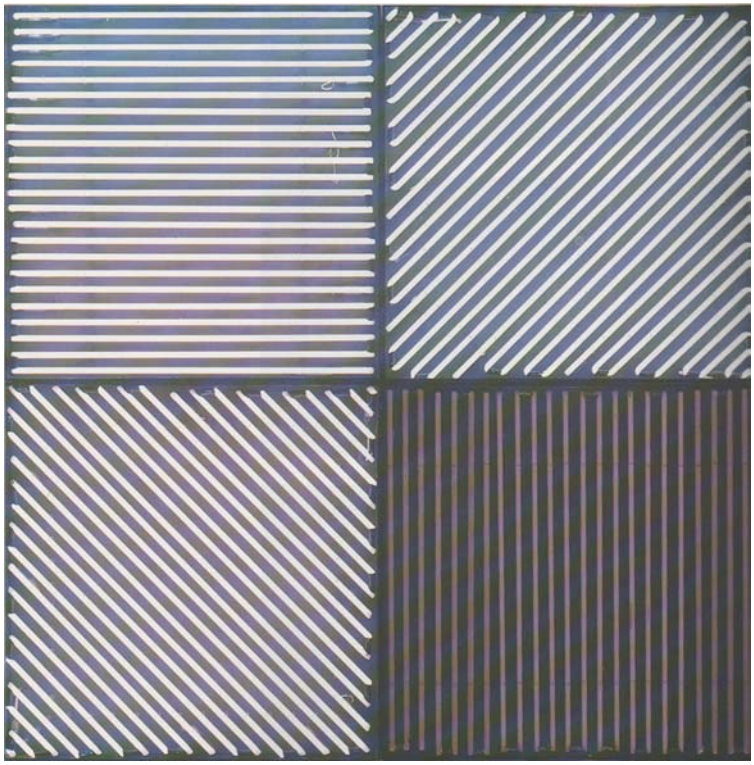
The reason for calling these works 'fixed' is that they constitute, in the catalogue of works by Morellet, a category that is rendered distinctive by the fact that, as with traditional paintings, poems, games or 'récits de rêve' by Breton, their shape is final. In other words, chance is restricted to the *process* of giving these pieces a physical shape: they record a specific random datum, translating it into colours or visual patterns; and for the very reason that they act as *records*, the contribution of chance disappears, as it were, as soon as that data is translated onto the canvas. Nothing, other perhaps than the fact that they appear patternless to the onlooker, can hint at the *mode of creation* employed to produce these works; however, such patternlessness can also be man-made (a piece can be made to look patternless when this is not the case) and in this sense, the viewer has to take on trust the aleatoriness involved. As Morellet has it: 'j'ai toujours cherché à utiliser des suites de chiffres contrôlables pour que l'on ne m'accuse pas de tricher en modifiant les données du système (pour faire "plus intéressant")'.[11] The problem of fixity (whereby for the viewer nothing differentiates chance in fixed works from man-made manipulation) is addressed in the two remaining categories.

Changing works

This 'label' applies in particular to works involving light bulbs. Morellet is often, rightly, described as an op artist because he used neon lights: he was in effect one of the first to do so. Equally often, however, he is defined as a cinetic artist, insofar as some of his visual creations are mobile, involving movement in one way or another. In fact, his works with neon lights always involve movement since, on the most basic level, the lights are switched on and off. These classifications thus fail to define him successfully: Morellet is, from this standpoint, very much a postmodern artist, in the sense that he does not mind crossing boundaries and mixing together various traditions, such as Op art, Dada, Constructivism or Cinetic art.

[11] Jacques Habrant, 'Entrevue avec François Morellet', in *Péristyles* (Nancy: Affaires Culturelles de la ville de Nancy, 2003). No pagination.

His interest in light dates from 1963. *4 panneaux avec 4 rythmes d'éclairage interférents* (1963, reproduced below) shows Morellet beginning to experiment with ways to involve the spectator in the making of the actual work, by asking him/her to press a switch in order to power the said neon lights. Spectator participation (and its corollary, reduced 'responsibility' or 'ownership' on the part of the artist) was one of the fundamental aesthetical claims of the GRAV (*Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel*), a group of painters to which the artist belonged for several years, and he rapidly made this particular one his own.



François Morellet, *4 panneaux avec 4 rythmes d'éclairage interférents*, 1961

Indeed viewer participation is, clearly, another way to introduce randomness into a work of art, to further dispossess the

creator of his own prerogative over the final shape taken by it.[12] Morellet asked the visitors to his exhibitions to contribute in two distinct ways, one mediate (i.e. exhibiting indirect causation), and one immediate. *16 cercles à néons rouges avec programme aléatoire* (1968), for example, which belongs to the former category, consists of four rows of four circular red neon lights. Here, the viewers' role is to activate a switch, whereby certain of these lights lit up. Naturally, with a normal switch, the same circles would constantly remain switched off. Therefore, in addition to relying on the action of others, Morellet inserted a combinatorial device, by his own admission quite basic, between the switch and the neon lights, adding yet another element of randomness into the work.[13]

However, this 'technical' mediation is not always a requirement for Morellet. *Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur* (1964, reproduced below) involves, in a dark room, a simple grid of geometrical neon lights hung on a wall and left continuously switched on. In front of it is a container filled with water. All the spectator has to do is interact with the water, by using a dedicated handle, touching the water, or tapping the container. Whichever form taken by this interaction, the result is that the surface ripples, and the reflection of the lights on the water immediately becomes distorted or blurred.

Contrary to fixed works, these pieces are characterised by the fact that chance is not involved in the *conceptual* stage, but is an element introduced after it. On one level, then, they represent the polar opposite of the works belonging to the first category. Whereas fixed works have a clearly defined identity, changing pieces challenge this very concept: time becomes an integral part of them and so, then, does evolution, transformation. Naturally, the framework remains the same, and evolution is restricted by the number of possible shapes or combinations that can be adopted by the work (*16 cercles à néons rouges avec programme aléatoire*, for instance, can only provide a finite number of distinct configurations).[14]

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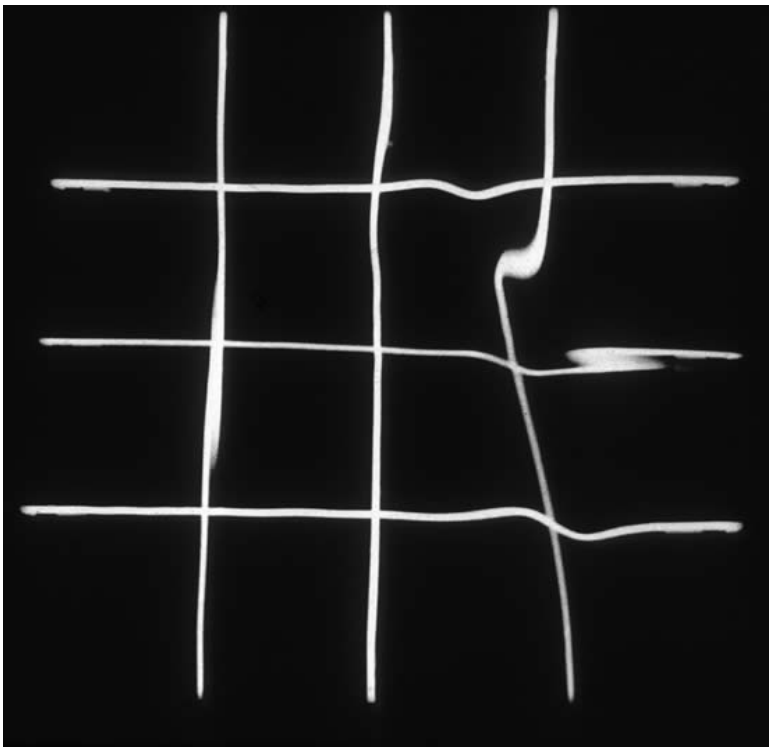
[12] There is a clear link between this particular use of other subjectivities and Breton's games.

[13] François Morellet, *Mais comment taire mes commentaires ?* (Paris: ENSBA, 1999), p. 176.

[14] This last remark does not apply to *Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur*, which bridges the changing and in-progress categories.



François Morellet, *Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur*, 1964

Another characteristic of changing works is that they can be said fully to exist only once the viewer has intervened. In other words, they are *virtualities* that require an external contribution to become concrete, to attain (however momentarily) an actual form. As such, the viewer appears on an equal footing with Morellet: as much as the piece demands the artist's presence, it demands, equally, that of the spectator. Consequently, while fixed works introduce a first degree of distance between the artist and the created work insofar as randomness determines specific parameters, changing works introduce a second such level between Morellet and his pieces: this takes the form of the viewer, who actively participates in them by activating a combinatorial device of one kind or another.

In-progress works

In 1998, Morellet resorted to pi once again with *Les cheminements de Pi*, but this time in a completely new way: whereas before pi had been constrained within the physical limits of a canvas, a characteristic which resulted in a very minimal use of pi's decimals, the artist now sought to work with the number's full potential. His project follows the same principle as *10 lignes au hasard*, i.e., it converts a decimal into an angle; but it differs greatly from the 1971 work in the sense that with this project there is no spatial restriction of any kind, as will be detailed later. This is actually crucial, and makes his new pi-based works highly original, because with pieces such as *10 lignes au hasard*, chance was in a sense shackled, while now pi is given *carte blanche*. The emphasis shifts from the canvas to the very nature of pi, a number with fascinating properties: it is endless, and moreover no digit pattern will ever appear in it. In short, it is infinite and unpredictable.[15] However, this does not mean that new digits cannot be found: they just have to be calculated. This is why Morellet now works with a computer programme which calculates new digits and automatically 'translates' them into angled segments.

What sets this category of works apart from fixed and changing pieces is that it illustrates an important aspect of chance, which did not feature before, with the possible exception of *Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur*: infinity. Because their shape, determined by chance, is final, fixed works provide the audience with only a 'frozen' randomness, a mere picture of it. Changing works offer to remedy this limitation by emphasising the combinatorial aspect of the concept: owing to science's dealings with chance, it is now naturally associated with a statistical approach which makes use of the law of large numbers. Morellet's changing works embody this particular understanding insofar as they represent chance as a great number of possible combinations.

His in-progress pieces, however, go beyond this restricted understanding: by using endless and unpredictable numbers, such as pi, to shape his works, Morellet offers a more comprehensive picture of chance. This time, the concept appears as truly open-ended, or rather

[15] Technically speaking, pi is not infinite, since 3<pi<4. But the number of its decimals, however, is, and this is what matters to Morellet.

never ending: infinite. In this respect, it seems as though works from this third category display more awareness of the inner complexities of chance. This is what the next section will attempt to make clear, by analysing Morellet's thought and how chance fits within it.

Chance in the thought of François Morellet

The systems

François Morellet, as shown above, first used chance as part of his creative process in 1958. The reason he gave for this initial gesture is that 'J'ai découvert aux alentours de 58 que le hasard pouvait […] aider à insuffler de la vie dans mes systèmes, qui me semblaient se reposer un peu trop sur leurs lauriers.'[16] From this observation, it would seem that, from the artist's perspective, chance constituted a tool which he could use to improve on his current production. In order to understand in what ways chance could be said to have achieved this result, and measure its importance in the artist's overall work, it is primarily necessary to have a clear idea of what his 'systèmes' are and how they function.

In stylistic terms, Morellet's career is divided in two parts: from 1944 to 1949, he describes himself as a figurative painter, and from 1950 on, as an abstract/conceptual painter. In 1949, he discovered Melanesian art at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. A year later, he came across works by the Swiss painter Max Bill in Sao Paulo, and in 1951 was introduced to the work of Marcel Duchamp and Piet Mondrian. However, his complete conversion only took place in 1952: that year, he made the acquaintance of Jack Youngerman, an American artist involved in Contructivism and Neo-plasticism, and, while visiting Andalusia, discovered the Alhambra's intricate Islamic patterns. This conversion is confirmed in one of the biographical lists Morellet drew up in 1998: '1952 – premiers systèmes'.[17] The artist therefore equates abstraction with systems, so what does he mean by this term?

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[16] Blistène, *Morellet*, p. 153.
[17] François Morellet, *Tout Chatou* (Paris: La maison Levanneur, 1998), p. 43.

> Pour moi, un système est une espèce de règle très courte pour un jeu qui existe avant l'œuvre et détermine précisément son développement, et donc son exécution.[18]

Such a definition provides a confirmation as to the general orientation taken by Morellet's abstraction: by aiming to determine the development of his works precisely, the artist clearly leans toward geometrical, rather than Expressionistic, abstraction. More specifically, this definition posits a number of bases which must be explored. First, systems rely on rules ('règles'): when they are broken down to their simplest components, what remains is precise instructions, such as reproducing the same shape sixteen times in *Répartition de 16 formes identiques*. As a result, systems are inherently logical, and evolve in a causal way from an imposed premise. This emphasis on logic explains the clinical matter-of-factness of many of the titles given by Morellet to his pieces: *6 répartitions aléatoires de 4 carrés blanc et noir*, *6 trames 0°-20°-70°-90°-110°-160°* or *Tirets dont la longueur et l'espacement augmentent à chaque rangée de 5mm* invite the viewer to check the work against the intent. In fact, Morellet *wants* his titles to display the rules of his systems, which constitute a 'programme', a word which, like 'système', he uses repeatedly. In other words, such titles ensure that his works are 'verifiable' (a concept normally more common to sciences than to visual art), and can be 'copied' by anyone.[19] Morellet's rules, then, are not just steps laid out in order to achieve an end, ideally they are the *only* components of the system: they define it.

Second, these rules are very concise: Morellet aims for an economical way to create. The aim of this precision is, primarily, to ensure simplicity. As the aforementioned titles exemplify, the instruction is short, and the resulting work is easily 'readable'. In this regard, the means (geometry) and the end (concision/clarity) are perfectly adapted to one another: geometrical shapes are indeed easily drawn, and easily reproducible, thus needing no added input to expand the work, that is, nothing foreign to the system itself.

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[18] Morellet, cited in Serge Lemoine, *Morellet* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 2001), p. 149.

[19] The artist indeed actively encouraged this, and a website even helps whoever is interested in 'producing' a Morellet work do so at http://www.box.net/public/32zd6id21m [accessed on 29 March 2008].

Third, the term 'jeu' is naturally used as a synonym for rules: as shown in the chapter on Breton, games exist solely on the condition of there being 'instructions for play'. But the word is interesting in two other ways: it hints at the absence of seriousness of art, at art being inconsequential, and it also announces Morellet's later involvement with humour, in *Géométries dans les spasmes*, for instance. These orientations will be discussed in more detail later.

Finally, systems, insofar as they determine the creative act itself, circumscribe the artist's freedom. This implication is already latent in the concept of rules, but it becomes particularly obvious in the last part of the definition: Morellet's systems, freely elaborated, lead to the artist's voluntarily binding himself, and limiting his actions, to the application of a set of simple instructions. What this position challenges is the common understanding of art as a field in which individuals express themselves, unchallenged even by Breton: Morellet rejects expression, or rather subjective expression. Indeed systems as the visual artist understands them contrive to remove emotions, impulses, in short manifestations of subjectivity, from the work of art: 'dégraissée des caprices de la subjectivité, l'œuvre doit résulter de l'application d'un système programmé qui ne désigne rien d'autre que lui-même'.[20] Rules, their strict application and implied verifiability, appear as the safest way to keep the subjective element at bay. When Morellet became a member of the GRAV in 1961, one of the first propositions he made was that members of the group should not sign their individual creations.

In this active rejection of subjectivity (an attitude hereafter alternatively termed objectivity when referring to Morellet's intention) lies the crucial characteristic of his systems: what they afford the artist is a distance between himself, his individuality, and his creations, as Richard Mèmeteau confirms when he writes: 'on sait que Morellet considère comme un progrès que les peintres et les artistes disparaissent en tant qu'auteurs de leurs oeuvres.'[21] Art must be as detached as possible from one's tastes, personal history, education.[22] In this regard,

[20] Anon, auction catalogue Artcurial, *Enchères Art Contemporain*, Paris, 03/04/2008.
[21] Richard Mèmeteau, 'Nature de l'artifice et artifice de la nature – François Morellet et Clément Rosset', in *Revue d'esthétique*, 2003, Vol. 44, pp.117-126 (p. 125).
[22] 'Je ne sais plus qui a dit: ''Un des avantages de l'art systématique est qu'il nous permet de faire des choses qu'on n'aime pas, ce qui augmente beaucoup le champ de la création''.' Morellet, *Mais comment*, p. 252.

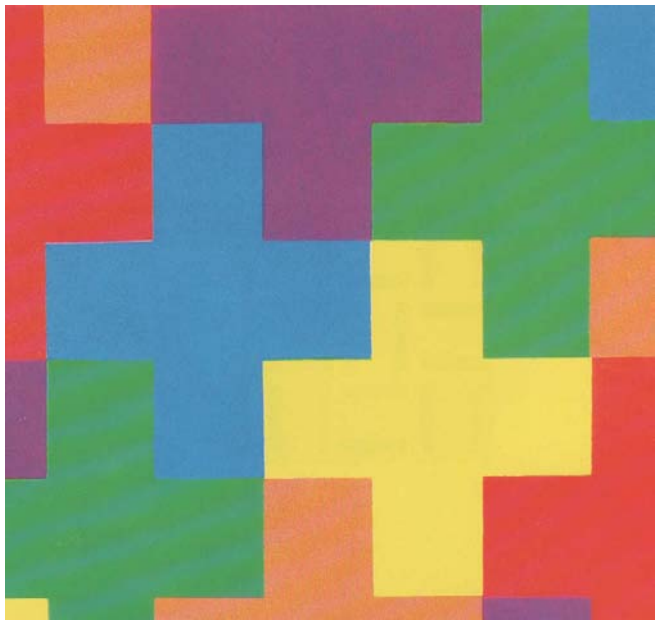
Morellet's position could not be further from that of Breton. In practical terms, what the visual artist wants to avoid at all costs is the existence of clues betraying a human presence at the root of his pieces; any work bearing evidence of such clues he has dubbed 'mal foutu':

> J'appelle 'mal foutu' (une expression familière mais pas vraiment péjorative) toute œuvre d'art dans laquelle les traces de fabrication sont laissées volontairement visibles (quand elles ne sont pas l'unique 'sujet' de l'oeuvre), par exemple: les coups de pinceaux irréguliers, les traînées de peinture, les morceaux manquants et ainsi de suite pour la peinture.[23]

Morellet looked from 1952 onward to find practical ways to avoid such traces: his goal was 'des oeuvres […] produites de la façon la plus mécanique possible'.[24] The adoption of the 'all-over' technique, inspired by the patterns and motifs encountered at the Alhambra, can be seen as a first step toward this ideal, since it signifies a shift in emphasis from the canvas itself (traditionally a closed-in totality with a strong focus of attention) to the idea that the frame need not constitute the fixed edges of a work, and the related notion that the canvas can be considered as simply a convenient extract of a much larger whole. But through this technique the sought-after objectivity was still somewhat evasive.

Works such as *Violet, bleu, vert, jaune, orange, rouge* (1953, partially reproduced on the next page), when looked at closely, reveal just such traces of the artist's presence: on several occasions in this detail, for instance, colours are seen to overlap at the edge of shapes, and the layer of paint can be less thick in areas, leading to slight variations in the supposed uniformity of the colours. In other words, it is still obvious that such works are hand-made, and if Morellet is to reach a satisfying level of neutrality, he must do away with these 'self-references'.

[23] Morellet, *Mais comment*, p. 144. The brackets are in the original.
[24] Morellet, *Mais comment*, p. 48.



François Morellet, *Violet, bleu, vert, jaune, orange, rouge,* 1953 (detail)

In 1956, the artist met the Molnars, a Yugoslavian couple with very radical ideas about abstract art, who would instill in him a strong 'désir de tout contrôler' with regards to his creative production.[25] This expression can be read in two different ways, which may well be compatible: first, art becomes a science, and therefore fulfills the visual artist's wish to 'contrôler et peut-être comprendre' art; second, science is understood primarily as a synonym for objectivity, and what Morellet means in this statement is that art is to be dealt with as neutrally as a scientific experiment.[26]

A year later, the artist moved a step further in his search for a dehumanised creative activity: 1957 indeed saw him take on assistants for the first time, a habit to which he has remained faithful to this day.[27] This practice is of course not new, but it is interesting to note the difference with past masters such as Michelangelo, who employed assistants with no notion of a painting losing his personal 'touch' in

[25] Lemoine, *Morellet*, p. 31.
[26] Morellet, *Mais comment*, p. 14.
[27] Blistène, *Catalogue*, p. 153.

the slightest. In Morellet's case, the same means is used to attain the very opposite result: through his assistants, the creator distances himself even more from his work, becoming a remoter causal factor.

However, it could be argued that employing assistants ultimately fails in its attempt: indeed it merely shifts the problem of a piece's being 'mal foutu' from Morellet to his employees. The human presence, far from being defeated, is still visible, with the only difference that it is simply no longer that of the initial instigator himself. Elements of a solution to this dilemma came through the artist's adoption of technological breakthroughs such as industrial paint and tools, whereby a machine would mechanically apply paint on canvases. More significantly still, in 1960 Morellet discovered the silkscreen process, a process which not only gave 'l'air d'être imprimé' to his works, but also allowed him to reproduce them at will, varying the colours and other components at the touch of a button.[28] He explains the use of machines in *Mais comment taire mes commentaires?*:

> Dans la production de l'oeuvre d'art, les décisions arbitraires sont réduites au maximum. Pour cela, les machines sont toujours plus utilisées. [Des] machines servant à la production industrielle courante permettent de réaliser des éléments identiques, base même de l'oeuvre.[29]

In actual fact, this process did not prove of much use to him until ten years later as, during the 1960s, Morellet, for the most part, abandoned traditional materials. Instead he worked with 'raw', or ready-made, ones: steel and neon tubes for instance. His first pieces using these materials date back to 1963, and if Morellet felt drawn to them, it is in large part because they had 'un passé historique très léger'.[30] From this remark, it would therefore appear that the aims of this period were closely related to the artist's desire to do away with the subjective element in art, and show a conceptual continuity despite the variety of materials used.

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[28] Lemoine, *Catalogue*, p. 48. This look distanced the creator even further from the work by doing away with all marks of 'mal foutu'.
[29] Morellet, *Mais comment*, p. 22.
[30] Morellet, *Mais comment*, p. 113.

How chance fits within systems

Apart from the connotations of freedom contained in the term 'jeu', Morellet's definition of systems, and subsequent understanding of geometrical abstraction, emphasises rigour. This rigour, added to the artist's preference for simplicity and attraction to geometrical shapes, gave the works of this period, in his own eyes at least, a certain 'blandness'. Morellet has said that 'au bout d'un moment, mes systèmes me sont apparus un peu trop endormis dans leur autosatisfaction et j'ai pensé que le hasard pourrait les réveiller, les faire revivre, leur faire préférer l'absurde à la tautologie.'[31] Chance, in 1958, is explicitly introduced to counter this blandness, as the quotation cited earlier also made clear: 'le hasard pouvait […] aider à insuffler de la vie dans mes systèmes.' 'Life' in this context can be read as a synonym of movement. But before the ways in which chance enriches Morellet's systems can be looked at in more detail, it must be demonstrated that, first and foremost, it 'fits within' them; this is not obvious when one considers how systems have been defined, and what chance represents.

In several respects, chance is in fact the polar opposite of systems: it implies disorder, and therefore contradicts Morellet's desire to control each and every aspect of the creation. In these conditions, it might seem that chance and systems can only be associated at the expense of one or the other. However, on one crucial aspect both agree. As has been mentioned, the overarching property of systems is their rejection of subjectivity; the distance they afford between the creator and his work. At this fundamental level, the addition of chance to systems makes perfect sense: chance, as emphasised by Rosset, is independent from all other spheres. In particular, chance is totally independent of man, nothing the latter does affecting the former; naturally, both occasionally come into contact, but if chance sometimes intervenes in human affairs, humans do not seem to have any influence over chance whatsoever. Morellet's geometrical abstraction can therefore integrate, and indeed welcome the introduction of, factors dependent upon chance.

[31] Habrant. No pagination.

What chance brings to systems

This particular instance of complementarity invites a reassessment of precisely what aspect, or quality, of chance may still seem to be incompatible with system-generated geometrical abstraction, in order to understand how the concept can be thought to enrich a work. In other words, it is now important to understand the nature of the extra element Morellet believes the use of chance can bring to his paintings or installations.

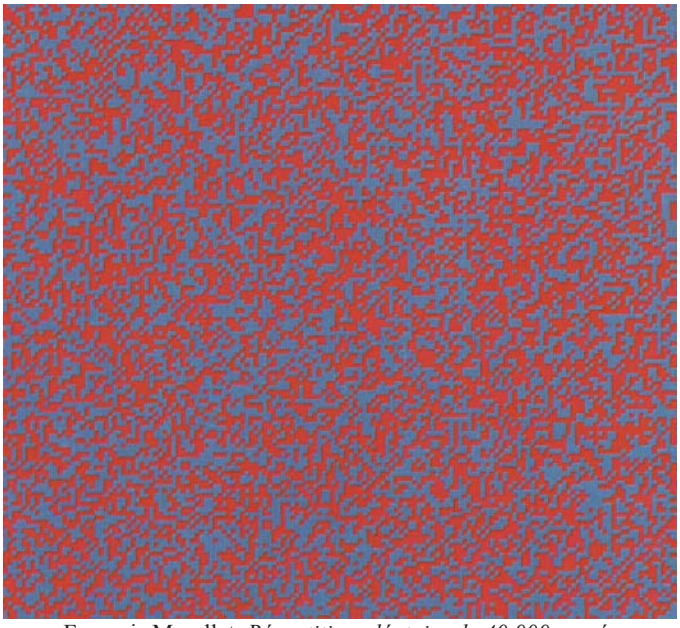
The first, most obvious, characteristic of chance, as witnessed in the case of Breton, is disorder. In 1958, Morellet was particularly aware of this property, for it is precisely that which he saw as defeating the blandness of his systems, as he explains again in *Mais comment taire mes commentaires?*, recognizing that 'j'ai été fatigué d'un certain constructivisme classique et équilibré.'[32] However, this admission must not be misunderstood: what he grew tired of is not Constructivism *per se*, but a 'balanced' Constructivism. In the face of that particular qualifier, no tool other than chance was more apt to come to his rescue.

Writing later about his adoption of randomness, the visual artist dubbed it the surfacing of his inner Dadaism in his otherwise Constructivist art, describing himself as 'le fils monstrueux de Mondrian et Picabia'.[33] This comment further stresses the importance Morellet placed in the disorder associated with chance. The first technique he used to implement chance can be seen in *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du bottin téléphonique* (1961, reproduced next page).

As mentioned earlier, this technique consists in relying on the randomness of numbers in the phone book. *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du bottin téléphonique* was primarily divided into 40.000 squares, and the colours (arbitrarily) decided upon were blue and red. Following Morellet's principles pre-dating chance, this painting might have resulted in a geometrical alternation of colours. This would have corresponded to the most 'economical' approach, from the point of view of the quantity of decisions he would be obliged to make (decisions being the

[32] Morellet, *Mais comment*, p. 183.
[33] Morellet, *Mais comment*, p. 142.

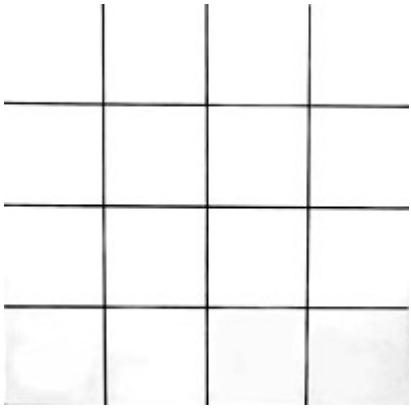
yardstick by which the visual artist judged the involvement he was obliged to accept in the production of a work). But by pairing each colour with either even or odd numbers, and surrendering the nature of the number attributed to each square *not* to a rigorous geometrical system, but to an aleatory succession of phone numbers, the artist created a work which is effectively characterised by lack of order in the spatial repartition of the chromatic squares.



François Morellet, *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du bottin téléphonique*, 1961 (detail)

Naturally, this seminal technique is not the only one to display disorder: by definition, all works involving chance do. *6 répartitions aléatoires de 4 carrés noir et blanc selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du nombre Pi* for instance replaces the randomness of the phone book with the aleatory nature of pi. In short, each time chance is called upon, Morellet knows it will provide him with a source of unexpectedness that, first, breaks the rigorous mould of his systems and, second, relies on principles of an arbitrary, or objective, nature. If this principle is not related to numbers, as previously mentioned, it is related to another source of unexpectedness, such as the whim of viewers in *4*

panneaux avec 4 rythmes d'éclairage interférents: this work, along with several others, is 'activated' by the spectator, either through a switch, as is the case here, or through direct action, as in the case of *Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur*. In all cases, disorder, and chance, are achieved through resorting to the unpredictable behaviour of individuals or devices. There is nothing here, as with the phone book or pi, that can be influenced or ordered by Morellet.



François Morellet, *16 carrés*, 1953

The correlative of this gain in disorder is complexity of form. At first, this phenomenon might appear as opposed to systems as disorder was. Such opposition appears particularly obvious when considering *16 carrés* (1953, reproduced above) for instance: the painting consists in a white canvas divided into sixteen equal squares by three vertical, and three horizontal, lines. *16 carrés* is Morellet's most minimalist work, and it is also his most simple, in the sense that both its structure and the amount of decisions required to produce it are restricted to a minimum.[34] In this regard, *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du bottin téléphonique* breaks away from this ideal, as, in the last analysis, do all works involving chance.

Visually, the two canvases contrast radically: the former repeats the same structure, a white square, sixteen times. The latter, on the contrary, has a much higher square count, which in itself makes the

[34] Morellet has referred to *16 carrés* as 'mon oeuvre la plus dure et la plus pure' (Hervé Bize, 'Meireles et Morellet, sous un angle particulier', in *Art & Aktœr*, n°35, printemps 2003, pp. 2-8 (p.2-3)).

appearance of the painting more complex; but the real complexity here comes from the association of a differentiation of blue and red squares to a non-geometrical, aleatory, repartition. *16 carrés* is easily readable: each square is followed by an exact copy; in *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du bottin téléphonique* however, nothing other than the randomness of phone numbers commands the colouring of each square, and when this arbitrariness is applied to the total square count, the overall structure of the work is far less decipherable. What chance introduces into Morellet's paintings is structural unpredictability, as the artist himself explains: '[la] première qualité [du hasard] est de fabriquer de l'imprévisible. Il s'oppose, ou plutôt, prend la place de la spontanéité, l'intuition, le talent, le génie'.[35]

However, this addition paradoxically does not contradict the creator's interest in simplicity, for in the end the complexity achieved through chance is as eradicated by it. In actual fact, complexity even *furthers* simplicity, if simplicity is defined as minimal participation in the piece on the part of the visual artist 'divided by', so to speak, the complexity of the finished work (this 'calculation', it must be stressed, is not meant to provide scientific data, but to offer a clear representation of Morellet's project that is both fair, and true to the spirit of the undertaking).

The consequence of his interest in simplicity has been to distance the creator from the creation, to make him an ever more remote factor. In this respect, in the judgement of the artist, the fewer decisions involved (input), the simpler, and better, the work (output). *16 carrés* provides a good example of such thinking: the input, evaluated in terms of decisions, can be said to be limited. It consists in deciding to use six lines, spaced out according to a given number of centimetres, and choosing two colours. The resulting painting, as mentioned, is simple in form and execution; but Morellet's simplicity, as his works with chance show, is not a measure of the result: again, what he is interested in is a simple *involvement*. In *16 carrés*, the result of dividing the input by the output is relatively high: in other words, the input creates little more than what it introduces.

In *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du bottin téléphonique*, on the contrary, the same calcu-

[35] Private interview (April 2005), appendix 2.

lation gives a very different result. In absolute terms indeed, Morellet's choice to resort to a phone book counts as only a few additional decisions (choosing the book, where to start the list of numbers, and so on), but the gain in terms of output is greatly increased compared to *16 carrés*. For a roughly similar amount of decisions, the complexity achieved in the second case vastly overshadows that of the first. Therefore, proportionally, the input produces significantly more when chance is used than when strictly geometrical systems are.

This finding pinpoints the value chance has for Morellet: it *introduces creativity* into his works. But this creativity, crucially, is not related to man any longer, and it therefore sidesteps the question of whether or not it is 'mal foutu'. The blandness of systems is avoided through a means that is both independent of the creator and able to create on its own. For chance indeed has the ability to generate by itself, to *produce* outside of foreign influence; hence its relevance for the visual artist. This is nowhere more obvious than in the aforementioned *Les cheminements de Pi*. The work is organised around the properties of the mathematical number pi, and consists, starting with a vertical segment of a given length, in positioning the next segment at an angle ten times equal to the new decimal of pi: the first number of pi, 3, results in a segment at a 30° angle from the first vertical line, and the second, 1, results in a segment at a 10° angle from the second line. As indicated, the computer-generated work belongs to the category of in-progress pieces, and it clearly illustrates the creativity of chance, as well as the proportional diminution of Morellet's input as the computer program calculates more and more decimals.

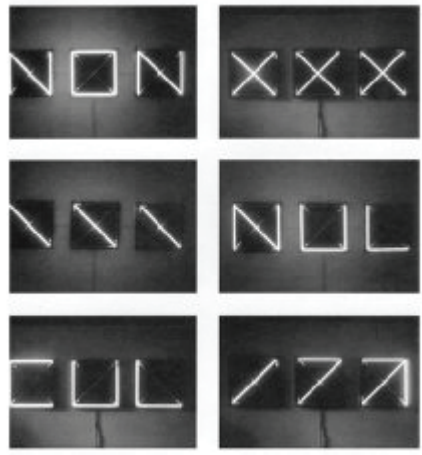
The creativity of chance

Chance, in the end, can be seen to represent for Morellet a substitute for the creator, an element which somehow improves the efficiency of the system insofar as randomness serves to mimic human decisions, without actually requiring further involvement on the creator's part. Understood as an expression of the artist's interiority, creativity is rejected; seen as a way to bring in complexity while avoiding further demands on the artist, chance is adopted. *16 carrés* might be of interest or value but its drawback, from Morellet's perspective, is that it is entirely comprised in the constraint that presides over it: nothing extra is added to it, it is no more or less than the exact illustration of

an idea. But, given the artist's self-proclaimed Picabian side, this particular avatar of simplicity could not satisfy him indefinitely. Hence his ingenious way of solving the apparent paradox of an objective creativity through chance, which does not put more stress on the creator, while also keeping strictly within the boundaries of his overarching systems.

However, it would be erroneous to talk here of an exchange of freedom, in which the creator would be relinquishing his own and replacing it with chance: Morellet is still the original factor, the prime mover, the entity deciding to use chance. Nonetheless, what appears clearly in his use of the concept is the attempt to increase yet again the distance between the initial 'creating' stage, and the subsequent development of the work. In this regard, by giving chance's creativity central position, he actively contributes to hiding his own, and reduces the importance of his freedom in favour of that of his new tool. Such a position is at the heart of Morellet's works relying on an element of the outside world. *Néons avec programmation aléatoire-poétique-géométrique* (1967, reproduced below) is one such piece: the lighting of its neon light bulbs, rooted to a combinatorial device, is activated by viewers pressing a switch. In another work, the switch in question is positioned in a nearby street and activated by cars, their drivers ignorant of the presence of the device, passing over it. In both cases, the intervention of the outside world, which introduces unpredictability, is part of the work itself; it is one of its constitutive elements.

This involvement is Morellet's decision, and hence the exercise of his own freedom, but it somehow dissipates behind the visibly instrumental action of the outside world. While traditional works put the emphasis on the creator controlling his creation, by using chance in this way Morellet puts yet more distance between himself and his pieces: his freedom becomes dependent on that of others, or at any rate on the intervention of a causal factor independent, to a certain extent, of himself. Thus the necessary arbitrary quality of his pieces appears superseded by the presence of others. In Morellet's perspective, that is, given his interest in making pieces as objectively as possible, the introduction of arbitrary qualities other than his own constitutes an *improvement*: it is as if, in fact, he turned them into technical tools. In this respect, there is no ambiguity, because the freedom of others is objectivised, while at the same time his decisions, his freedom, are required less and less.



François Morellet, *Néons avec programmation aléatoire-poétique-géométrique*, 1967 (detail)

Potentiality

This last remark hints at a logical trend in Morellet's artistic career: that of seeking to give ever more influence to chance, to increase its role. The creativity he draws from chance not only serves to give more life to his works, it also increases the gulf between input and output, and for a creator as interested in disappearing into the background as Morellet, it is understandable that the reins should increasingly change hands. *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du bottin téléphonique*, although being comparatively more complex than *16 carrés*, required a considerable amount of intervention from its creator; in fact, it involved considerably more time than the latter work: after the abstract stage of the conception, it required time to determine the nature (odd or even) of forty thousand phone numbers, then the painstaking process of colouring these forty thousand squares on a canvas accordingly. In this respect, the creator's presence is far from negligible, both in terms of time and effort.

To solve this problem, Morellet introduced, as in *4 panneaux avec 4 rythmes d'éclairage interférents*, an intermediary placed between himself and the work, which would take responsibility for part of the creative process. Whether this intermediary is a conscious

viewer or a passing car, it becomes part of the causal chain leading to the piece being made. Without their help, the piece simply would not be. Through this independent external device, over which he can have no influence, the artist cuts down his involvement by a considerable margin.

Furthermore, Morellet's interest in these devices lies in the fact that the ensuing pieces have a life of their own: they will continue to evolve regardless of his subsequent actions. This characteristic is essential to understand fully the creator's work with chance. Not only can chance increase complexity without the creator's help, it also introduces the possibility of non-geometrical, as well as non-subjective, automation into visual arts. *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du bottin téléphonique* includes chance at the stage of conception: the concept helped Morellet produce a given painting. However, in works such as *4 panneaux avec 4 rythmes d'éclairage interférents* or *Néons avec programmation aléatoire-poétique-géométrique*, chance is activated after the stage of conception. In other words, chance acts *upon* these works, as well as *through* them.

This shift emphasises a characteristic of chance that did not, and could not, appear in Breton's treatment of chance: potentiality. Naturally the Surrealist was aware of the richness and potential of coincidences; he more than anyone else had stressed the importance of 'attente'. But no Surrealist technique embodies in practice the fact that chance is not a result, but a process. This difference surfaces clearly in Morellet's *Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur* for instance. *Les cheminements de Pi*, through its exploration of the decimals of pi, achieves the same result.

In both these cases, the potentiality of chance is not stated, it is shown: these works have no definite shape, and cannot be grasped as a whole, for the simple reason that their being consists in a constant metamorphosis. At any given moment what one sees of them is only one detail, one more temporary step in an endless process. Furthermore, in the case of *Les cheminements de Pi*, no one is necessary to activate the system, since it is automated: a computer program has been designed to keep calculating the decimals of pi and, technology permitting, these decimals will indefinitely keep translating into angles. What precedes therefore implies that works illustrating one of

chance's fundamental aspects, potentiality, are by nature condemned to be in a temporary state, endlessly lingering between start and finish.

What Morellet achieves with these works is to show the fact that chance is not an object, and that it is instead an invisible principle or force. Indeed the result of a chance encounter is not chance itself; it is, to think of it in Rossetian terms, its *result*. Chance, on the contrary, is the process that leads to this encounter: it is situated neither in the two separate events which somehow meet (before), nor in what they have become once they have produced a new event (after).

In introducing potentiality, Morellet therefore also increases the importance of time as a creative force in visual arts. Breton's poems and texts did not, for the very reason that, as the name 'récits de rêve' shows, they are records: once they are written, their shape is final, and no evolution is possible. Morellet's *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés selon les chiffres pairs et impairs du bottin téléphonique* is, in this respect, similar. But with *Les cheminements de Pi* or *Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur*, the visual artist posits time as a *necessary component* of the work. Importantly, owing to the association of this temporal dimension and chance, as time passes, the causal intervention (the original gesture of the creator) recedes ever further into the distance, the input-output ratio becoming infinitesimal.

'Le vertige du vide'

Given the uncompromising nature of Morellet's endeavour, it is important to examine the ideas that drew him to such a radical approach. Indeed the rejection of subjectivity, and its subsequent replacement by an increasingly important role given to chance, seem to require equally strong beliefs. In the case of Breton, it was shown that chance was prized in fact as a form of shortcut (albeit necessary) designed to reach the deeper layers of individuality, to establish a link with an essential, unfettered self. However, Morellet is unequivocally opposed to subjectivity, be it conscious or unconscious. The visual artist, just as does Breton, rejects consciousness, not as a 'corrupted' self but in more general terms, as referring to humanity, as bringing humanity to the fore. This contrast in their stances is particularly evident in the two different approaches to the problem of bypassing consciousness: Breton's approach consists, in automatic writing for instance, in letting the unconscious surface without consciousness 'having a say';

Morellet's approach consists in resorting to stringent constraints, consciously decided upon and consciously applied.

These constraints, in complete contrast to Breton's rules, are purposefully designed to keep the unconscious at bay. In fact, from Morellet's point of view the unconscious is the most objectionable of phenomena, for it represents precisely the deep-seated location of subjectivity, and acts in undetectable and stealthy ways (an understanding which, this time, clearly agrees with Breton's). Consciousness, on the other hand, can be controlled, mastered. It is, after all, the aspect of our psyche which displays logical reasoning. As a result, the stringency of Morellet's constraints represents an exacerbation of the logical dimension of consciousness, designed to make sure that as little individuality as possible affects the work. But for what reason is Morellet so intent on avoiding subjectivity? What does he try to express through the radical use of chance?

At the time of his first foray into geometrical abstraction, the artist was a keen reader of Ouspensky and Teilhard de Chardin. Amongst the books that most influenced him, Morellet indeed mentions *Fragments d'un enseignement inconnu*, *Le Phénomène humain* and *L'Apparition de l'homme*.[36] Ouspensky, who popularised the thought of Gurdieff, was an Esoteric, and Teilhard de Chardin a Jesuit influenced by Saint Paul. Here is not the place to study their respective views in detail, but both thinkers agree on a number of points, which it is important to be aware of in order to understand the evolution of Morellet. The chief common belief is, interestingly, a complete rejection of chance as founding principle, as Laurent Drillon explains with reference to Teilhard de Chardin:

> Que l'évolution puisse progresser inexorablement dans la même direction pendant 15 milliards d'années sans viser un objectif est bien difficile à admettre. On ne peut accepter l'idée de tout ce parcours sans but. Si on veut envisager notre avenir, il faut accepter ce postulat: le Monde n'est pas absurde, le Monde a un sens.[37]

As a result, both thinkers posit the existence of a metaphysical principle underpinning life, whereby mankind is assigned an objective, a direction. For Teilhard, this objective is called Omega, the

[36] Private interview (April 2005), appendix 2.

[37] Laurent Drillon, 'L'évolution et la destinée humaine' <http://teilhard.org/pania/1_fichiers/format ion.Drillon.pdf> [accessed on 23 May 2008].

point at which the complexity borne out of evolution reaches its climax, and corresponds to a form of union with God. For Ouspensky, the emphasis is on self-development, because in daily life our consciousness is kept in a vegetative state. The objective, here, consists in achieving the fourth state of consciousness. The first one corresponds to sleep, the second to the waking state. Neither of these stages has anything to teach mankind; they represent our common, everyday, experience. Ouspensky encourages us to achieve the third state, or self-consciousness, attainable in times of extreme danger, when the self is in a state of high alert, therefore more receptive; through this state, the individual learns the truth about himself. But the final objective for Ouspensky is the fourth state, objective consciousness, which itself leads to cosmic consciousness: there, the individual learns the truth about everything.

These interpretations might seem at odds with geometrical abstraction, particularly considering Ouspensky's strong emphasis on the notion of consciousness. But in fact Mysticism and Esoterism are often of relevance when evoking 20th century geometrical abstraction. The founder of abstraction himself, Kandinsky, insisted in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, as the title shows, on the spiritual dimension of visual art.[38] As for Mondrian, founder of neo-Plasticism, he initiated geometrical abstraction in a self-proclaimed attempt to attain universality, a form of spiritual Holism; insofar as Realism and Expressionism depicted simple events, or scenes (i.e only a partial representation of reality), geometry was hailed as the only means to access a fuller expression of the truth, thanks to its purity:

> L'artiste vraiment moderne ressent consciemment l'abstraction dans une émotion de beauté, il reconnaît consciemment que l'émotion du beau est cosmique, universelle. Cette reconnaissance consciente a pour corollaire la plastique abstraite, l'homme adhérant uniquement à ce qui est universel.[39]

This direction, if ever it was a prominent feature in Morellet's thinking, seems to have gradually lost momentum throughout the 1950s, for the introduction of chance into his systems in 1958 is in clear contradiction with the positions aforementioned. In fact, Morel-

[38] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1977).
[39] Mondrian, *De Stilj*, n°1, in *L'Aventure de l'art au XXème siècle*, ed. Jean-Louis Ferrier (Paris: Editions du Chêne, 1999), p. 175.

let's claim to be 'le fils monstrueux de Mondrian et Picabia' is deceptive in that it suggests a sense of identity both in terms of artistic endeavour and underlying theory. But the latter assumption is misleading as the artist, typically relishing the irony of his discovery, explained to me:

> Les œuvres de Mondrian ont été pour moi des chefs-d'œuvre jouant merveilleusement avec le vertige du vide. Aussi quand, longtemps après, j'ai lu ses textes, j'en ai conclu, ironiquement, qu'il n'avait rien compris à ce qu'il faisait.[40]

The inclusion of Mondrian in Morellet's fictional genealogy is thus valid on the visual level, and as long as it is restricted to the concept of emptiness. In terms of ideas, however, this quotation makes clear the disagreement between the two men, and indirectly highlights Morellet's rejection of Mondrian's spiritual interpretation of art. Morellet's interest in the Russian's work was therefore based on a misunderstanding, which centred around the 'vertige du vide' mentioned above, and deciphering this expression can provide a key to understanding better the direction in which the French painter intended his work to be moving.

This emptiness, or void, or absence, is best described as the expression of no-thing, which is not to be confused with 'nothing': indeed to express nothing is already to express something. To create a work depicting nothingness would be to deliver a message. Morellet, on the contrary, would like to express *not a single thing*, to create a work without message: 'L'art existe pour moi quand un spectateur fait le boulot de vouloir trouver un sens au résultat d'une activité humaine', he explained to Camille Guichard in a film interview.[41] This position, however, can be read in two different ways. On the one hand it can signify, as suggested above, that the artist does not want art to deliver a message; on the other, and more radically, it can imply that there simply is no message to be delivered. The first affirmation, again, seems undeniable; Morellet indeed has always insisted that meaning is irrelevant to his works: 'L'art ne veut rien dire. C'est un système de signes, qui ne renvoie à rien d'autre qu'à lui-même.'[42] Art

[40] Private interview (April 2005), appendix 2.
[41] Morellet interviewed in *François Morellet: Le peintre de l'art systématique*, dir. Camille Guichard, Terra Luna, 1999.
[42] Cited in Lemoine, *Morellet*, p. 55.

refers to itself alone, it does not make reference to anything outside itself: it does not say anything about the world, about life, or about its creator. Its auto-referentiality makes it a locked-in system, an emptiness that does not feed on anything other than itself.

In this respect, the visual artist's interest in systems and chance is self-explanatory: through the replacement of arbitrary decisions by external constraints, the work is effectively as though severed from biographical contagion and thus achieves the desired objectivity. The presence of the adjective 'arbitrary' here, which Morellet often uses, might surprise insofar as, semantically, chance and arbitrariness are very close: Breton, for instance, did not differentiate between the two. But the visual artist does: to him, what is 'arbitrary' (the 'mal foutu') is what is related to the creator, or to man in general. Chance, on the contrary, is unrelated to man. The two concepts are therefore entirely incompatible. Man has no power whatsoever over chance, other than perhaps that of accidentally bringing it into being, of making it happen. As a result, from Morellet's perspective, it appears that the best way to escape arbitrariness (that is, the unconscious and all that marks something out as being 'human') is in fact not to rid a work of all traces of 'humanity', but to be *in total control*, for being in total control implies that nothing else other than what one intends is given shape.

While Morellet's interest in systems was an attempt to keep subjectivity out of his works, chance, on the other hand, brings into the systems an outside element, but this element has the desirable characteristic that, as Rosset explained, it is 'silent'. It is silent for the reason that it does not refer to a tangible reality, or body of matter, but also for the reason that it has not been weighed down by theories, laws and categorisations. Chance, because of its fundamental emptiness, has remained an empty notion, both referentially and conceptually.

Systems, or the conjunction of systems and chance, therefore allow Morellet 'le flirt avec le vide' he so craves.[43] This general position helps understand his 'théorie du pique-nique'. In a text written in 1971, the artist devised the theory that certain painters produced meaningless works of art so that the viewer could, in them, 'trouver ce qu'il veut, c'est-à-dire ce qu'il amène lui-même. Les œuvres d'art sont *des aires de pique-nique*, des tavernes espagnoles où on consomme ce

[43] Private interview (April 2005), appendix 2.

qu'on apporte'.[44] This theory could be taken as Perspectivistic: there is no ultimate truth, and as a result all interpretations are on an equal footing. However, Morellet's position appears more Nihilistic than Perspectivistic: indeed these various interpretations are accepted for their very emptiness. In other words, they do not affect the work because nothing can affect, or 'fill in', emptiness.

The second affirmation (that there is no message to be delivered) does not necessarily follow from the expression of no-thing, from the flirting with emptiness. In a strictly auto-referential framework, one might be able to envisage a Christian, a Hindu or an Animist using systems and chance in the same perspective. However, in addition to his quest for total auto-referentiality, Morellet posits a philosophical stance vindicating the interpretation that, if the work of art is silent, it is for reasons deeper than a simple retention or suppression of information. In 1979, he wrote an article, 'Les années soixante-dix', essential to a proper assessment of the nature of the 'vide'/void in question.

> Eh bien, une justification de ces œuvres 'dénaturées', c'est d'être en accord avec un monde, comme je le conçois, 'dénaturé' lui aussi, débarrassé de Dieu et de son résidu: l'idée de nature. C'est d'accepter un monde régi seulement par le hasard et l'artifice, d'accepter enfin un présent qui n'est plus refusé au nom d'un passé perdu ou d'un avenir à instaurer.[45]

This excerpt indeed clarifies what 'vide' truly means; it refers to the rejection of metaphysical principles: God, first, but also the idea of nature. Morellet, on the philosophical level, operates a *tabula rasa*: human illusions, which lead to a refusal of the present at the expense of a lost past or a wished-for future, are to be got rid of.

The parallel between the conceptual and the artistic level therefore becomes obvious: indeed, the great majority of Morellet's works rely on the same principle, whereby constraints become so stringent that they reduce subjectivity to the status of a strictly causal factor. This dual *tabula rasa* leads, in both cases, to the same results: artistically, once subjectivity has been eliminated, it leaves only systems and chance; philosophically, once God and natures of all kinds are discarded, it leaves 'un monde régi seulement par le hasard'. As a

[44] Morellet, *Mais comment*, p. 47. My italics.
[45] Morellet, *Mais comment*, pp.81-82.

result, 'le vertige du vide' present in Morellet's art must be read on these two separate, and yet complementary, levels.

Humour

The works of Morellet often display a considerable amount of humour. In fact, as the artist mentioned in our interview, *16 carrés* was already subtly humorous, at least in the sense that with it he intended 'une provocation légère'.[46] His humorous side, however, started to become more obviously visible at the beginning of the 1960s, with the introduction for instance of vulgar terms such as 'con' or 'cul' in *Néons avec programmation aléatoire-poétique-géométrique*. As this example shows, language constitutes the main vehicle for Morellet's humour: his articles ('vieux motard que j'aimais' is a spoonerism of 'mieux vaut tard que jamais'), the titles of some of his exhibitions ('Mords-les' is a homonym of 'Morellet'), the title of his collection of writings (*Mais comment taire mes commentaires?* is made up of two homonymic propositions), are characterised by a play on words.

In the series *Géométrie dans les spasmes*, the artist goes even further. Here the play on words consists in the phonetic proximity of 'dans les spasmes' and 'dans l'espace', but this title is motivated by the interpretation of the paintings it can thus be understood to invite. The series is made up of squares overlapping in different ways: without the title, which is not explicit by itself but rather suggestive, this overlapping could be seen as a further way in which Morellet could experiment with squares, their arrangement perhaps determined by chance operations. However, the title ('spasmes' can refer to both muscle spasms and love making) invites the viewer to interpret the series in a sexual way.[47]

On first view, the existence of humour in Morellet's work seems to contradict systems, as well as chance. If indeed both do actively reject subjectivity, humour clearly reintroduces it within art.[48] In the

[46] Private interview (April 2005), appendix 2.
[47] 'La Brouette', 'La Pipe', 'En Levrette', amongst others.
[48] For the evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, humour requires as a minimum second order intentionality, and science is still undecided as to whether the most evolved primates do possess second order intentionality. The lack of this level of intentionality in humans, in autistic individuals for instance, results in their not understanding 'what it means to joke or use words metaphorically' (Robin Dunbar,

particular example of *Géométrie dans les spasmes*, systems and chance are defeated in two separate ways: first, the squares have been positioned in defiance of objective rules (i.e. arbitrarily), and, second, the series also contradicts Morellet's overall frame of reference, geometrical abstraction, in as much as the shapes become figurative. This rehabilitation of subjectivity into art therefore takes place within an artistic artefact that, at the same time, is trying to annihilate it: as a result, it would seem necessary to revise either one or the other views.

However, it can be argued that Morellet's humour belongs to a specific category which, at the same time as implying a resurgence of subjectivity, can in fact coexist with chance. As was shown in the previous section, the artist's insistence on objectivity is rooted in the belief that no meaning can be expressed through art for the reason that no 'natural' meaning exists. The question of humour's appropriateness to chance and systems therefore revolves around whether Morellet's puns are intended as meaningful messages or for their own sake. The first notion has been studied in particular by Henri Bergson in *Le Rire* and Freud in *Le Mot d'esprit et ses rapports à l'inconscient*.[49] In both works, the stress is put on jokes and puns that allow a release of tension: here the smile or laughter is brought about through the denigrating of a reality that is seen as problematic and painful. In other words, the comic tries to restore psychological balance by allowing a distancing of the individual from a particular situation.

However, not all forms of humour do belong to this category: there indeed exists a strain that is intended to provoke smile or laughter without criticising or attempting to protect itself from the outside world. This category is called 'playful'. My *Maîtrise* thesis, which focused on this notion, centred around the analysis of a collection of poems by Raymond Queneau, *Le chien à la mandoline*.[50] Morellet's strain of humour has all the characteristics encountered in Queneau's work: it consists mainly in unmotivated puns which play with language without referring to external factors. Morellet's humour does not attack to defend or release tension; it extracts pleasure from

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The Human Story (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 51). In other words, humour relies heavily on the notion of subjectivity.

[49] Henri Bergson, *Le Rire* (Paris: PUF, 2005); Sigmund Freud, *Le Mot d'esprit et ses rapports à l'inconscient* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

[50] Denis Lejeune, *Théorie du ludique* (unpublished thesis, University of Poitiers, 1999).

the simple fact of ingeniously exploring the amusing possibilities of language, or of the dialogue between language and canvases, as the artist confirms: 'pour moi, le jeu, la frivolité n'ont pas besoin de la gravité pour me procurer cette jubilation, qui va jusqu'à la "chair de poule". C'est en effet mon seul thermomètre, remarquablement imprécis, pour mesurer "l'émotion artistique"'.[51]

In this sense, the visual artist's involvement with humour does not contradict his overall artistic programme; his using puns is not intended to bring about a new meaning, or imply a discourse on the world. Instead it is *gratuitous*, that is, not motivated by reasons other than the joy obtained through its sole utterance, or writing. No message is delivered through it, and as a result it does not jeopardise what has been developed so far about Morellet's philosophical views.

Summary

The study of Morellet's thought shows that it acts as clear confirmation of what his works seem to indicate on the surface. As opposed to the case of Breton, where the high level of involvement with chance on the creative level was revealed not to correspond to a championing of the notion on the conceptual front, the visual artist's use of the concept is firmly in line with his ideas. For this reason, Morellet's work tends to reject all aspects linked to subjectivity (and this means 'free' consciousness as well as the unconscious), thus positioning itself very clearly in opposition to movements such as Surrealism, whose avoidance of consciousness coincided with even more involvement with the individual.

This fundamental departure from subjectivity entails a number of consequences, such as a lack of interest in the idea of artistic freedom, especially evident in Morellet's pursuit of more and more binding constraints, systems more and more restricted as regards the 'human factor'. At the same time, the artist waged war on meaning, insofar as meaning as an artistic aim is one more form of the expression of subjectivity, of the individual behind the work.

Morellet furthermore revealed a new aspect of chance, not seen in Breton. *Potentiality*, a characteristic inherent for example to the concept of chance in philosophy, is welcome in his work, to the extent

[51] In Habrant. No pagination.

that some pieces seem mainly to seek to illustrate it. This would seem to make of Morellet a good example of an artist intent on creating chance-as-art. But is this adequation between the practical and conceptual levels a solid one? Morellet's thought as regards chance seems to be coherent, but does the artist wholeheartedly embrace a philosophy centred around it?

Morellet's chance, Rosset's chance – comparison and contrast

Fundamental agreement

Given the relative silence surrounding Clément Rosset in the media, and specifically three decades ago, it might be seen as an unlikely coincidence that Morellet, in a letter of August 1978, asked a friend who had previously recommended to him Edgar Morin's *La méthode*: 'Et toi, as-tu lu *L'anti-nature* de Rosset?'[52] This first reference is interesting in its ambiguity, for it is both revealing and frustrating: revealing in that it shows enthusiasm for the philosopher's writings on the artist's part, and frustrating since it stops short of explaining the reason for his puzzling enquiry.

Fifteen months later, for an exhibition catalogue, Morellet's choice of vocabulary became clearly permeated by Rosset's, and testifies to a close reading of the philosopher's work: asked why he was 'expressing himself more' as a painter at the time, Morellet took the opportunity to emphasise his resolute wish *not* to express anything in his paintings. But this was, admittedly, nothing new in itself. What was, on the contrary, was the choice of the word 'artificiel' ('Mes peintures sont, je l'espère, parfaitement pasteurisées, complètement artificielles') and insistence that 'mes systèmes n'expriment rien d'autre qu'eux-mêmes'.[53] Indeed such phraseology exactly mirrors the Rossetian 'tautology', i.e. the fact that reality does not refer to anything other than itself. However, this time, the reference is unacknowledged.

In fact, Morellet's most important text as regards Rosset was published slightly later in the same year, 1979. In the article 'Les

[52] Morellet, *Mais comment*, p. 74.

[53] Both quotations from Morellet, *Mais comment*, p. 79. As regards 'artificielles', *L'Anti-nature* is entirely dedicated to Rosset's notion of 'Artificialisme'.

années soixante-dix', the artist explained his interest in emptiness and the absence of meaning, as linked to the symmetrical absence of 'nature', which is the main thesis of *L'anti-nature*. The passage cited above (*supra*, page 159) is, by any account, a mere repetition of the philosopher's ideas, but tellingly, as in the previous article, a repetition that is completely endorsed by the borrower, and that he therefore makes his own ('comme je le conçois'). However, the filiation is even more undeniable here than in the earlier occurrences: the words 'hasard', 'artifice' and 'dénaturé' have indeed crept in, as well as the description of the concept of nature as a 'remnant' of God.[54] Furthermore, Morellet ended his article on a lengthy quotation taken directly from *L'anti-nature*, which establishes the connection between Naturalism and anguish (hence indirectly highlighting the positive Rossetian connection Artificialism/Joy developed earlier).

These three examples suffice to illustrate what Morellet owes to the philosopher who, as Mèmeteau explains, '[lui] offre [...] une justification et une formulation efficaces de ce qui sous-tend la nécessité de son art'.[55] In fact, this appreciation is further demonstrated by the fact that the artist took pains to make contact with Rosset himself, as the latter recalls: 'Je connais assez bien le peintre François Morellet. Il m'a écrit plusieurs fois et est venu me voir à Nice, à l'époque où j'y étais professeur, avec sous le bras plusieurs de mes livres qu'il semblait connaître par cœur.'[56]

All in all, what seems to have specifically appealed to Morellet, or to have particularly caught his attention in the late 1970s, was Rosset's deconstruction of the philosophical concept of 'nature'. As the painter explained: 'Il a été, pour moi, l'exterminateur, sans pitié, de la nature dans tous les sens, oh combien imprécis, du mot « nature ». Le dénonciateur de tout ce que les hommes ont créé pour se faire souffrir.'[57] This point, already made in 'Les années soixante-dix', is interesting in that it helps us further to understand Morellet's involvement with chance.

Casting Artificialism against Naturalism (*artifice* v *nature*) is a fundamental step in Rosset's reasoning. Indeed, as we have seen,

[54] Actually, as was shown earlier, it is rather God who is a remnant of the concept of nature, the latter being, for Rosset, the former's necessary condition.
[55] Mèmeteau, p. 118.
[56] Private correspondence, 25/05/2000.
[57] Private interview (April 2005), appendix 2.

Naturalism is related to the notion of essence, that is, eternal truths from which everything originates. In this perspective, there exists a concept of, say, 'chicken', or 'beauty'. Artificialism, on the contrary, posits that no such things as essences exist, and therefore objects, ideas, and more generally reality, do not refer to any higher, perennial 'images' of themselves. In other words, Artificialism rejects the existence of hypothetical duplicates, and only agrees to the tautological argument (A = A) when it comes to 'explaining' what effectively *is*.[58] For it must be remembered that duplication is for Rosset the only way to dodge this argument, and also the only way to allow meaning into reality.[59] And the concept of 'nature' does precisely that: it is a construct, a duplicate invented to account for what *is*, but based on hope rather than on reason.

What Rosset advocates instead is 'artifice': the notion that an object, an idea, or reality itself, does not *come from*, but is the result of, a *process* involving 'skills' (the ability to create complexity). Being deprived of an explanation or justification, these elements originate instead in a process that itself originates nowhere in particular (or rather, in the initial chance: chance-as-origin).

From the Naturalist perspective, man was always there, because the man of flesh and bone refers to its abstract duplicate, the concept or essence of 'man'. But from the Artificialist perspective, man is the contingent result of a complex series of accidental causes and effects; he is created, rather artificially, because what we traditionally call artificial is that which is soul-less, which does not seem to have any justification other than a flight of fancy, a whim or a stroke of luck. The artefact is a creation, an addition, an insignificant extra, which could or again could not exist, without anything being fundamentally changed.

Another way to express this is to say that Artificialism is a-hierarchical. In the absence of nature and a pre-existing justification of reality, everything is on the same ontological level, nothing (other than accidental characteristics) differentiating Darwin from a giant squid or the *Mona Lisa* from a smiling acarian. Morellet, as the previous quotations and discussion indicate, was vividly aware of this fundamental opposition, and undoubtedly sided with Rosset's posi-

[58] The only possible way to *explain* is to quote.
[59] Meaning understood here as a way to justify the existence of what *is*.

tion. But what form(s) did this primary conceptual agreement take in his work – and did the practice always coincide with the theory?

Concrete parallels

Morellet's discovery of the philosopher, and more precisely of *L'anti-nature*, dates at the latest from 1978, a time when the artist was already established in his artistic career. To use the term 'influence' would as a result be misleading, for Morellet had already worked with chance for two full decades. This probably explains his choice of words (such as 'Il m'a conforté') when talking about Rosset.[60] As a result of the comparative lateness of this encounter, the role the philosopher seems to have played for the artist seems to have been one of *confirmation*, rather than discovery: Rosset put into clear words, and organised into a structured discourse, what Morellet had been aiming to express through his paintings, sculptures and articles.

Indeed, many elements encountered in his paintings seem to gain a certain clarity and coherence when looked at through the philosopher's writing. First of all, and most obviously, chance, since for both it occupies a central position, one which is repeated, diffracted (the concept being not just an element amongst others, but a very crucial one). The use of constraints is testimony to this: the rejection of subjectivity that it permits is rooted in the idea that there is no 'nature', hence no truth. This denial imposes the adoption of another way to create art, one that will in no sense suggest the possibility of there existing any kind of inspirational 'nature' or 'truth'. Hence the use of concise instructions, or rules, whose most useful characteristic is, as has been shown, to allow a degree of objectivity which, coupled with a pre-determined application of chance, ensures that subjectivity is kept well at bay.

In line with this Rossetian flavour to Morellet's work are the logical rejection of meaning, and also, perhaps less obviously, his humour. It has been explained how and why meaning was rejected from the outset in Morellet's work. His interest in a mystical understanding of abstraction (via Ouspensky) was restricted to the early days of his career; after this initial period, it became clear to him that abstraction was to be endorsed as the only way to escape from the

[60] Private interview (April 2005), appendix 2.

Naturalist view. Not that abstraction was *immune* to meaning (as Ouspensky, and more recently Pollock or Flavin have proven), but it was the artistic language most capable of evading it, or at least, of keeping it at what Morellet felt to be a respectable distance.

In this light, the gradual introduction of humorous elements into Morellet's work could be seen as a backward step, as a 'reinjection' of subjectivity into art when art seemed to be successfully annihilating it – especially if the humour is to take the form of a return to some kind of figuration, as in the series *Géométrie dans les spasmes*. The sexual references contained in this work might only become obvious with the individual titles as well as the series' name, but the important point here is that the pieces start to *refer to* something, to reflect an exteriority, which could easily be, or at least runs the risk of being, interpreted as a kind of 'nature'.

However, as was suggested above, the answer to this particular conundrum lies in differentiating between two kinds of humour: Morellet's is playful (*ludique*) rather than protective (black humour; comical comments). Breton was also a playful writer, insofar as he invented various games, such as the exquisite corpse or 'l'un dans l'autre'. But, first of all, this playfulness was a means to an end (the underlining of objective chance), which it is not for Morellet; and, second, these games were rooted in a general pessimism. The playfulness of Surrealism is thus better described as belonging to the second of the aforementioned categories.

Morellet's involvement with humour can, on the other hand, be seen as rooted in a state very similar to Rosset's 'joie de vivre'. In fact, the philosopher himself provides the evidence to support the case that approbation, with which 'joie de vivre' is closely associated, is highly compatible with playfulness. It was shown earlier that his style of writing, the range of examples he uses, as well as the name given to some concepts ('crapule', 'sottise' etc), was quite unlike that of most philosophers. Of course, Rosset's taste for irreverence and play could be dismissed as an accidental characteristic, just as it would be easy to see Morellet's interest in verbal and visual puns as a simple personality trait. However, such a view would overlook the intriguing coincidence of two individuals who are interested in the same notion displaying the selfsame punning characteristics, and fail to recognise the importance of 'joie de vivre': the concept, as was highlighted in the chapter on Rosset, can be seen as the ultimate test regarding one's

Artificialism. There simply is no alternative to 'joie de vivre': all other psychological dispositions (such as pessimism or optimism) retain more or less visible links with the idea of nature. This explains why, in his analysis of those individuals he calls Artificialists, Rosset either focuses on artists who are renowned for their playfulness (Offenbach, Mozart, Molière), or otherwise emphasises this particular aspect in the work of others (Ravel, Shakespeare, Cyrano de Bergerac).[61]

If it is also true that some Artificialists, such as Lucretius, Nerval or Gracian, are more problematically described in this way, it remains the case that the whole Rossetian philosophy allows, even invites, the existence of the *ludique*, the playful. The disappearance of the overarching concept of nature leads to a meaningless and tragic world, and to approve of it in an Artificialist's sense necessarily implies to approve of it whole-heartedly.

Chance and objectivity: a differing view

Rosset's choice of Artificialists can be instructive in another way. As has just been stressed, not all of those he names displayed outright playfulness; however, one characteristic that is common to all is that their work stresses subjectivity: Nerval, Lucretius, Offenbach, Marcel Aymé, Nietzsche or Montaigne were never artistically involved with chance. This is hardly surprising: it is after all with Dada that the conceptual possibility of non-subjectivity in art developed, and most of Rosset's Artificialists pre-date Dada.

However, Morellet's evident and persistent leaning toward objectivity raises the question of why Rosset has never shown any philosophical interest in him, or in other like-minded creative individuals. My correspondence and interview with the philosopher confirmed that he has known of the visual artist for a number of years (he was still working in Nice at the time Morellet visited him, and only retired in 1998); Rosset has therefore been acquainted with Morellet's work for at least ten years. In *Franchise postale*, a collection of interviews, the philosopher also remarks in passing that he likes the music of John Cage.[62] It cannot be denied that the composer is a major figure as

[61] Points made especially in 'Esthétique de l'artifice', in Rosset, *L'Anti-nature* (pp 89-123).
[62] Rosset, *Franchise postale* (Paris: PUF, 2003).

regards the creative exploitation of chance, and I asked Rosset to comment on this interesting detail:

> J'aime son œuvre, tout simplement parce qu'elle me séduit par son sens du rythme, par son sens du contrepoint, par son sens du timbre, des petits ensembles dont chaque instrument apparaît au moment qu'il faut, bien qu'à un moment aléatoire.[63]

Furthermore, in addition to being an amateur musician, Rosset is a connoisseur of music, and for this reason it seems highly unlikely that the philosopher would not have heard of those active and much talked-about composers, closer to the European tradition, who in the last sixty years have given much thought to the idea of chance: Pierre Boulez and Iannis Xenakis, for example. Had Rosset never heard of them, their absence from his list of Artificialists would be understandable, but since he is most likely to be well aware of their existence and their work, their omission is intentional: why, therefore, does the theoretician of chance choose not to evoke or examine artists who openly seek to involve the concept of chance in their work?

Answering this question might indirectly reveal an important truth about both Rosset's and Morellet's understanding of chance. To make sense of this puzzling omission, then, it is necessary to remember that, for the philosopher, chance cannot be *represented*. This point is central to his system; chance is its origin, the undefined shape that overshadows the whole of creation, and for this very reason nothing can be said about it. Any attempt to discuss it would automatically create a duplicate. Duplication, in the philosopher's system, is synonym with illusion, and revelatory of the duplicator's desire rather than of any supposed truth. This is one of the reasons why Rosset studies Artificialism through individuals who do not try to represent chance, or even fail to mention it altogether. What his essays show in practice complies with the theory: chance cannot be tackled directly; its 'presence', so to speak, in an artist's or a thinker's work is necessarily conspicuous by its absence. Rosset based his entire system of thought upon chance but insisted that nothing could usefully be said *about* it, and his writings actively abide by this rule: only a small section of *Logique du pire* discusses the concept *directly*, and precisely in order to make the point that silence is the only way properly

[63] Private interview (4th March 2004), appendix 1.

to approach it. Artificialism consequently appears, as an idea, as a system, through a series of *indirect* proofs; in this sense, it is no surprise that several Artificialists are in fact themselves philosophers (Nietzsche, Lucretius), or artists who deal with ideas (Montaigne).

With these reservations in mind, it is time to return to Morellet. Ever since the artist introduced chance into his work, the notion has been linked with objectivity. As a result, all the subsequent efforts he made with a view towards improving the impact of chance on his pieces have, in parallel, increased the chasm between his production and subjectivity. Again this is logical, since Morellet reasoned that, chance being the opposite of man (as Rosset explains in *Logique du pire*), developing the former implied a diminishing of the importance of the latter.

The difference could, consequently, simply be put down to an alternative vision, or interpretation, of the concept of chance. However, duplication is an integral part of Rosset's tightly-knit system, and since Morellet explicitly agrees with him on it, it is possible to see the artist's endeavour as a duplication. Indeed, in constantly refining objectivity in his works, Morellet aims to provide the purest image of what chance is. But, according to Rosset's analysis, we know that this ambition must necessarily fail in its faithfulness, and that much can rather be learnt from it as regards the individual's own interpretation, his own desires. In Morellet's case, this interpretation is simple, and has been mentioned: it consists in analysing chance as contradictory to man, or to subjectivity.

Such understanding has the advantage of being rigorous and methodical. And, once again, it is emphasised by Rosset himself. However – and this is where mentioning his choice of Artificialists becomes relevant – the philosopher offers, in the last analysis, a very different picture of chance. In order to see this picture, it is necessary to remember that Rosset does not oppose chance and the notion of Determinism. As was stressed in the chapter dedicated to the philosopher, there is no contradiction in his system between order and disorder, as long as the latter is understood as the origin of the former. Our world is replete with order, deterministic phenomena; laws apply at every single level of matter. And Rosset does not deplore this state of affairs, far from it: order, in the way he analyses it, does not dispel disorder, because this order is accidental, whereas disorder is fundamental.

What this implies is therefore that chance as Rosset sees it encompasses *all* that there is. It is not only the singularity from which everything came into being, for everything that was created afterwards still 'belongs' to it, or rather, is constitutionally indistinguishable from it. In other words, chance is objectivity, but equally it is subjectivity, since not even mankind is capable of hauling itself out of the contingent frame of reference delimited by primordial chance.

Against this interpretation, Morellet's understanding and use of chance appears as partial, because it excludes a significant part of reality, and is biased, insofar as this exclusion is voluntary. In the end, aiming to represent the core of his philosophical system, François Morellet falls into the trap the philosopher expressly warned against: he erects duplicates. The artist is not promoting a 'nature' of any kind, since he seems to agree with Rosset on all other points (and in this sense Morellet does not belong to the Naturalist category), but he attempts to capture what, by definition, cannot be captured, because it is indefinable, not to mention so comprehensive that no canvas could hope to approach a faithful representation of it.

Summary

These points do not negate all the strong parallels existing between Rosset's and Morellet's thinking. Nonetheless, they reveal a difference in the way both see the place of chance in the field of art: that is, a difference on the question of whether creative works can accommodate the concept at its most radical. In the philosopher's case, the answer seems to be in the negative, while the artist's career appears to defend the view that such an accommodation is possible.

However, this difference is not just an expression of opposing opinions: insofar as both the philosopher and the artist share such common ideas as regards chance, it would seem that Morellet reaches a logical aporia. In others words, he manages to be a good Artificialist, whose only *faux pas* consists in wanting to *show* chance.

Conclusion

François Morellet has raised many interesting points as regards chance throughout his career, not least those concerning potentiality and the possibility of expressing it through visual works, and the present chapter has attempted to show the logic underpinning the evolution of his artistic practice on this matter, as well as the philosophical assumptions needed to make sense of it.

In terms of internal logic, Morellet's career is clearly understandable; he has remained focused on trying to squeeze subjectivity out of the artistic equation, adopting various contraptions, devices and methods in order to do so. This focus had its source in Morellet's own conception of art, which interestingly mirrors many points made by Rosset himself, as well as Rosset's philosophical system. However, this comparison seemed to reveal that Morellet overlooks a major characteristic of chance: its un-representability. This difference could be seen as merely a slight divergence in analysis, but the philosopher's thinking about chance is based on this essential characteristic: if the concept were 'representable', it would be a nature, or essence, and if this were so, nothing would conceptually differentiate it from other natures or essences – therefore creating a fatal flaw in his system. Chance is not graspable for the very reason that it encompasses *everything*, both quantitatively and qualitatively, synchronically and diachronically. In his eagerness to make a point, Morellet therefore seemed to pull the rug from under his conceptual feet.

This, of course, takes nothing away either from his work as an artist or from the thoroughness of his efforts towards the creation of a form of art moving closer and closer to chance, but it does beg the difficult question of whether artists involved with the concept can avoid this paradox. Indeed, can chance really survive as such while being the artistic focus of attention? In order to try to answer this particular question, the next chapter will concentrate on the composer John Cage.

7

John Cage

Chance in the works of John Cage

Toward chance

Contrary to Morellet, and rather more like Breton, the composer John Cage was a highly conceptual individual. However, where Breton set the tone for the future of Surrealism and for his own work from the very beginning, in the *Manifeste*, Cage's discourse and aesthetics were always evolutive, a living organism permeated by various influences, undercurrents, variations and changes.

The composer's involvement with chance, strictly speaking, dates from 1951, the year he produced *Music of Changes*, his 'first work composed entirely with chance operations'.[1] The qualifier 'entirely' is important here: it suggests that Cage used chance beforehand, albeit on a smaller scale. Although the pieces concerned do not belong squarely to what could be called the composer's *anni aleae*, it is nonetheless important to be acquainted with these beginnings, because *Music of Changes*, despite the impression given by its title, is a natural evolution rather than revolution. The changes are indeed rooted in a period preceding 1951, and are essentially characterised by two particular elements.

To the layman, Cage is known mostly for two 'inventions': the 'prepared pianos' on the one hand, and *4'33''* on the other.[2] The composer prepared his first pianos in 1940, for the choreographer Syvilla

[1] Daniel Bernstein, 'Cage and high Modernism', in Nicholls, *Companion*, pp. 198-210 (p. 203).

[2] Schoenberg (who had been his teacher) alledgedly said of Cage that he was 'not a composer, but an inventor – of genius' (Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 8; see also Daniel Nicholls, 'Cage in America', in Nicholls, *Companion*, pp. 15-24 (p. 16)).

Fort's dance programme *Bacchanale*.[3] This invention was itself only possible owing to Cage's previous exploration of noise, which started in earnest when the composer held his first percussion concert, in 1938.[4] The actual creation of the prepared pianos stemmed directly from practical concerns: Fort's programme was African in inspiration, and Cage had decided to reflect this by using percussion instruments. However, upon being shown the space where his ensemble was supposed to play, he realised that there was insufficient room, and that he could fit in a piano at best. After several attempts at reshuffling the set, and with time running out, the composer tried to write a traditional piano piece but failed. Eventually, the solution came when he had the idea of turning the piano *itself* into a percussion ensemble, by way of inserting screws, bolts but also pieces of cloth and other items to hand between the strings.

4'33'', also known as *Silence*, is a later piece, indeed it 'dates' from 1952, the year David Tudor controversially first 'interpreted' it; it consists in the musician's seating himself at the piano and lifting the lid up and down according to the piece's tripartite structure for a duration of four minutes and thirty-three seconds. In other words, *Silence* was conceived a year prior to *Music of Changes*. That said, this piece can be included in the prehistory of Cage's *anni aleae* for the reason that it had been on the composer's mind since 1948, although under a different proposed title:

> I have, for instance, several new desires (two may seem absurd, but I am serious about them): first, to compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to the Muzak Co. It will be 4 1/2 minutes long – these being the standard lengths of 'canned music', and its title will be 'Silent Prayer'.[5]

The time elapsed between the stages of conception and creation of *Silence* made Cage joke that it had been his longest piece in the making. Before looking at the composer's first serious foray into the fully-fledged exploitation of chance, it is of use to note those elements which, in the prepared pianos and *4'33''*, already hints at its use. Piano preparation introduced a strong element of unexpectedness into

[3] As James Pritchett points out however, there is still a question mark over whether *Second Construction* was, instead of *Bacchanale*, the first piece using prepared pianos (Pritchett, p. 206).
[4] Pritchett, p. 11.
[5] John Cage, *For the Birds* (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981), p. 76.

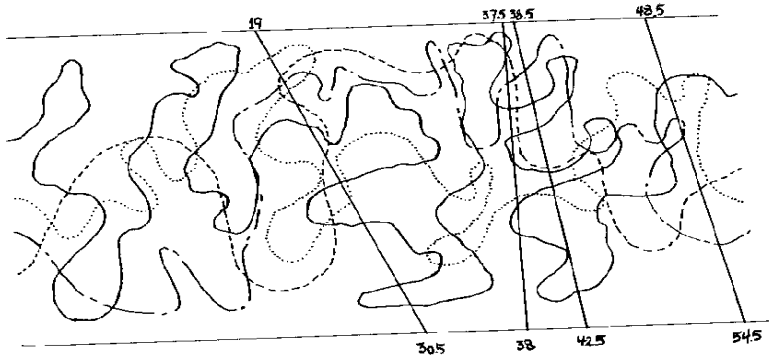
a performance: the insertion of various objects within the instrument caused sonorities and note durations, amongst others, to emerge very differently from usual. In the process, the piano lost its distinctive signature, the sound by which we normally recognize it, thereby in a sense losing its usual identity.

In *Silence*, in the same way as in the prepared pianos, the piece introduced chance into the resulting performance, but its *structure* was also determined by means of chance, thereby effectively bridging the pre-chance period and the era of the deliberate use of chance operations. *4'33''* was designed to prove to the audience, as will be shown in more detail later, that in fact, silence does not exist: what we think of as silent interlude is always made up of a variety of different noises. And it is in these noises that chance 'made an appearance', insofar as Cage had no control over what they were and when they occurred.

Chance

Between 1951 and his death, the composer wrote a vast number of musical pieces, a considerable amount of which revolved around, or at least to a great extent involved, chance. Logically, the multiplicity of techniques invented in order to do so is equally great, but Cage himself separated his musical involvement with the notion into two categories, two fixed centres, upon which he would always seek to improve by bringing in new ideas and variations. The first is, somewhat confusingly, called 'chance', while the second is termed 'indeterminacy'. However, this distinction comes with a warning: in Cage's eyes: both categories might well exist separately, but throughout his own career he always coupled them.[6] In practice, it simply means that, when the 'indeterminacy' period started, he integrated 'chance' into it.

[6] John Cage, *Silence* (Cambridge: MIT, 1967), p. 108. This linking is probably easier to understand when the dates at which each category came into use are noted: 1951 for the former, 1953 for the latter.



John Cage, *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra*, 1951 (excerpt)

As already stated, *Music of Changes* marks the momentous adoption of a new composing technique in Cage's career. Written earlier that year, in 1951, the piece *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra* (an extract from the score is reproduced above) made use of the *I Ching*, also known as *Book of Changes* (the ancient Chinese book of divination made up of sixty-four hexagrams purportedly containing a decipherable answer to all situations man can encounter in life).[7] Use of the *I Ching* was, however, solely restricted to the third movement, and within this movement its influence was itself quite minimal. *Music of Changes*, on the other hand, draws on this first experience and in it Cage extends the use of the *I Ching* to the whole piece, thus making it central to the work.

The importance of adopting the *Book of Changes* as a composing tool is that it contradicts traditional assertions about composition. Indeed what was new in this choice was that Cage moved, as he explained, from giving answers to asking questions: 'If there is no question, there is no answer'.[8] Instead of the composer deciding himself on each and every aspect of a piece of music, the hexagrams were consulted in order to obtain directions: in order to know how the score must evolve, Cage 'asked' the book. Primarily, this questioning was achieved through the tossing of a coin, but gradually the composer's means of consultation became more varied, so much so

[7] Amongst the possible spellings of the collection, Pritchett's has been retained.
[8] Cage, *Silence*, p. 119.

that, within a short space of time, any chance-related method was seen fit for the purpose.

This description might make turning to the *I Ching* seem an easy task, but in fact each of the six lines of each of the chance-selected hexagrams required three more tosses to be decided upon, thus normally adding up to eighteen tosses in all.[9] Of course, for Cage, each hexagram thus obtained often determined only one very minute aspect of the composition, or rather answered only one very specific question that he wanted answering.[10] In *Music of Changes*, for instance, only the tempi and the notes were, one by one, established by using the *I Ching*.[11] This meant that other aspects of the composition, such as its structure, were strictly independent of chance. Bernstein's comment that *Music of Changes* was a work 'composed entirely with chance operations' must therefore be qualified: it is not that the whole piece, in every last detail, stemmed from chance, but rather that chance pervaded it, from start to finish.

Cage soon came to realise that using the *I Ching* was a time-consuming affair; that the number of coin tosses, or related methods, necessary in order to finish a composition (a number greatly varying from one piece to another) placed a heavy burden on him.[12] This is the reason why he would welcome the arrival of computer programs on the music scene in the 1970s. But, in the early 1950s, the issue was an ever-present concern, reinforced by the fact that the *I Ching* was often used within charts, which drew on Cage's previous gamut technique.[13] The interest of the chart technique is that it allowed the composer to use patterned moves (going up or down and left or right) to select sounds, to which he then applied different 'permutations and orientations […] to generate sequences', permutations and orientations

[9] 'Normally', since there exist subtleties: for instance, if a line is 'moving' as opposed to 'stable', a new set of tosses is needed (for more details, see Pritchett, p. 70).

[10] This way of consulting the *I Ching* is of course Cage's own. For most other users, when used as a divination device, the book is much more complex to use and its answers to interpret.

[11] Jean-Yves Bosseur, *John Cage* (Paris: Minerve, 1993).

[12] For instance, it took Cage nine months to see *Music of Changes* through to its end (Kostelanetz, *Conversing*, p. 120).

[13] The gamut technique consists of a *linear* 'collection of *sounds* of varying character and complexity' (Pritchett, p. 40). On the other hand, the chart technique consists of a *chart formation* of these sounds, which allows Cage to move horizontally and vertically as he pleases. The compositional freedom is thus greater in the latter technique.

decided, naturally, via the *I Ching*.[14] But its downside, on the other hand, was that it was already time-consuming to produce in itself, thus making the process even longer when coupled with the hexagrams.

Music for Carillon No.1 (1952) displays Cage's first substitute for the chart: a system relying on the drawing of points. This system is essentially a model, a common principle which could be interpreted in different ways, and whose main advantage was the saving of time, as it effectively obviated the need to resort to the *I Ching* for numerous parameters of the composition. For instance, in *Music for Carillon*, Cage arbitrarily folded sheets of paper and made holes at the intersections of the folds. He then unfolded the paper onto a homemade score sheet and drew in 'notes' through the holes. A variation on this theme was used for the series *Music for Piano* (1952-56), for which the composer generated the points that were to be interpreted as musical notations by locating and marking imperfections in the paper. Furthermore, even within the series itself, there existed differences, depending chiefly on how involved the *I Ching* was.[15]

However, regardless of the improvements the point-drawing techniques brought over the charts, Cage was dissatisfied. Not in terms of workload this time, but at a more fundamental level, because he felt that the music resulting from chance operations was too plain, as Pritchett explains: 'Speed and flexibility (particularly of rhythm) had been obtained at the expense of the complexity and diversity of the basic musical materials'.[16] The composer was also concerned that chance as he saw it still left too much input (and choice) to the composer, or rather, gave him too much control over the score, as well as over the musicians and the audience: 'That the *Music of Changes* was composed by means of chance operations identifies the composer with no matter what eventuality. But that its notation is in all respects determinate does not permit the performer any such identification: his work is specifically laid out before him.'[17]

In other words, chance as the composer understood it intervened in the composing stages, but not afterward, in the playing: despite being composed using chance operations, the score was to be followed scrupulously by the musicians. This is evidenced by the fact that,

[14] Pritchett, p. 63. These permutations are obvious influences from Dodecaphonism.
[15] Pritchett, p. 94.
[16] Pritchett, p. 94.
[17] Cage, *Silence*, p. 36.

whereas initially the composer was quite evasive as to how to prepare pianos, he quickly grew increasingly precise and eventually took so much care in the matter that he ended up specifying the model of piano to be used, as well as the size of objects and their exact position along the strings. Similarly, Cage was often angered at the contemptuous attitude, or lack of application, of thoroughness, shown by some orchestras or musicians when playing his music.

The main problem, the fact that made the composer feel dissatisfied, therefore, was the *fixity* of the resulting pieces, their over-reliance on the creator's decisions.[18]

Indeterminacy

The solution to this difficulty came in the second manifestation of Cage's involvement with chance, 'indeterminacy'. For Pritchett, this category first appeared in the in-progress work 'The Ten Thousand Things'.[19] While it is true that this piece is Cage's first conscious using of a system that (partially) overcame difficulties linked to the limits of chance operations, the practical solution to bypassing them had been before his eyes for some time already. Indeed, and to take but one example, *Imaginary Landscape No.4* (1951), a work for twelve radios, had hinted at the overcoming of chance's shortcomings. As a result of the questioning of the *I Ching*, the twelve radios had been tuned according to chance operations, hence reproducing in a very deterministic way the role played by the twenty-four musicians involved. However, the actual result of the piece, being outside the control of both Cage and the musicians, was already stepping into indeterminacy – into what the composer also went on to call 'experimental music'.

Cage saw indeterminacy as a phenomenon whose result was not predictable. Put this way, chance operations also seem to belong to indeterminacy; but where both categories differ is that in the former, the element of chance is only present for the composer at the time of writing, while in the latter it spreads to later stages and components,

[18] The fixity of compositions was also being discussed in Darmstadt at the time, most especially by Henri Pousseur. Another important contributor to this question is of course Pierre Boulez.

[19] Pritchett, pp.95-104. The name refers to a number of works composed from 1953 to 1956.

such as the musicians themselves. Indeterminacy, in the composer's words, helped him make 'something that didn't tell people what to do'.[20] Again, his frustration with chance came from the fact that even though chance operations were involved, his works, once written, left no 'elbow room' whatsoever, either to himself, to the interpreters of his scores, or indeed to the audience; indeterminacy, however, aimed to overcome this somewhat contradictory state of 'deterministic chance' and to enable Cage to give back to chance its expected quality of… unexpectedness.

'The Ten Thousand Things' incorporated an element of indeterminacy as regards how the pieces sounded: indeed the musicians were, for instance, given the choice over what kind of preparation they wanted (in *31'57.9864'' for a Pianist*, 1954), or over the nature of the instruments themselves (in *27'10.554'' for a Percussionist*, 1956). Therefore, as in the case of *4'33''*, the resulting musical effect was to some extent indeterminate. But this was not yet what Cage meant by indeterminacy proper, and in fact it would take him several years to establish how he could compose in such a way as to truly allow the 'piece to be performed in substantially different ways'.[21]

Encouraged by the works along similar lines of some of his friends from the New York School (Morton Feldman, David Tudor, Christian Wolff and Earle Brown, as well as Europeans such as Stockhausen), Cage eventually found a solution in the shape of a piece from 1957, *Winter Music*. In this particular work, indeterminacy ceased to be an accident of the composition and very much became its purpose, its central concern. *Winter Music* still used imperfections in paper and the *I Ching*, which ensured an initially high contribution of chance, that is, what one might call 'pre-compositional' indeterminacy. But the indeterminacy that Cage was looking for was brought in through a novel conception of the score itself.

Thus far, what the composer had done in order to increase the role of chance had been mainly to complexify his writing techniques (as in the charts or paper imperfections), to find new ways to produce notes, keys, structures – score sheets in general. With *Winter Music*, Cage chose to introduce not complexity but *ambiguity* into his compositions. He did so by creating notations that required of the musician

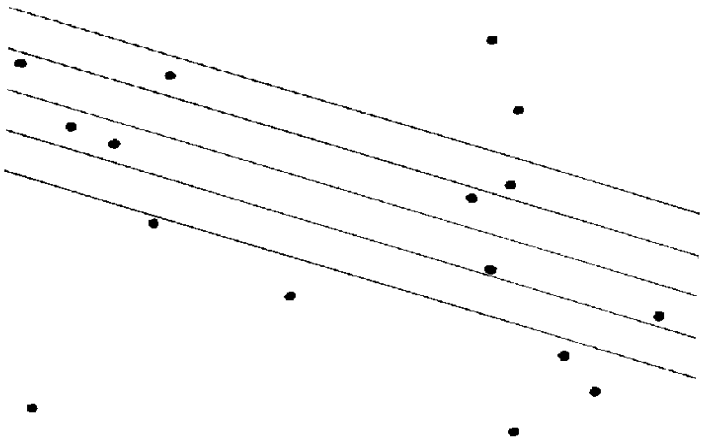
[20] Kostelanetz, *Conversing*, p. 74.
[21] Pritchett, p. 108.

that (s)he individually interpreted them: the new notations confronted musicians with a number of possibilities for each chord and asked them to make their own choices. This move can be summarised thus: if everything a composer does is bound to end up as fixed, as not admitting of interpretation, then he can opt to leave the choice to other people (a bold move that will therefore make the piece a proteiform and constantly changing musical event). In *Winter Music,* however, Cage was not asking the performers to decide what to do on their own accord in so many words, but chose instead to restrict their freedom by imposing a framework which nonetheless required them to act freely *within* it.

This ambiguity is interesting from the perspective of the use of chance, in that it takes the responsibility of the final form of the work away from the creator. The introduction of a decision-maker other than the composer between the latter and the work increases the distance and the indeterminacy, therefore the degree of unexpectedness; it places the creator in the position of a prime mover somehow relieved of his duty; whose ultimate task, that of giving life to his work, is partially handed over to an outsider (not unlike in some of Morellet's works).

Ambiguity therefore became Cage's main objective in composing, and he henceforth set out to create different ways in which to induce it. In *Winter Music*, it consisted in practice in the possibility for the performer to choose the way each chord was played, to decide on the order of the chords, to select their key, and even to shuffle and combine the pages of the score in any way (s)he wished. In *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1957-58), Cage used three different sizes of notes, and asked the musicians to choose whether this difference would affect the dynamics of the notes, their duration, or both. In addition, for the sixty-three-page score of the *Concert*'s solo for piano itself, the composer used eighty-four different notations, most of which required, as can be imagined, a large degree of interpretation to be turned into music.[22]

[22] For a detailed analysis of the most representative notations, see Pritchett, pp.112-124.



John Cage, *Music Walk*, 1958 (excerpt)

After working with scores, Cage moved on to employ what Pritchett has termed 'tools'.[23] Until *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, and even in the case of *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961), the composer had himself applied staves to a sheet of paper scattered with dots (the results of imperfections in the paper, folds and so on); in *Music Walk* (reproduced above) or *Fontana Mix* (both from 1958), he instead provided the performers with both elements, but *separately*, thus asking them to superimpose the staves onto the sheets themselves. The indeterminacy of pieces such as *Winter Music* was reinforced here, because no such thing as a score existed any longer, and the musicians were consequently asked to take even more responsibility in the process of creation. They were no longer merely players: they were simultaneously acting as composers.

Such experimentation reached its climax in the form of *Variations II* (1961). The piece consisted of eleven transparencies: five small ones containing each a single dot, and the remaining six, larger in size, with a single line on each. As in previous compositions, the lines corresponded to very general categories (frequency, amplitude, timbre, duration, point of occurrence and number of notes). But instead of the detailed and binding instructions found with the other tools, Cage this time simply wrote: 'If questions arise regarding other matters or

[23] Pritchett, p. 126.

details […] put the question in such a way that it can be answered by measurement'.[24] The performers could therefore arrange the transparencies according to their own inclination, thus creating a perfectly open-ended work, and do much as they pleased. Indeed the 'measurements' advised by Cage in his instructions left the door open to every sort of interpretation, and the piece is consequently one of the composer's most striking explorations of the player's freedom.

The two categories distinguished by Cage himself show that his involvement with chance remained a work in progress throughout his career, fuelled by the desire to fine-tune compositions so that they mirrored the composer's reasons for writing music. It is these reasons, and the constant dialogue between them and the practical outcome, that the next section will study.

Chance in the thought of John Cage

One aspect that the previous section highlighted is that Cage's practical involvement with chance cannot be assigned precise dates: as far as the composer was concerned, the categories of chance operations and indeterminacy were *practices* before being analytical concepts. This means that his career is better seen as a living whole, where boundaries are somewhat blurry. For the critic, it is of course convenient to distinguish eras, contrast habits and methods, but there is some necessary overlapping and/or redundancy.

The reason for this is simple: Cage's interest in chance was not conceptualised as such from the very beginning. If some pieces predating the 'chance operations' or the 'indeterminacy' periods display a certain degree of prescience (as did *4'33''* for instance), it is because in Cage's work the musical aspect of chance is firmly situated on the philosophical, or conceptual, level, before being articulated, translated, in terms of aesthetics. In other words, chance as a technique was not stumbled upon at a given moment, it slowly imposed itself on Cage's mind following several philosophical reorientations, which

[24] Cage, cited in <www.johncage.info> [accessed on 6 April 2007]. Again, it should be stressed that pieces such as *Winter Music*, although giving greater responsibilities to the performer, had strict rules that Cage had produced in order to keep an ultimate control over them.

started long before 1951. It is on these reorientations, and on their evolution throughout Cage's career, that this section will focus, so as to provide a good understanding of the composer's ideas and motivations for 'siding with' chance.

The breakdown in communication

On the whole, the second half of the 1940s were difficult and trying years for Cage, and would prove crucial in his general orientation, both in terms of musical language and thought. On a personal level, the composer separated from his wife, Xenia, whom he later divorced. From the point of view of his music, the initial turning point took the form of a piece entitled *The Perilous Night* (1943-44). Its style corresponded to the composer's interests of the moment, and the piece did not exhibit anything new in terms of experimental composition.

However, Cage had intended *The Perilous Night* to communicate his feelings to the audience; it was therefore meant, in this respect, as an expressive piece. Unfortunately, the audience did not respond to the composition, leaving the composer baffled by this unexpected experience: 'I had poured a great deal of emotion into the piece, and obviously I wasn't communicating this at all'.[25] The importance of this sudden realisation cannot be overemphasised. Indeed, as the quotation suggests, it concerns the notion of communication, which is traditionally held as crucial to any art form in general. Following the distressing reception of *The Perilous Night*, Cage therefore decided that music had to abandon its communicative endeavour altogether; at least, he posited that the notion of communication would from then on become unimportant for him, as suggested in a 1966 interview:

> Music doesn't really communicate to people. Or if it does, it does it in very, very different ways from one person to the next.[26]

The full implications and ramifications of this new position will be returned to below. For the present, it is essential to mark its signifi-

[25] Cited in Pritchett, p. 36. See also an observation reported by a French critic: 'Je remarquai que, lorsque j'écrivais consciemment quelque chose de triste, les auditeurs et les critiques en venaient souvent à rire; je ne pouvais accepter l'idée académique selon laquelle le but de la musique est la communication.' Cited in Bosseur, p. 27.
[26] Kostelanetz, *Conversing*, p. 120.

cance: indeed this seminal rejection sowed the first seeds of chance in Cage's thought. Communication presupposes that emotions, or meaning, expressed in musical notations by the composer, are presented to the audience through the medium of music. Communication therefore means that two subjectivities seek to enter into an exchange of information; one the transmitter, the other the receiver. In doing away with an aim of communication, or rather in reducing the importance accorded to it, Cage squarely attacked the notion of subjectivity, a concern also shared by Morellet, and a decision which will prove essential to understanding the composer's involvement with chance. As a result, from *The Perilous Night* onward, his writing became less and less centred on himself, the transmitter, or on the receiver. Consequently, soon after this experience the composer started looking for ways to compose music without explicitly referring to emotions.

Introduction to Asian thought

As luck would have it, shortly after the premiere of *The Perilous Night*, Gita Sarabhai, an Indian musician who had come to the USA in order to study occidental music, asked Cage for lessons in counterpoint. The composer obliged and suggested she introduce him, in exchange, to Indian music and aesthetics. This encounter, itself born out of a coincidence, would prove to be the start of a life-long interest in, and affection for, Asian thought on his part: indeed, most of Cage's thinking thereafter would be deeply influenced by Eastern concepts. But the discovery did not help the composer solely on the theoretical front: on the personal level, one of its most direct consequences was from his viewpoint to effect in him a healing that replaced more European techniques, such as psychoanalysis, and helped him through his problems.

Before returning to India, Gita Sarabhai gave Cage a leaving present in the form of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, and Sri Ramakrishna's teaching of living 'unattached in the world' made a lasting impression on the composer. In turn, the collection motivated him to finding out more about this tradition, and he soon discovered Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy*, subsequently followed by writings from Meister Eckhart, Huang Po, Lao Tze and Zen Buddhism. These texts, at least in the years immediately following, were to have a major impact on Cage's understanding of life.

In terms of composition, however, the outstanding influence came first from Ananda Coomaraswamy, a Sri Lankan scholar working in the United States. Quickly, the composer made some of Coomaraswamy's ideas his own, so much so that Pritchett even traces the religious tone colouring the composer's late 1940s articles back to Coomaraswamy's style.[27] This common ground, which will be returned to later, starts with the blurring of the boundaries between art and life: 'Every action executed is linked inherently to an aesthetic process, whether an act of religion, philosophy, cooking, planting, teaching, sculpting, etc'.[28] Second comes a special kind of 'Naturalism', which the composer expressed thus: 'The function of art traditionally is to imitate nature in its operations'.[29] Here he was clearly borrowing from (and extending the ideas of) Coomaraswamy, who wrote in *The Transformation of Nature in Art*: 'We shall find that Asiatic art is ideal in the mathematical sense: like Nature (*natura naturans*) not in appearance (viz. that of *ens naturata*), but in operation.'[30]

The last assertion fits perfectly within Cage's preoccupations of the time, for it articulates a rejection of self-expression. As Kostelanetz explains of the Sri Lankan scholar's creed, 'self-expression, equated with ''aesthetic exhibitionism'' […] is interpreted as an artistic vice, and Coomaraswamy continually warns of its degenerate nature'.[31]

For the American composer, Coomaraswamy therefore provided a system that justified and offered a framework for his desire to do away with communication. If another musical path was to be found, then, it should follow these general guidelines. But they were only that: guidelines, and Cage logically had to devise a musical transcription of them in order fully to free himself from the tyranny of communication, as well as from traditional compositional techniques (a category which, as surprising as it may seem, also comprised Dodecaphonism for the composer).[32]

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[27] *Companion*, p. 37.
[28] *Companion*, p. 46.
[29] Kostelanetz, *Conversing*, p. 76.
[30] Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (New York: Dover publications, 1934), pp.10-11.
[31] Kostelanetz, *Conversing*, p. 45.
[32] Dodecaphonism is a musical movement founded at the start of the 20th century by Schoenberg, under whom Cage studied composition. Its key-principle is to use all the

This transcription started with the adoption of the 'four elements technique', first elaborated on in the article 'In Defense of Satie' (1948), and further developed the following year in 'Precursors of Modern Music'. However, only with the adoption of chance operations and indeterminacy did it really become fully-fledged. Nonetheless, the 'four elements technique' is an important step toward understanding later compositions. The four elements in question are structure, form, method and materials. Crucially, in Cage's understanding of the technique, structure was linked to the mind and organisation: 'structure is properly mind-controlled'.[33] On the contrary, form appeared on the side of emotions: 'Form wants only freedom to be. It belongs to the heart'.[34] In the late 1940s, therefore, and despite his resolve to suppress communication, Cage's aesthetic was very much dualistic, with on the one hand self-negation (structure) and on the other what to all intents and purposes looks like self-expression (form). Law and freedom were the two apparently antagonistic poles informing his composing.

It thus does not come as a surprise that the pieces from that period, such as *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1949-50), express the tension between these two poles. However, and as Pritchett demonstrates, the *String Quartet* contradicts Cage's claim made in 'Precursors of Modern Music' that 'the law observed [by form], provided it serves one, has never been written and will never be'.[35] In this piece indeed the composer unwillingly showed that form was open to being controlled, that is, to coming under the influence of the mind (as, of course, the strikingly conventional name 'quartet' exemplifies). In other words, the composer's music was at this time slightly ahead of him: while *String Quartet in Four Parts* hints at the possibility of less dualistic compositions, Cage is still clinging to the conviction that music should retain a degree of expressive freedom.

The American's introduction to Asian philosophy provided him with the perfect opportunity to start confronting the issue of commu-

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twelve notes of the octave in every composition in an a-hierarchical way. Cage quickly grew dissatisfied with Dodecaphism. The possibility of this rejection has several possible explanations. One of them is that America in general, and American art in particular, was less weighted down by tradition than Europe.

[33] Cage, *Silence*, p. 62.

[34] Cage, *Silence*, p. 62.

[35] Pritchett, p. 61.

nication and subjectivity in a constructive way. However, at the same time, it created, or rather exacerbated, a tension in his thinking about music, for some time thereafter split between an objective (structure) and a subjective pole (form).

Redefining freedom

As formally anticipated by the *String Quartet*, any easing of the tension would necessarily have to come from a more efficient relinquishing of the conviction that form had to lean toward freedom. Unsurprisingly, this was facilitated by a deeper understanding of, and involvement with, East Asian philosophy. The first clear evidence of Cage's more complete endorsement of it is found in the talk entitled 'Lecture on nothing', from 1950.

Structurally, the lecture consists of 48 units of 48 measures each, and incorporates silence as part of its core. Its content is heavily indebted to Taoism, Buddhism and Zen, which routinely used apparent paradoxes or puzzling tautologies such as: 'I have nothing to say and I am saying it', 'It makes very little difference what I say or even how I say it', or 'If there is no question, there is no answer'.[36] Cage's decision to exemplify the content of the lecture in the way it is written only makes his allegiance clearer: in these traditions, the form of each utterance is indeed recognised as potentially signifying more than may at first appear. In this particular light, the six ready-made sentences that Cage used at the end of the lecture as answers to the audience's questions ('My head wants to ache' or 'According to the Farmers' Almanac this is False Spring', for instance) clearly emulate those exchanges (koans) associated with Zen, such as this dialogue taken from *Les Chemins du Zen* by Suzuki:

> Le maître leva le poing et demanda: 'Vois-tu?'
>
> Le disciple répondit […]: 'Même lorsque les bambous poussent drus, ils n'obstruent pas le cours du torrent'[37]

This comparison does not mean to suggest that Cage reached either the disciple's or the master's understanding of Zen. This brief

[36] Cage, *Silence*, respectively pp.109, 112, 119.
[37] Daseitz Suzuki, *Les Chemins du Zen* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1985), pp.82-3.

extract stresses the strong formalistic connection between the composer's endeavour, and those stichomythic conundrums typical of Zen.

'Lecture on nothing' also presented three ideas that were to prove particularly important for the future of Cage's music: firstly, emptiness (mirrored again in the lecture's style, which is replete with negations); secondly, the acceptance of unexpected events and their relation to organisation; and, finally, the realisation that sounds should be treated individually. Taken separately, some of these ideas had already been explored by Cage beforehand: the gamut technique, for instance, disconnected sounds from the whole. But it is in the coming together of these ideas into the composer's next piece that he found a way to address the aforementioned tension between structure and form, or law and freedom.

Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra, as already mentioned, was completed in 1951, although it had been begun shortly after 'Lecture on nothing'. Its importance is encapsulated in the piece's structure, divided into three movements. In the first, the piano part was written following a traditional method, that is, in Cage's case, a quasi-improvisational one, such as in *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946-49) and other previous compositions for prepared piano. The orchestra part, on the contrary, was composed using the newly developed chart technique. The marked difference between the two composing styles was also further underlined by the fact that the piano and the orchestra never played in unison.

The second movement saw the appliance of the chart technique to the piano part as well, although a different chart was used. This time, the progression rule relied on concentric circles and squares being drawn on the charts. Once again, both the piano and the orchestra played in alternation.

This slow, yet obvious, evolution led to the third movement, in which Cage's compositional procedures helped silence gain in importance: here it was placed on a par with sounds, acting this time not as a mere articulation between groups of sounds, but instead as a sound in itself. But this movement was significant for more than this new status accorded to silence: it constituted the high point of the piece as regards the composer's inner struggle. The movement indeed resolved the dichotomy between piano and orchestra: here at last, both were played at the same time, and in addition, their respective scores came from the same chart: the piece's antagonism was, in effect, nul-

lified. This, however, could still be seen as mere formalistic symbolism.

The third movement of *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra* also, and more importantly still, gave musical shape to 'Lecture on nothing's second idea, the acceptance of unexpected events. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, in this movement Cage, for the first time, used the *I Ching* as a compositional tool. In practice, the book was used to direct the filling in and selecting of the cells in the chart, thus creating a 'random series of sounds', as opposed to what happened in the first two movements, where sounds were chosen according to geometrical rules.[38] The way the composer used the *Book of Changes* to write the concerto's last movement is developed in greater detail in Bernstein and Pritchett.[39] But for my purpose, suffice it to say that its influence was restricted in scope in this instance; what matters, however, is that Cage, adopting this particular approach, made his first true foray into chance.

On a philosophical level, the fundamental meaning of the adoption of chance is a new understanding of the notion of freedom. Until *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra*, Cage was treading a fine line between structure and form, where structure represented external constraints and form, personal decisions. In this framework, which strongly echoed the Western opposition Determinism-Free agency, the composer was still perceiving freedom as the *ability to decide*, as the prerogative to exercise free agency. What the adoption of chance marks in this respect is a major shift: chance operations began to replace subjective decisions; arbitrarily selected constraints began to take over from consciously selected ones. In other words, the tension acutely felt by Cage since the mid-1940s, and in particular since *The Perilous Night*, was partly resolved, at least in principle, in that he sided with a non-Western understanding of freedom.

This particular approach lends much less importance to subjectivity, and recognises to a certain extent the illusory nature of free agency, as is for example implied in the Hinduist and Buddhist notion of karma. As a result, freedom is not so much perceived as the exercise of one's will as, rather, one's attunement to the surrounding

[38] Pritchett, p. 71.
[39] *Companion*, pp.193-203; Pritchett, pp.70-1.

world. In this light, and keeping in mind Coomaraswamy's precepts, chance is one of the possible ways out of the Western dilemma previously encountered, and keenly felt, by Cage: indeed, chance represented the world's unexpectedness, hence providing the composer with a means of expression that did not heavily rely on his own subjective involvement.

It is also clear that this shift conclusively addressed Cage's qualms about communication: thanks to chance operations, and later indeterminacy of course, the traditional need for music to 'mean' became baseless. Chance distanced the composer's life from his pieces; it severed the link between biography, mood, temper, tastes on the one hand, and the notes themselves on the other.

Missing the subject

As regards techniques, Cage's music evolved greatly after the early 1950s. For a start, he would soon make his adoption of chance more thorough by switching to indeterminacy. However, in terms of ideas, the use of the *I Ching* constitutes the crux in Cage's career in that it signalled his momentous change in emphasis: from a bias toward the inside, he moved thereafter to a bias toward the outside. Chance was therefore not as significant in itself as in what it rejected. Chance was Cage's weapon of choice against subjectivity. This notion has already been mentioned, but a true understanding of the composer's involvement with chance cannot be envisaged without realising the mutually exclusive, or proportionally inverse, relationship of these two concepts.

In many ways, the analysis of this relationship is the same for Cage as it was for Morellet: chance acts as substitute for the creativity that might be thought to have been lost through the (partial) relinquishing of subjectivity. Where Cage and Morellet differ, however, is in the composer's links with East Asian thought. Morellet reached chance via his personal interpretation of visual abstraction, Cage by means of his readings from the Buddhist tradition, and Zen Buddhism in particular. Patterson stresses that Cage's attendance at Suzuki's lectures is surrounded by some uncertainties as to dates, or even attendance proper.[40] But what is beyond doubt is that the

[40] *Companion*, p. 53.

composer at least read his books, since Suzuki is, in those years, the thinker to whom the composer referred most, either directly or indirectly.[41]

Four terms in particular underline this influence: unimpededness, interpenetration, no-mindedness and purposelessness. Musically speaking, each found its way into practical applications. Unimpededness implied the recognition and acceptance that sounds are independent of each other. Interpenetration meant that sounds ceased to be related to one another (by harmony for instance), and instead belonged to a unique overarching entity: the composition itself. No-mindedness amounted to refusing to treat music as a principle that orders sounds. As for purposelessness, the term referred essentially to the fact that the absence of purpose should become the very purpose of music.

But these concepts had even more weight in the philosophical understanding that Cage was progressively forming. Primarily, the first two in particular put the stress on the abolition of the notion of hierarchy: musical sounds, as well as noises and events, did not *impede* any longer, they rather interpenetrated. This is to be taken literally: indeterminacy was the best example of such levelling, insofar as it left the responsibility of structuring the composition to elements outside the control of the composer. In other words, no preference, and in this sense no 'arbitrary' (in Morellet's sense), no consciously determined order, was imposed.

The last two concepts dealt more forcefully with the human element and, more precisely, with subjectivity: the stress here was on relinquishing, as much as possible, the human drive to impose rules. The notion of purpose best represented this drive: to assign a purpose to a piece is to give too much credence to the composer, not to mention to meaning. In many ways, Cage's adoption of these principles amounted to letting the piece shape itself, grow, so to speak, organically; the composer became the mere starting point of a process which existed outside of him and which put his restricted role into perspective.

It is easy to see how these four concepts are broad, or loose, enough to integrate the ideas Cage gleaned from previous influential readings, such as those of Sri Ramakrishna or Coomaraswamy: they

[41] The same can be said of later writings and interviews, in which Cage never fails to name him. See for instance Bosseur's interview from 13 June 1979, in Bosseur, pp.181-6.

too promote non-attachment, self-negation, the equality of art and life, emptiness and the acceptance of unexpectedness. As opposed to the Western obsession with duality, and to the tension displayed in the composer's four elements technique (as well as in *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra*), the East Asian tradition appealed to Cage for its Monism, or its Holistic perspective; its teaching that man is a genuine part of the world. However, recognising it implied giving up the idea of mastery: mastery indeed estranges man from the world, for it gives him the illusion that he is somehow different from it, even superior to it.

The imitation of nature

But turning away from mastery, even partially, necessarily leaves a void. Where the interiority of the composer ceases to be the source of a piece, where communication is rejected, something must come and fill the gap, otherwise there simply is no musical event. The solution had already been highlighted by Coomaraswamy: art must imitate nature's operations.

Coomaraswamy's focus on the *operations* of nature is crucial if one is to avoid misinterpreting Cage's music, and his adoption of chance. Indeed the notion of imitation has a long history in Western art and philosophy: most famously, Plato and Aristotle produced highly influential discourses on the concept of *mimesis*. The *Dictionnaire d'esthétique* defines it as a '*présentation d'une fiction sous l'aspect qu'elle prendrait si elle était réelle*'.[42] In this perspective, imitating nature means to *copy* it, to indulge in 'make-believe'. Understood from this standpoint, Coomaraswamy's suggestion that art must imitate nature could imply that music aspires to no more than reproducing as realistically as possible the singing of birds, the noise of waterfalls, or the buzz of traffic. However, by concentrating on the *operations* of nature, the Sri Lankan was clearly not advocating Realism: what must be copied is the way nature *works*, not the way it *looks*, a point confirmed in Coomaraswamy's original statement, worth reiterating: 'Asiatic art is ideal in the mathematical sense: like Nature (*natura naturans*) not in appearance (viz. that of *ens*

[42] Etienne Bouriau, *Dictionnaire d'esthétique* (Paris: PUF, 1990), p. 862. Original emphasis.

naturata), but in operation' (where the reference to mathematics clearly sets the tone for the deciphering, or expression, of the hidden rules governing reality).

Naturally, in a Western context, this differentiation poses more problems than it solves. Had Cage read Coomaraswamy from the standpoint of his own cultural education, it is difficult to see how he would have ended up with a strong interest in chance: symbolically at least, mathematics are the antinomy of chance. According to Western logic, the operations of nature would have to be placed along a theoretical segment whose limits are, on the one hand, God as the creator of all, and on the other, nature as a more or less Deterministic entity. This, possibly until the publication of Rosset's essays, was by and large the only possible alternative. What this implies for the operations of nature is that they appear as following a logic; as part of a strict hierarchy, and above all in the dominion of man.

However, Cage considered Coomaraswamy's theory once he had already familiarised himself with the East Asian tradition, and in this tradition, nature is seen as a *process*. Unimpededness, interpenetration, no-mindedness and purposelessness therefore not only apply to art, but to nature, too: they represent separate, as well as complementary, elements of East Asian Monism, positing equality between, and interdependence of, events, objects and persons. From this standpoint, the operations of nature thus do not describe a *logic*, with its implied necessity for hierarchies, but an external and self-sufficient concatenation of happenings.

Cage's adoption of chance, and his constant improving on ways to implement it, is in large part rooted in this interpretation: chance does not imitate what one sees in the world, but the way the world functions, or rather the way it functions beyond appearances, as Larry Solomon confirms: 'using chance was literally an imitation of nature's manner of operation'.[43] One must, once again, avoid reading this from the point of view of Western philosophy: the East Asian tradition does not posit that the world is ruled *by* chance, but that events occur without any visible order, and without any visible purpose.

As a result, the emphasis on nature repeats, at a more fundamental level, the rejection of subjectivity. Of course, the operations of nature

[43] Larry Solomon <http://solomonsmusic.net/4min33se.htm> [accessed on 19 July 2008].

do include man, and therefore subjectivity, but again these, as highlighted by no-mindedness and purposelessness, are placed on the same level as others: man is not in a position of superiority with regard to nature, he is one more element of it, on a par with the rest of Creation. Cage would however come to appreciate the full weight of this approach at a later stage, as will be shown. During his 'chance period', and during much of his 'indeterminacy period', the stress is squarely put on the negative powers of nature's operations, and this is not without its problems.

Weaknesses in early indeterminacy

The previous developments have shown the strong links existing between Cage's outlook on philosophy and his keen interest in chance, first through chance operations, then indeterminacy. But indeterminacy was hardly a precise method of composing: we recall that in Cage's words, it was 'something that [did not] tell people what to do', and it allowed the resulting pieces 'to be performed in substantially new ways'. It was therefore a general and vague guiding principle, coloured by everything this might imply in terms of internal evolution, nuances and apparent contradictions. If, for instance, nature's operations became the distant goal of the composer's music, important parts of Cage's involvement with indeterminacy would seem to become problematic: the use of technology, for instance, or even his later leanings toward the political theory of Anarchism.

But on a more pragmatic, and immediate, level, indeterminacy posed a number of other difficulties. It certainly introduced variety and change in the way the pieces sounded, hence bringing them closer to the way nature was seen to function. As a result, after the interpretation by others of his more or less ambiguous scores (new notations), and scores in kit form (tools), it might seem that Cage had reached the end of his journey. However, these first attempts at indeterminacy raised questions of their own, and, in time, their formulation and resolution would fuel the composer's drive toward new forms of indeterminacy. Amongst these difficulties was the fact of relying on the interpretation of musicians: while undoubtedly efficient at distancing Cage from the final shape of a piece, this ultimately replaced one subjectivity by that of others, just as does, as has been shown, Morellet's use of assistants. In other words, the

avowed aim was not reached, insofar as the point of indeterminacy was not to target a particular subjectivity, but the very notion of subjectivity itself: that of the composer as well as of the musicians. By delegating the task of composing to another individual, by handing his own responsibilities to a fellow human, Cage simply reactivated the targeted notion of hierarchy: someone was still at the 'helm'.

In addition to this problem, appealing to somebody else's interpretation runs two even more pragmatic risks: first, as already mentioned, Cage's instructions did not protect his scores from being potentially turned into 'musical jokes' by ill-intentioned musicians (or at least musicians singing to a different theoretical tune). Second, even if this possible mishap is dealt with, there exists another issue: improvisation. As in the case of Morellet, Cage's involvement with chance as a concept was from the start seen as a pertinent way to avoid improvisation, which is not, contrary perhaps to some expectations, a good way to get over the hurdle of one's personality. It is rather the opposite, for asking musicians to play, or decide, freely only results in their being influenced, either consciously or unconsciously, by memory, education, or mood, that is, by aspects strongly tied to their own individual 'history'. The case of Surrealism in general, and Automatism in particular, clearly proved this point.

Technology

As a result, a sizeable portion of Cage's forays into indeterminacy (not only ambiguity, but 'tools' as well) addressed the problem of fixity, or unexpectedness, while in the end leaving untouched that of subjectivity. To overcome this obstacle, the composer began to turn his attention to the matter of technology, as used within the framework of indeterminacy. It has already been mentioned that, as early as 1951, *Imaginary Landscape No.4* involved radios, tuned according to chance operations, and therefore resulting in a chorus of noise and variously audible radio channels.[44] The composer is in fact commonly credited as being the first to have included radios in a musical work. In other pieces composed previously, Cage had also used recordings: technology, therefore, was nothing new to him at this stage in his career.

[44] This piece is, like others, one of those that, although written before indeterminacy, seem already to display it. However, chance operations determined its structure, as well as each new tuning by the musicians.

Furthermore, that it should resurface at this point of his thinking is logical: indeed technology considerably reduces the individual's input, as it nullifies the need to improvise, consequently reducing a disgruntled musician's scope to ridicule the music.

The composer's first use of technology had put the emphasis more specifically on one particular idea: that noises are sounds, which might already be said to address the question of hierarchy. In *Score (40 Drawings by Thoreau) and 23 Parts: 12 Haiku* (1974) for instance, which used technology in the same way as pieces from the 1950s, Cage recorded dawn at Stony Point, close to where he then lived; *Song Books* (1970) included taped hawk, and other birds', songs. In these examples, the composer took technology outside of its habitual, indoor sphere and into the environment. Uninterested in the conventional production of sounds, he started *sounding* the world around him for its acoustic properties. In the perspective of nature's operations, however, this particular emphasis ran into the aforementioned difficulty raised by traditional *mimesis*, not to mention the fact that, strictly speaking, it defeated indeterminacy insofar as the recordings were 'fixed', and unchanging, material once they were recorded.

Where Cage's new use of technology in the early 1960s is different is that it went beyond merely reproducing what is readily audible. The adoption of amplification enabled the composer to extract sounds from virtually anything. Furthermore, because amplification was used live, pieces resorting to it implemented experimentalism; such pieces also displayed unexpectedness; further equated life and art; and, finally, provided Cage with a definite proof of a fact he had discovered in 1951. While visiting an anechoic chamber at the University of Harvard, the composer realised with surprise that sounds kept resonating in his ears, '*one high and one low*'.[45] The engineers explained to him that one was his blood circulation, the other his nervous system. This experience was interpreted by Cage as meaning that silence, understood as complete emptiness, does not exist: where one thinks there is no sound or noise whatsoever, there is in fact always something to hear. As a result, when *4'33''* was created a year later, it is quite obvious that Cage took it as an illustration of this discovery, and not as the joke most people at the time thought it was:

[45] Cage, *Silence*, p. 8 (original emphasis); see also Kostelanetz, *Conversing*, p. 307.

> What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.[46]

Silence is predictable, monotonous. On the contrary, sounds, especially those that the audience is not used to, that it has in fact never listened to or perhaps even heard before, represent the polar opposite: they are unpredictable and varied in kind. But however significant this aspect, amplification is principally important to Cage because it allows him to step yet further away from subjectivity. At the time, in the early 1960s, the composer summarised this new surge as 'Music (not composition)'.[47] The distinction speaks for itself: music is now disconnected entirely from the very act of composing, of writing; in many respects, it sounds by itself, it simply *happens*. Using amplifiers gave life to apparently silent objects or actions, ridding Cage of the necessity of the act of composing, of writing, in the process. Naturally, this radical gesture would prove temporary, but it will be shown later how it survives, in other guises, in later developments of the composer's music.

0'00''

The first piece to implement amplification is entitled *0'00''* (1962), but it is also known as *Silence n°2*, thus indicating its logical link with *4'33"*, and it is instructive to examine it in order to see how amplification serves the purpose of indeterminacy. For this piece, the performer was solely instructed to undertake a freely chosen action while being wired to an amplifying device.[48] Two distinct elements were put together here: the action, which was by no means necessarily associated with the sphere of music, and amplification. The latter made obvious the sonic dimension: in other words, the performance was still designed to be *heard*, even though the action could be one not usually undertaken for 'auditory ends', at least from the

[46] Kostelanetz, *Conversing*, pp.69-70.
[47] Cage, cited in Pritchett, p. 138.
[48] At the *première*, Cage wrote a letter.

perspective of our everyday perception, and this is worth noting, as on other occasions the composer used these elements differently.[49]

0'00'' represented the quintessence of both these elements, nothing coming between them to distract attention. The composer's instructions and presence had arguably reached their barest form, Cage's influence being restricted to the most open-ended and anti-authoritarian of directions. In this particular case, neither interpretation nor chance operations were required: only an action. As a consequence, *0'00''* directly addressed the question of the performer's freedom: this piece was a *carte blanche*, albeit still presented in such a way as to insure that, despite the freedom given, one audible and one visual element would occur simultaneously. Indeed the said freedom applied to the *action*, over whose sonic rendition, and this was the point of *0'00''*, the performer had very little control. Such freedom was therefore restricted to the fact of choosing the general category of 'what to do', the resultant 'sounding' being on the whole beyond one's influence. In this respect, the piece followed the path of those counter-balancing acts through which Cage made sure that, when he himself was not overtly composing and dominating the situation, no one else was either.[50]

For all these reasons, *0'00''* can be seen as a *mise en abyme* of the presence-absence pattern. The performer is indeed a mirror image of the composer: Cage decides (on an instruction) but does not *produce*, his decision requiring that a third party decides (on an action), while not producing either. The result was still sounds, but sounds not *directly* intended in their actual form by either contributor to the piece. Naturally, such a stratagem obviously fitted perfectly within the composer's new understanding of the notion of freedom.

But at the same time as addressing the thorny issue of free agency, *0'00''* challenged the very concept of music. Indeed the piece, which was not 'written', was devoid of any interpretation as we know it; in fact it did away with instruments altogether, and even with musi-

[49] For example: *Variations III* (amplification of the gulping of water), *Musicircus* (amplification of light switches being turned on and off), *Variations VII* (amplification of human bodies). In such works, the amplification is only one of many elements that are part of the composition, and the action itself therefore carries less weight.

[50] These radical pieces are, if not few and far between, only a minority amongst less 'chance-conscious' compositions; often the radical elements are recycled and blended into pieces in which the composer's presence is more obvious.

cians. As a result, *0'00''* departed from the domain of composition, as noted by Cage himself, but also of music and performance, understood in a traditional sense. The only two reasons why the composer was still entitled to call it music was that it encompassed noises, which he had previously put on the same level as sounds, and that his understanding of the notion of music was significantly wider than was customary in the Western tradition, even at a time when experimentation was commonplace. As a result, being devoid of instruments, of orchestration, in fact of all apparent connections with music, and insofar as the chosen action had a meaning of its own that was strictly foreign to our cultural world of sounds, *0'00''* poses, in the most blatant way, the fundamental question: 'what is music?'.[51]

In a sense, *4'33''* was slightly less radical than *0'00''*: it still staged a piano and a musician, and even more significantly, it had a visible structure (which was where the element of composition, albeit difficult to distinguish for the listener, was still retained). These elements clearly acknowledged musical heritage, but most people saw Cage's piece as a Dada performance, a practical joke, a hoax intended to poke fun at the musical establishment and its ceremonial. *0'00''*, however, could not be seen as a joke of this nature insofar as there was no obvious way to relate it to music. *Silence n°2* therefore extended the radicality associated with its position as regards freedom by powerfully showcasing the problem of intentionality in art.

In this perspective, it is not insignificant that Cage should have chosen letter-writing at the première. Indeed *0'00''*, although a 'work', was a serious parody of musical composition, a 'music writing' that failed to produce music and instead became performative. Writing, in this case, was not important because of what was written, but for the act of writing itself, a concept that is, taken literally, the very opposite of composition. Indeed performance is what happens *when* it happens (and is therefore linked to indeterminacy) whereas composition is a fixed notation of what *is to* happen, and therefore closes the door on the moment itself, denying its characteristics of openness and immediacy.

[51] It could well be argued that Cage has had the same impact on music as Duchamp had at the beginning of the 20th century on visual art. While it is Duchamp's ready-made that led to the most disturbing rethinking of the definition of art, such pieces as *0'00''* undoubtedly pose similar questions in music. In this sense, it is no surprise that Cage was so admiring of Duchamp, and ultimately became his friend.

The 'sound systems'

Cage called 'sound systems' those pieces which, either solely or partly, consisted in amplifying the environment. This expression is interesting in that it puts the stress on the intended objectivity of the concept: a 'system', as was shown with Morellet, is meant to evolve as much as possible *on its own*, without the need for continual input on the creator's part. This is exactly what amplification offered Cage: the possibility of being ever more passive (compositionally and otherwise); of letting the world happen, and sound, by itself. Strikingly, this dimension is both made possible and echoed by an electronic device: it is the technological system itself, intrinsically man-made, that 'creates' the musical system and as a consequence the possibility of reducing human presence to a bare minimum.

The obvious lack of composition in the sound systems harks back to the idea of 'simultaneity'. Simultaneity was the ultimate acceptance of the absence of hierarchy in all domains (sounds, structure, taste, amongst others). Until the early 1960s, there had always been 'some common feature or origin' to the various parts of Cage's pieces, however indeterminate.[52] In other words, there had always been an underlying link or articulation between the elements being put together, an encompassing relationship that sufficed to justify their coexistence. But with simultaneity at its height, Cage effectively did away with this need for a justifiable symbiosis.

Reunion (1968) serves as a good illustration of the idea of simultaneity. For this piece, Cage invited four of his composer friends (Tudor, Mumma, Behrman and Cross) to perform their own music, *all at the same time*, without any kind of advice as to the length, rhythm, style, instrumentation, or any other aspect of their performance. The output of each composer's production was routed to a gating system, itself connected to a chessboard.[53] Marcel Duchamp, his wife and Cage then played chess for five hours, rearranging the way the four different musical performances sounded at every move.

In essence, *Reunion* therefore managed to blend four very distinctive musical identities into a single event, of which they were necessary parts, although without any sort of predetermined coordination or

[52] Pritchett, p. 152.

[53] To each of the 64 squares was electronically attributed a particular combination of performances which were activated as pieces were moved.

adjustment. It showed an overall composer (Cage) initiating a musical event without producing a single sound himself, and without even composing (yet again, Cage was following his motto: 'music, not composition'). As in *0'00''*, the music-*making* process is completely independent of the piece produced itself, since in one case it consisted in the amplification of the act of writing a letter, and in the other the playing of a game of chess. In both instances, the musical experience is the result of an action not generally associated with music, which again invites a reassessment of the meaning of 'composition'.

Natural instruments

The aforementioned pieces fit very snugly within the general framework of Cage's understanding of aesthetics. However, the radicality of some of them, of *0'00''* in particular, reached such an extreme that the composer was in danger of crossing a notional musical border into other areas of art which had nothing to do with sounds (hence the use of the non-specific term 'performance' to describe some of these works). Cage's involvement with natural instruments, which still emphasised amplification, and hence technology, constituted in this respect a good compromise: indeed these 'instruments', as the name suggests, subtly reintroduced the notion of music playing within music, while at the same time managing to keep the structured freedom found in other amplified pieces, or sound systems.

First, natural instruments point at a reconciliation between the composer and improvisation, insofar as they required the musicians to 'play' these instruments as they pleased. However, it would be a mistake to take this reconciliation as literal, or rather to think that Cage finally signified through natural instruments an end to his dislike of jazz-like improvisation. In fact, the freedom granted with one hand was immediately taken away with the other, for the natural instruments proposed for playing, such as trees (*Child of Tree*, 1975) or conch shells (*Inlets*, 1977), themselves display a form of independence. As has already been mentioned, numerous pieces integrate natural sounds: the recorded songs of birds and the amplified sound of dawn (*Score (40 Drawings by Thoreau) and 23 Parts: 12 Haiku*, 1974); the noise of Sixth Avenue (*Etcetera 2/4 Orchestras*, 1986). But in these pieces amplification only applied to recorded *natural* sounds, a fixed material allowing no interaction whatsoever.

The case of *Inlets* and *Child of Tree* is different in that the performance was based on the actual playing of the natural objects themselves, which have the remarkable particularity, for Cage, of responding to the musician's interaction (in the form of tapping or tilting for instance) in unpredictable ways. This time, contrary to *0'00''*, the action is music-orientated from the outset, but, much like the amplification of letter writing, for instance, the fact of playing natural objects provides very little control over the resulting sounds. Again, freedom is given, but as soon as it is given, it is reclaimed, or rather countered by the natural properties of conch shells here, trees there.

One other significant difference between *0'00''* and pieces such as *Inlets* is to do with the input-output issue discussed earlier. The instructions for *Child of Tree* are, in comparison with pieces from the 1940s or 1950s, quite short:

> In *Child of Tree*, a single player performs using amplified plant materials. Cage specifies two of the ten ''instruments'' to be used: a pod from a poinciana tree and a cactus, this latter being played by plucking the spines with a toothstick or needle. Cage provides *elaborate* instructions to the performer on how, via *chance operations*, to divide the eight-minute length of the piece into parts, and subsequently how to divide the ten instruments amongst the various parts of the performance. *This is all done ahead of time*, and in performance the player improvises on the plant instruments, changing instruments according to the time structure.[54]

Because of the requirement for chance operations, which necessarily precede the performance, *Child of Tree* suffered from the same drawbacks as other works relying on chance, the input-output ratio being still relatively high. On the other hand, *Inlets*' input-output ratio was smaller; for a start, chance operations were not involved, thus slimming down the preparation time. But in addition there were, as Pritchett remarks, no set 'overall performance time, nor any particular division of that time'.[55] Finally, this piece comprised fewer instructions, which were less prescriptive, than its precursor, but in this area it was still lagging behind the radical *0'00''*, which would remain unsurpassed in Cage's production.[56]

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[54] Pritchett, p. 195 (my emphasis).
[55] Pritchett, p. 195.
[56] Pritchett, pp. 152-3.

Tension in a new guise

What these pieces did offer that *0'00''* did not, however, was the presence of instruments; as regards the creator's presence and binding freedom, *Inlets* and *Child of Tree* might thus be said effectively to combine the lessons of both indeterminacy and of works based on chance. But by doing so, they also, logically, increased the requirement for subjectivity, through improvisation for instance. Granted, this improvisation is counter-balanced, as has been shown, by the physical properties of the instruments themselves; but a conscious act, positively related to music-making, is undeniably at the base of sounds, however distorted and delayed.

In other words, the antagonism found in early 1950s works between freedom and law resurfaces partially in a new guise: it is, in fact, as if it had never really been omitted from Cage's relationship with music. In the 1970s this tension was less obvious, less visible, and had taken on a slightly different mantle, but the composer still seemed pulled between two contradictory poles. This new 'slant', instead of focusing literally on freedom and law, took the shape of the conceptual pair objectivity-subjectivity, which had always been present throughout his career but now seemed to have become prominent.

Rather similarly to Morellet, and despite his dedication to East Asian precepts of non-hierarchy on the one hand, and nature's operations on the other, Cage did not in fact succeed in creating a work entirely free of subjectivity. Even *0'00''* relied on two individualities (the composer's and the performer's) combining to give birth to sounds; although the composer managed to restrict the direct influence of both, it is nonetheless from their choices, that is, ultimately, their freedom, that the pieces originated. This specific piece is, it is true, particularly interesting in that what is put into it is negligible compared to the result, whereby it succeeds in reducing the subjective dimension to a diminutive fraction of the whole. But this meanest share is still present, the end result that lingering expression of subjectivity which becomes a piece of music.

In this respect, a simple change of perspective thus shows that *0'00''* and other such works, while trying to increase the distance between themselves and their creator, only managed to make very clear the necessary relationship between subjectivity and music. It

would seem that the closer Cage got to engaging chance in his works, the more determinedly they would resist it, thus mimicking on the objective level the tension felt by the composer himself. The minimalism of *0'00''*, for instance, shows the same pattern of attraction-repulsion as two magnets: separated by various objects or a great distance, the repulsion of magnets with the same electrical charge will be so weak as to be unnoticeable; but as soon as the interfering objects are taken away or the distance between the magnets is reduced, the laws of physics become very obvious indeed. simplifying music excessively through the use of chance, Cage stripped it to its bare bones, thereby making more obvious than ever (and despite himself) the unavoidable fact that music is rooted, at least partly, within the individual.

Silence n°2 can also be said to 'bypass' chance from another viewpoint. *4'33''*, its precursor, whose structure was determined by chance operations, was designed to showcase *any* kind of sounds. Its focus, therefore, was on what happened during those four minutes thirty-three seconds. On the other hand, *0'00''* focused solely on the performed action: whatever happened outside this particular action was, in effect, not part of the performance. As a result, present during a performance of it were potential disruptive noises, interfering sounds, unwanted elements. One telling illustration of this exclusion of input from surroundings is to be found in the fact that Cage specified in his instruction that the amplification was to be free of feedback: *Silence n°2* was, in broad terms, outside the control of the performer, but it was still all *about* him, stemming from *his* decision and the noise made by *his* chosen action. Furthermore, it must be noted that, since the piece was restricted to one sole action and outside noises were 'banned', the range of sounds may be assumed to be very limited.[57] In other words, the level of unexpectedness/potentiality present in *0'00''* dropped significantly compared to that of *4'33''*.

Summary

As regards the notion of chance, actively courted by Cage, and understood by him as the most efficient tool for making his music and his

[57] By which is meant that if the performer writes a letter, he is unlikely simultaneously to burst into tears, start barking or imitating the noise of a passing car.

ideas coincide, his use of technology, in the particular guise of amplification, constituted another step toward greater faithfulness to nature's operations. This does not mean that, along the way, amplification, as well as some of its variations, was completely devoid of internal problems, but in general it allowed Cage to create more comprehensive indeterminate pieces.

However, the process revealed one important limitation. Amplification seemed to have furthered both of those aspects singled out to represent nature's operations: unexpectedness and objectivity, which themselves encompassed those analysed earlier. It had, in particular, expanded the realm of noises by showing them to exist in the mundane and apparently mute reality of everyday actions, consequently revealing, just as quantum physics had done for the world of atoms, that the macro-world rested almost entirely on an unpredictable micro-world of sounds. But with *0'00''*, in terms of simplicity (and notwithstanding the aforementioned remarks about increased human presence and decreased potentiality), Cage came close to his proclaimed aim of imitating nature's operations, or rather, of reaching objectivity; so close, in fact, that the piece finds itself uneasily poised on the very edge of music, with one foot already outside of it. This means that *Silence n°2* epitomises the problem associated with trying to, as it were, play nature 'at its own game': were objectivity to be achieved, such a piece would sidestep music altogether, for the simple reason that music is an art, and art, until proof conclusively shows otherwise, is a human affair. Were a work to 'become' nature's operations, rather than remain an imitation, it would automatically lose its identity as a 'piece', and another descriptive term would be required.

In this respect, Cage's introduction of amplification within more structured, and complex, works, as well as his commitment to natural instruments, testified to his understanding, either consciously or unconsciously, that nature's operations cannot be matched in terms of complete and radical independence from man. Indeed Cage's attempt to do away with the dichotomy law/freedom saw him further antagonise chance (understood as faithful representation of nature's operations) and subjectivity, until he came to realise that subjectivity, in however reduced a fashion, is a necessary component of art, however radical. At this stage, it would therefore seem that Cage had finally reached the end of the road as regards the exploration of

chance in music, essentially because of the way he had conceptualised the relationship between the role of man on the one hand, and nature on the other.

Anarchism: a new perspective on music

Cage as an Anarchist

The conclusion that one cannot 'match' nature is inescapable, and the result of any attempt to do so is in fact partly to emphasise the gap between the two paradoxical elements (nature and man) rather than minimise, let alone nullify, it. However, Cage's enthusiasm for the ideas of Buckminster Fuller, who promoted an Anarchist vision of society (reached, in his interpretation, through technology rather than political revolution) provided an unexpected shift of momentum, with direct consequences for both chance and mimesis.

Anarchism is of course not a musical notion. It is a socio-political philosophy, not obviously, as indicated above, reconcilable with musical experimentation, or even music in general. From the mid-1960s onwards, Cage was very clear about his leaning toward the concept of Anarchism: in *Song Books*, for instance, a performer is instructed to fly a black flag and shout 'the best form of government is no government at all'. But although a self-proclaimed Anarchist, Cage was never an activist in the political sense. Instead he was, and remained, a composer. This means that Anarchism, just as had Buddhism earlier, became fuel for his ideas *about* music, and for his composing.

Interestingly, it would seem that Anarchism, on the surface, shares many common points with Cage's understanding of East Asian philosophy. In fact, it can even be seen as the next logical step from sound systems and simultaneity, or rather, their application on a grander scale: that is, a drawing of conclusions on a socio-political level. It is indeed of no surprise that such considerations came to shape the composer's aesthetics, first and foremost because for the previous twenty years he had claimed, and tried to show through various techniques, that life was no different from art, that art was life itself. That Anarchism, with its emphasis on the denial of any authority or established order, should influence and inform his music is therefore only fitting, when one recalls his promotion of unimpeded-

ness, purposelessness and interpenetration. With the notion of Anarchism, Cage seemed finally to be able to tie all these threads together.

Revolution in the circus

The musical embodiment of Anarchism, Cage named 'circuses'. Pritchett analysed them from the angle of 'an aesthetic of wastefulness', as expressed by the composer himself (also an expert on funghi) in an interview:[58]

> If you look at nature, for instance, it often seems to be wasteful: the number of spores produced by a mushroom in relation to the number that actually reproduce... I hope that this shift from scarcity to abundance, from pinch-penny mental attitudes to courageous wastefulness, will continue to flourish.[59]

This approach is instructive and enlightening, and also fits within the general periodisation of Cage's career by Pritchett, which entered its postmodern phase around the same time. However, to concentrate exclusively on wastefulness overlooks how circuses pose the question of chance in a radically new way, addressing in particular the dead end that is reached with *0'00''*.

In practice, circuses consist of several events (of various nature) being played at the same time. Described in such a way, it could seem that 'happenings', such as *Black Mountain Piece* (1952), or even *Reunion*, and circuses are identical.[60] And, in fact, much of the way both work is similar; the only obvious difference is one of intended purpose. While *Black Mountain Piece* made the composer Lou Harrison say 'I laughed a lot', and was experienced almost as a joke by its participants, *Musicircus* (1967) was seen by Cage as a living musical illustration of what society should be like.[61] As the composer explained:

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[58] Pritchett, p. 157.
[59] Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras, *Soundpieces: Interviews with American Composers* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1982), pp. 76-77.
[60] A happening being defined as a performance or an event understood as art.
[61] Lou Harrison, cited by L. Miller in *Companion*, p. 151.

> By making musical situations which are analogies to desirable social circumstances which we do not yet have, we make music suggestive and relevant to the serious questions which face Mankind.[62]

But the main departure in *Musicircus*, as opposed to *Black Mountain Piece*, is that it was not orchestrated as such: it consisted of the gathering together, in a large space, of several people performing different music styles (jazz, contemporary music by various composers, etc.), in addition to the use of films, slides, floating balloons, and the selling of drinks, popcorn and cider. Cage, for his part, would operate the lighting console, which had been wired with microphones, its sonic properties hence amplified.

Another example of circus is to be found in a work dating from 1969, entitled *Mewantemooseicday*. Its duration was dictated by one of the events included within it: the playing of Satie's *Vexations* (which lasts over 18 hours). Within this given framework, there also were 'lectures by Cage [...], performances by the university [of California at Davis, where the event took place] orchestra and band, [a] film presentation, [and] a new composition by Cage […] in which twelve phonographs and over 300 LPs were made available in a large open space to anyone who wished to use them'.[63]

From the perspective of chance, what is crucially important with the circuses is that, for the first time, the onus was moved from both the composer, and the musicians, to the audience itself. This shift had profound implications on the musical, as well as on the philosophical, level. Up to this point, indeterminacy had consisted of the sonic malleability of a given piece: that it should sound different from one playing to the next was sufficient. In other words, the identity of the piece was determined 'on the spot': the composer gave his instructions to the musicians, who followed them, and the result of this cooperation produced a given entity for the audience to listen to. However relevant for indeterminacy, from an Anarchist point of view this pattern could not be entirely satisfying: indeed it simply repeats the traditional division whereby a minority delivers its message to an obedient and passive majority. Circuses, on the contrary, are Anarchist pieces, inasmuch as they empower the majority.

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[62] John Cage, *Empty Words* (Boston: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), p. 184.
[63] Pritchett, p. 158.

This empowerment, which in the end equates to a relinquishing of the composer or the musicians' power of control over a work, is made possible thanks to the recycling of the notion of simultaneity, associated to that of multiplicity. In previous pieces, even those one might consider highly indeterminate, each instrument was part of the one core piece. Again, the audience was given a musical entity to listen to: it might have been a complex entity, but it was still one single entity, within which various instruments or noises intermingled with, echoed, rejected or complemented, each other. With the circuses, this idea of identity is relinquished once and for all: by organising different simultaneous separate activities, Cage indeed forced each individual to choose which one to attend; he found with these pieces a way to *impose freedom*, not on the musicians this time, but on the audience itself, which in many ways could be seen as the end of a long journey: 'Moi, je voudrais une société où les gens ne fixeraient pas l'attention des autres [rire]… Je voudrais que chaque homme fixe son attention lui-même'.[64] Clearly, circuses aimed to enact the guiding principle of Anarchism: no god, no master.

Musicircus and *Mewantemooseicday* have no single identity. To be more precise, they have a multitude of identities, each belonging to a single listener, insofar as each listener fashions his own experience of them according to his movements within the hall where they are played. Like *0'00''*, albeit in a different way, the circuses therefore address the issue of intention/non-intention: Cage often insisted that these works annihilated intention, and identity, by multiplying it.[65] This strongly echoed earlier concerns, and also complemented the composer's interest in Anarchism, owing to the link between intention/subjectivity and power.

What circuses bring to indeterminacy

On the matter of indeterminacy, circuses seem to be 'enacting it' in a completely different way from works examined thus far. On the one hand, indeterminacy as Cage theorised it is still present, whether it be through his own pieces, amplifications, or the presence of balloons. Likewise, since there is no binding instruction as to which musicians

[64] Cage cited in Bosseur, p. 168.
[65] Kostelanetz, *Conversing*, p. 314.

to invite for later performances, it is obvious that each time *Musicircus*, for instance, is staged, the result will sound different, a characteristic essential to experimentalism. Finally, it is also clear that the effect of the circuses' multiple identities enriches the concept. However, for the first time with an indeterminate piece (and it is this that constitutes the circuses' unique contribution to Cage's music), it also seemed that indeterminacy was no longer the *central aim of the composition*. In fact, with the circuses, indeterminacy as a compositional tool became mixed with very determinate, and even 'chance-free', works (in the form of the introduction of jazz, for instance), and this openness clearly indicated a broader understanding of what indeterminacy is, or could be.

This new definition can be understood in two different and still highly complementary ways: first, the circuses did not rid themselves of indeterminacy, they simply transferred it from the *playing* to the *experiencing*. *Musicircus* and *Mewantemooseicday* were not so much designed for the musicians as for the public, which, having been given the freedom to choose what to attend and in what conditions, became the real 'agent' of indeterminacy. Whereas other indeterminate compositions (*Imaginary Landscape N°4*, *Fontana Mix* or *0'00''* for instance) could be said to have a strong identity within indeterminacy (understood as the fact that any listener of a given performance would hear the same piece), the circuses were 'chameleon' works, strictly speaking without a defined identity since each listener, through his or her own choices, experienced a different event (encompassing both music and non-musical ingredients). The changing totality common to the other indeterminate pieces here became ungraspable: the circuses can be said to be simply made up of parts, deprived of a whole, entities that forever evade the listener. In this, they were probably the most 'efficient' of indeterminate works, even though, once again, indeterminacy as a compositional tool lost its central role.

The second manner in which Cage's mixing of determinacy and its opposite in the circuses can be read goes to the heart of these pieces' importance. To understand it, it is necessary to remember that the composer became interested in chance partly to diffuse the tension felt between form and structure, law and freedom. It is true that the notion provided him with an efficient tool to attempt to solve the problem, but it remains undeniable that, whether it be through chance operations or strict indeterminacy, the question had been 'unsatis-

factorily' answered, that is to say that the contradiction subsisted. In the last analysis, chance operations exacerbated the said tension, in that chance was arrived at through more and more constraining techniques, while indeterminacy ran the risk of giving so much room to objectivity that freedom (and human presence) paradoxically dissipated. The principle of amplification, particularly as used in *0'00''*, *4'33''* and in pieces requiring the use of natural instruments, can legitimately be seen as indeterminacy at its purest, but as such only served to reveal the inherent tension at their core in its purest form.

In trying to promote freedom and objectivity within music, Cage indirectly drew the theoretical picture of nature as he saw it then: to be able to see it, to understand its operations, the individual had to erase himself from the background, or at least recede to such an extent that his presence would become unnoticeable. The connections with East Asian philosophy, and with Buddhism in particular, are obvious: one's aim is to be unattached to the world, to meditate so as not to desire, to be able to relinquish earthly needs. To a certain extent, Cage's chance operations and indeterminacy amounted to a form of asceticism, guided by the understanding of nature as partially exclusive of man. As a result, the composer's musical orientation appears as logical.

The return of man and the reconciliation of opposites

Cage's adoption of Anarchism, however, slowly changed this perspective, or at least cast things in a new light. Although it is possible to analyse the notion as proximate to chance, insofar as no authority, no rule, is supposed to exist, Anarchism is a political notion and as such, it places the individual, or man, at its very heart. This is confirmed at the basic level in the circuses: as was highlighted above, the majority, that is, the audience, is made to occupy the central role, in that its members become the real creators of the work. This is precisely why the circuses mark a new position in Cage's music writing and aesthetics: they are not just the sign of a subtle change in emphasis from a certain minimalism to wastefulness, as Pritchett seems to think, but of a major revolution in how the composer conceives of chance and of the notions of freedom and objectivity, as well as being, finally, a true resolution of the tension that initially inspired his interest in chance in the first place.

The reintroduction of man into music, not as accessory, or necessary element grudgingly tolerated, but as the point of focus, indeed points to a genuine end to Cage's troubles concerning the dilemmas of 'order versus disorder', 'law versus freedom', and even 'subjectivity versus objectivity'. Conceived of before as archenemies, such pairings were now seen by the composer as part of the same entity. In other words, circuses 'disarmed' the aforementioned tension: not that one aspect permanently 'won' over the other (which seemed to be the objective with chance operations and indeterminacy prior to the circuses), but that Cage *ceased to see them as opposites*.

Such a resolution of what had presented themselves as areas of conflict undoubtedly had far-reaching consequences, specifically concerning the composer's understanding of Coomaraswamy's assertion that music should imitate nature in its operations. From the late 1940s to the mid 1960s, Cage's music writing postulated that these operations were devoid of subjectivity; but later, with the advent of natural instruments and amplification, it became clear that the composer shifted his position, proposing instead to see nature as being more holistic, comprehensive, than previously advocated. With the circuses, Cage not only deradicalised his stance as regards subjectivity, he in essence gave it centre stage. As a result, the composer had come full circle: having been discouraged from incorporating the expression of emotions or individuality into his pieces with the experience of *The Perilous Night* in 1944, he revised his position twenty years later. This said, it is essential to note that this return of subjectivity was achieved without giving it the leading role: *Musicircus* and *Mewantemooseicday* did not go from one extreme (objectivity) to the other (no objectivity at all), they welcomed subjectivity as one, but only one, element within the great mix of elements that defines circuses. In this respect, subjectivity was *instrumentalised* (as opposed to 'essentialised' in other pieces); it became a tool in the general concert of noises, sounds and activities.

For all these reasons, circuses heralded a new period in Cage's music writing: a period in which opposites, instead of being locked in a constant battle, cancelled each other out within a totalising whole, within a plurality comprising everything. In Pritchett's view, it was works such as *Cheap Imitation* (1969), *Song Books* or *Europeras 1 and 2* (1985-7) that revealed the acceptance of musical contradictions, the mixing of old and new, which he justly analyses as characteristic

of a change in attitude. But what the critic fails to acknowledge, or overlooks, is that this change *is rooted in the circuses themselves*: it is they that marked the real turning point where Cage stepped into what were essentially his 'postmodern' years, leaving behind the radicalism of Modernism, and hence the conflict inherent in his previous compositions. Essentially, the composer's postmodernity could not have been attained without a significant re-thinking of his assumptions as regards the definition of nature, and henceforth nature's operations.

Indeed, most of the ideas that are to be found in Cage's later works seem to be expressed in these swan songs to Modernism, in particular his re-evaluating of previously rejected elements. This was already evident in *Musicircus*, for which, as already noted, Cage invited jazz bands, despite the fact that jazz was a musical genre he had always felt uneasy with. Even though the composer is renowned for his work with noises, his many declarations of tolerance, and his recurrent references to the emphasis Eastern philosophies placed on ridding oneself of one's tastes, Cage only really acknowledged his dislikes in his sixties, that is, just before the circuses. One could say that this ambivalence is reflected in his previous relationship to composition, which once again harboured unresolved tensions and antagonisms.

Cage's tendency to resurrect previously discarded notions would surface especially in the mid-1970s, in particular with works such as *Child of Tree* and *Inlets*. The notion these two pieces brought back to the fore is that of improvisation. It has already been shown why improvisation caused the composer problems: it necessarily brings subjectivity into the equation. Likewise, it was explained to what extent chance operations and indeterminacy allowed him to overcome the burden of subjectivity: by implementing techniques designed to create a 'space' within which one's freedom was such that there was only a controlled room for choice and for directions. Because the musician was requested to make a decision within certain predetermined limits, he was insulated, as it were, from his unwanted memory and unconscious, while still being asked, and still being able, to exercise free will. In other words, constraints induce, or rather *channel* freedom – a freedom understood as liberation from one's personal history.

In this optic, it was unlikely that Cage would go back to a traditional kind of improvisation. His ideas about music did not

change sufficiently in the 1970s to allow this to happen. In fact, his ideas on music did not change at all: what did change, however, was the theoretical context within which he wrote music, namely, his definition of nature, and the best way to imitate it. And, in this renewed frame of reference, Cage was finally, with the circuses, able to embrace wholly the Buddhist precept of relinquishing one's taste.

The new position adopted by the composer can thus be seen in two different lights: so far, the emphasis has been put on how circuses registered the approved return of subjectivity within musical pieces. Cage moved from a state of denial to a state of acceptance. But within these works, subjectivity is but one component of the whole. Such a qualification is not without importance. Before the circuses, subjectivity was targeted by chance operations and indeterminacy; by a beguiling reversal, it remained the subject of the pieces, its absence testifying, as it were, to its haunting presence. In matters of music as in psychology, denial never successfully solves problems.

In this light, Cage's adoption of Anarchism amounts to a coming to terms with his long-standing denial. The reinsertion of subjectivity within his pieces, as an instrument amongst others, puts it on an equal footing with all other aspects, and operations, of nature. Inviting man back into music does not mean, this time, a conflict between two contradictory forces, but a new philosophical conception in which nature is reconciled with both objectivity and subjectivity, order and chaos, likes and dislikes, musical tradition and musical innovation.

As a consequence, while circuses might have been seen as breaking away from the East Asian tradition (as first understood by Cage), there is in fact reason to believe that they represent a better fit. As long as subjectivity was denied, unimpededness, interpenetration, no-mindedness and purposelessness applied solely to a restricted definition of nature. There is even a case for interpreting Cage's non-circus music as distorting these notions: with subjectivity held at bay, there actually was 'impededness', 'mindedness', and purpose. Similarly, interpenetration was, for the most part, partial. It is only with the re-introduction of a subjective element into music that this partiality could vanish: each circus is indeed a faithful picture of nature, for nature contains all.

The musical form of Anarchism advocated by the composer did therefore allow him to stop impeding the event and, rather, to let events 'interpenetrate'. Furthermore, by shifting the focus of subjec-

tivity from the composer and/or the musicians to the audience, as well as by giving it a status shared by all other aspects of the composition, Cage gave no-mindedness and purposelessness their true meaning, insofar as 'mindedness' and purpose are present, but solely as equal components.

Summary

Although the conceptual background, as well as the medium of expression, of François Morellet and John Cage was very different, it is interesting to note that, in their pursuit of chance in art, they often raised the same questions and proffered the same answers, as well as coming up against the same stumbling blocks. Chief amongst the difficulties they had to grapple with was the position of objectivity in the face of a diminished, or shrinking, subjectivity. Indeed both battled with the problems associated with this case of communicating vessels.

In fact, on the strict matter of chance, little would have differentiated Morellet from Cage had the composer not been drawn to an unexpected resolution of the contradiction apparently inherent in the idea of chance in art. This resolution came not in the shape of a redefinition of the concept, but thanks to the adoption of a new framework in which chance was used, and seen, as nothing more than a part. This reframing, a move from a Modernist perspective to a rather Postmodernist one, arrived at through the marriage of Cage's interest in Asian philosophy and in Anarchism, indeed allowed chance to become an inclusive rather than an exclusive concept.

One of the questions raised by this shift in perspective is whether it affects the way Cage's thought compares with that of Rosset on chance. Given the proximity of Morellet and Cage on almost all matters artistic concerning the concept before the 'paradigm shift' of Anarchism, it might be assumed that the position of both as regards Rosset would be similar. Whether or not this is the case, and how Cage's reframing of the problem of chance in art impacts on the expected closeness of their respective endeavours, is what the next section will attempt to answer.

Cage's chance, Rosset's chance – comparison and contrast

The links between Cage and Rosset may at first sight seem more tenuous than those associating Morellet and Rosset. Indeed, if the philosopher knows of the composer's work, there is no indication whatsoever that the reverse was true, quite apart from the practical fact that before Cage's death, not a single article or book dedicated to Rosset had appeared in English. That the American did not know of him of course does not mean that parallels cannot be drawn between their respective thinking. However, if agreements are to be found, it is necessarily indirectly. This search, occupying the first division of the present section, will be two-pronged: it will indeed focus on the theoretical frames of reference that have supported, and fuelled, Cage's conscious and methodical adoption of chance's radical qualities and implications, the Asian tradition and Anarchism.

The second section will ask whether Rosset's system is in *complete* agreement with both, and whether something can be learnt from this confrontation.

Correspondences

The Asian tradition in Rosset

Cage's 'progress' toward chance was shaped over the formative years which saw him read Coomaraswamy, Taoist thinkers, and Zen Buddhist masters. His slow adoption of the concept therefore has to be understood with these teachings in mind. The problem associated with comparing the Asian tradition and Rosset's system, however, is that the former did not expand on chance as such, while the latter did not address the central points developed by Lao Tseu, Suzuki or Meister Eckhart. For these reasons, several elements borrowed by Cage from the Asian tradition cannot be translated into, or even find a direct echo in, Rosset's system. This is for example the case of 'unimpededness', 'no-mindedness', or 'psychological emptiness'.

This does not mean that a dialogue is impossible. By Rosset's own admission, 'beaucoup de personnes plus instruites que moi des pensées chinoises, indiennes, japonaises, […] ont cru trouver un lien entre ce que j'écris et un certain nombre de thèmes se rapportant à ces

courants de pensée'.[66] It is therefore possible to establish connections and parallels between both parties on a number of other points. One of Buddhism's central tenets is the description of life known as the four Noble Truths. Three in particular are of relevance to this development: firstly, universal suffering exists; secondly, this suffering originates in desire; lastly, it is the suppression of desire that leads to that of pain. The definition of 'desire' itself has a different root in Rosset, insofar as the philosopher conceives it as the will to duplicate reality in order to accept it, whereas Buddhism understands desire in a more mundane, and less nontological, fashion (desire for pleasure, for instance). However, the structure of the thought is very much comparable: only the acknowledgement of pain or tragedy (in the traditional sense) can lead to the suppression of pain, and to the advent of the tragic (in Rosset's sense) through the renouncement of that which we would like to be: desire.

This act of renouncement is subsequently balanced by an act of acceptance: Rosset accepts the tragic, the lack of justification for what is, just as Buddhists accept the existence of universal pain in order to overcome it, or rather to detach themselves from it. Indeed Buddhism distinguishes between two paths when it comes to facing reality. The first one, the positive path, 'consiste', as Suzuki explains, 'à affirmer le monde, à le combattre, à s'y mêler, à passer par la naissance et la mort, à affronter toutes sortes de tribulations, sans vaciller face aux menaces et aux horreurs.'[67] It corresponds very clearly to Rosset's concept of Naturalism, particularly in the guise of optimism and political involvement. The second path is negative:

> La voie négative est comparativement plus facile, mais elle a quelque chose d'illogique et d'asocial. Si le monde provient de la discrimination et si la discrimination mène à l'illumination, qui disperse l'ignorance, le monde avec tous ses maux – quel que soit le sens que l'on donne à ce terme – doit être accepté.[68]

Again, this path closely echoes Rosset: his notion of Artificialism is described in almost identical terms. In the chapter dedicated to the philosopher, it was shown that acceptance implied a re-positioning of the powers of man. Within a Naturalistic framework, the problematic

[66] Private interview (4th March 2004), appendix 1.
[67] Suzuki, p. 155.
[68] Suzuki, p. 155.

notion of acceptance is conditional, in that it is dependent on the state of the outside world; as a result, Naturalism logically calls for intervention, action on one's part. On the other hand, Artificialism's acceptance, or approbation, is unconditional, in that it is independent of the state of the outside world: Rosset's recommendations therefore logically lead to a form of passivity. In other words, the powers of man must not be used to influence the world, to model it according to one's own ideas, but should instead focus on one's own perception, one's own relation to the outside. For Buddhism, precisely the same is true: 'étant donné que le monde phénoménal est irréel et que c'est précisément dans la mesure où l'homme se rend compte de cette vacuité qu'il approche de la délivrance, il va de soi que c'est la ''méditation pure'' (dhyâna) qui constitue la vertu suprême du bouddhisme.'[69]

These two significant similarities imply a third shared approach, this one concerning freedom. Rosset's position as regards this notion is that free agency, conceived as the ability to act in the absence of any kind of influence, is an illusion. Instead, he emphasises the importance, not of determination, but of *situations*: strict Determinism might overlook the effect the mind can have on the cause-and-effect pattern, but each individual is nonetheless the seat of a great number of factors that narrow, so to speak, his experience of free agency: IQ, education, genetic heritage, country and time of birth, amongst others.[70] For Rosset, however small the degree of free agency, it can only be found in the realisation of this precise state of affairs. Naturalists therefore tend to believe in freedom because they are ignorant of what it is that makes them think in this way (desire); conversely, Artificialists make the most of whatever little freedom is available to them by accepting the idea that they and their actions are partly determined.

This reasoning, interestingly, is also found at the root of Buddhism. The third of the four Noble Truths makes this clear: the cycle of reincarnations depends on ignorance of its causes (desire), and only through a willingness to suppress this cause (via knowledge of the action of desire) can this endless cycle be interrupted. As in the case of Rosset, therefore, Buddhism situates the crux of approbation,

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[69] Henri Arvon, *Le Bouddhisme* (Paris: PUF, 1947), p. 41.

[70] The distinction between determination and situation is taken from Ferry, *La Sagesse*.

and relative freedom, in the realisation of the various determinisms that constitute the common beginnings of each individual. As Suzuki explains:

> Une fois la conscience éveillée, la discrimination s'ensuit inévitablement et l'autre face de la discrimination est l'ignorance. L'ignorance obscurcit notre existence tant qu'elle gouverne le monde, tant que nous sommes incapables de voir au-delà d'un monde de dualités, et donc pluriel.[71]

In this perspective, the overcoming of ignorance becomes a priority of Buddhism:

> Le but de la discipline bouddhiste est de vaincre l'ignorance, ce qui est aussi se libérer du karma, et de toutes ses conséquences.[72]

The first quotation introduces another strong parallel between Buddhism and Rossetian thought: their attitude toward Monism. Artificialism is a Monism, conceiving of a world gaining its strict unity from its resolutely non-dualistic origin, that is, from chance. Dualism, on the other hand, corresponds to a denial of this origin, and takes the form of an opposition between what *is* and what *should be* (reality and its duplicate), of which the other forms of Dualism (mind versus matter, for instance) are mere variations. For Suzuki, Buddhism is also strictly non-dualistic, but the reasons for this are different:

> La plupart des gens pensent que le dualisme est ultime, que le sujet se tient toujours en face de l'objet, et vice versa, qu'aucun pont, aucune médiation ne traversent l'espace entre les deux concepts opposés, et que ce monde d'oppositions demeure inchangé en tant que tel, c'est-à-dire engagé dans un éternel combat. Mais cette manière de penser n'est ni très juste ni très logique, selon la philosophie bouddhiste; car l'antithèse absolue dans laquelle 'A' s'oppose à 'non-A' n'est possible que s'il existe un troisième concept, qui relierait les deux premiers.[73]

In the Buddhist perspective, Dualism is therefore seen primarily as a cognitive problem. For Rosset, the problem with Naturalism is more specifically seen as belonging to the realm of psychology. But,

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[71] Suzuki, p. 163.
[72] Suzuki, p. 151.
[73] Suzuki, p. 152.

in the last analysis, both agree that duality is the cause of ignorance, and is thus the force against which acceptance must fight.

A further common point to Rosset and the Asian tradition, and one also essential to both Cage's theory and practice, is that of flux. The philosopher calls it 'le hasard'; Buddhism talks of 'impermanence'. In both cases, what is implied is the impossibility for essences, or permanence, to be formed. As Suzuki writes: 'toute chose en ce monde est sujette au changement, il n'y a rien qui soit immuable, permanent, et qui conserve un soi identique tout au long de sa carrière terrestre.'[74] Also, just as for Rosset the only certain and unchanging phenomenon is chance, the Zen Buddhist master goes on to explain that 'nous sommes capables d'être conscients d'un monde de mutations parce que ces mutations sont ce qui, véritablement, n'est jamais soumis au changement.'[75]

This characteristic of impermanence applies to everything (except itself), and more particularly to the self: 'le bouddhisme réduit le Moi à une création momentanée et fortuite due à la coopération mutuelle des cinq éléments physiques et moraux qui composent l'homme.'[76] Again, this is in complete agreement with Rossetian thought, which derives this aspect of the self from the absence of essences, itself anchored in the preliminary positing of chance-as-origin.

The Anarchist in Rosset

Insofar as Anarchism is a social and political system, and Rosset's a 'nontological' one concerned to avoid political considerations, parallels between both are less evident than when comparing the philosopher's thought and Buddhism. Anarchism, a term first used in its current sense by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, argued that 'organization without government was both possible and desirable'.[77] As can be seen from this general definition, Anarchism pays little heed to discussing questions such as the origin of what is, the tragic in life or the possibility of approbation, but two notable connections nonetheless seem to exist between Anarchism and Rossetian principles.

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[74] Suzuki, p. 81.
[75] Suzuki, p. 81.
[76] Arvon, p. 37.
[77] Colin Ward, *Anarchism* (Oxford: OUF, 2004), p. 1.

The first is Monism, whose characteristic also impregnated Buddhism. The Monism of Anarchism is inherited from Hegel's theory of the Absolute Idea, within which objectivity and the spirit unite to overcome their inherent duality. However, Hegel's Monism and that of Anarchism are different in that the Absolute Idea is a transcendent principle, whereas Proudhon, Bakounine and other Anarchists see it as positively immanent, as Henri Arvon underlines:

> Cet esprit hégélien qui se réalise grâce à la prise de conscience des esprits finis, de transcendant qu'il était sans doute chez Hegel lui-même, devient pour une importante fraction de ses disciples l'esprit humain parvenu à la pleine conscience de soi-même.[78]

This shift leads to the second common point between Rosset's thought and Anarchism: Materialism. Hegel's system exemplifies Idealism, in which the spirit is ultimately the prime cause. For Anarchism, on the other hand, the move toward immanence and the subsequent abandonment of transcendence and the spirit gave rise to a Materialistic conception, either of a mechanistic or dialectical inspiration. Rosset's own understanding of Materialism is certainly not inspired by Marxism, but it *can* be called mechanistic as long as this aspect is not held as absolute, since for the philosopher Determinism is but an accident of chance.

These are the two obvious links between Rosset's philosophy and Anarchism. There also exist a number of indirect ones – indirect in the sense that Anarchism finds a number of echoes in Buddhism. It is true that, the Japanese thinker Kotuku Shusui 'claimed that there was always an Anarchist undercurrent in Japanese life, deriving from both Buddhism and Taoism'.[79] Amongst these echoes, strongly reflected in Cage's ideas and aesthetics, are the notions of equality (of people or sounds), and inclusion (through the negation of separations and the integration of all within the same system). Naturally, these indirect connections, although interesting in themselves, are less relevant to a strict comparison.

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[78] Henri Arvon, 'Anarchisme', in *Encyclopedia Universalis* [accessed on 29 May 2005].
[79] Ward, p. 10.

Divergence?

Between Rosset and the Asian tradition

Despite all the points of connection found between the Asian tradition and Artificialism, there exist two crucial differences, one leading to the other. The first one is clearly explained in this statement by Rosset, in which he compares his affinity with Hinduism and his interest in Buddhism:

> Je dirais que c'était plutôt l'influence hindouiste, védique, qui me plaisait, par son caractère affirmateur et inconditionnel de la réalité, alors que le bouddhisme, que j'admire beaucoup par son immense pitié pour la vie humaine, ne m'apporte pas autant, du fait de son côté éminemment négateur de la réalité. L'hindouisme est une vénération de l'être, le bouddhisme invite à se libérer de l'être.[80]

This excerpt is a comment on the Buddhist notion of acceptance described earlier. In fact, this acceptance appears to the philosopher as a *negative* acceptance. By this, he means that the ending of the cycle of reincarnation, that is, suffering, must come from an accepting of the universality of suffering, the ultimate goal of this acceptance being to achieve nirvana. But attaining nirvana implies 'leaving' reality, escaping the very definition of life, characterised by universal pain. In other words, the Buddhist acceptance is a means to an end, an acceptance designed to lead to a liberation. This, of course, is in complete contrast to Artificialism, for which acceptance is the end of the system's logic. It is interesting to note that both forms of acceptance are rooted in exactly the same primary belief that there is no such thing as an essence, as a permanent 'something' which could be used as the measure of all things. Thus both approaches share the same premise; the notable difference is that Buddhism chooses, in the last analysis, the pessimistic option when faced with the Rosset wager.

The word 'pessimistic', in addition to reflecting the mood underlying, for Rosset, the whole of Buddhism, also signals, in his thinking, that this doctrine falls victim to duplication, and this despite its defence of a form of Monism. We recall that the philosopher glosses pessimism as the state of mind of a given individual who is aware of the tragic nature of reality, and is also aware of the absence of a

[80] Private interview (4th March 2004), appendix 1.

remedy to it, but still feels such a remedy should exist. Whether nirvana is or is not attainable in practice, for Rosset the concept is testimony to the presence of hope within Buddhism, which is the next crucial difference between the two systems. Therefore, and despite other appearances to the contrary, Buddhism is, for Rosset, fundamentally a Naturalism.

Whilst this is true, it must be remembered that this comparison is designed to establish how much Rosset and Cage have in common on the theoretical level. It is important to emphasise this here because, as was noted in the section 'Chance in the Thought of John Cage', the composer cannot be called a *true* Buddhist any more than he was a *true* Taoist:

> The most elemental facet of Cage's contact with Asian culture is the way in which he studied, absorbed, and sifted through a variety of texts during the 1940s and 1950s, *extracting with single-minded discrimination only those malleable ideas that could be used metaphorically.*[81]

Cage's attitude toward the Asian thought was essentially that of a consumer; he selected what he liked or agreed with, leaving aside what he disliked, disagreed with, or simply did not understand. Buddhism, while enriching the composer's thinking, helped him shape his own philosophy, but this particular philosophy appears more 'life-affirming' than the doctrine of Buddha, insofar as it avoids addressing the question of nirvana, the cycle of reincarnation and the issue of ignorance. Instead, Cage focused his attention on the concept of chance, which to him encompassed many salient aspects of the Asian tradition, while leaving him enough freedom to constitute his personal system. Chance was used by the composer as a counterpoint to structure and to other preconceived musical ideas, but not *only* as a way to combat them: chance was also used *for itself*, for what he considered to be its positive input. This includes, in particular, openness, and the related notion that the result is unimportant. Adopting chance as a creative tool meant, for the composer, that the result of a chance operation had of necessity to be accepted, whatever it should be, come what may.

Such a lack of interest in the result (because it is rooted in chance) also confirms the idea that meaning was irrelevant to artistic creation

[81] *Companion*, p. 59. My emphasis.

for Cage. It is easy to see how this bald statement returns us to the negation of essences: because there *is* nothing other than what happens, and because what happens does so for no reason at all (no transcendence), there is nothing else to express other than this very fact, this very meaninglessness (tautology). Hence Cage's embracing of the notion of chance as a creative force.

This creative force is particularly well illustrated in Cagian indeterminacy: any given indeterminate piece will only ever sound a certain way *once*, since it is its very principle that time/life/chance will intervene in between two performances of the same score, therefore musically mimicking the underlying belief behind the composition. By refusing to create traditional pieces (i.e., pieces that sound the same regardless of the time and the place), Cage vividly demonstrated the fact that no such thing as permanence exists. If all is impermanent, transient, why should music, or writing, or painting, be eternal, solid; why should it be unchangeable?

These different elements (openness; acceptance; laying stress on the process as opposed to the result; meaninglessness; pain; and the Mobilist option) are naturally strongly echoed in Rossetian thought and in Buddhism. But Cage's adoption of Buddhist ideas was not so complete that he accepted its more esoteric implications. As a result, trying to establish the philosophical proximity between Rosset and Cage cannot be decided solely on the comparison between the philosopher and the Asian tradition. If Cage was not fully a Buddhist, however, he certainly was an Anarchist.

Anarchism and Rosset

If Cage was not an active Anarchist in the political, and stereotypical, sense of trying to abolish established governments through acts of rebellion and terrorism, his interest in Anarchism is beyond any doubt, as the following two extracts (as cited by two French critics) confirm: 'à m'entendre, vous avez facilement compris que je suis Anarchiste'; 'Eh bien je me considère comme Anarchiste'.[82] His favoured trend was influenced by Henry Thoreau, Buckminster Fuller and Marshall

[82] Bosseur, p. 162; Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversations avec John Cage* (Paris: Editions des Syrtes, 2000), p. 352.

McLuhan, thus drawing more on the social and collective impact of Anarchism on individuals, as opposed to its political ramifications:

> Je m'intéresse aux questions sociales, mais pas politiques, parce que la politique relève du pouvoir, et la société a affaire avec des gens en nombre. Ce qui m'intéresse ce sont tant les individus pris un par un, que des individus en nombre, grand ou moyen, ou n'importe quelle sorte ou nombre de personnes. En d'autres termes, la société m'intéresse, non pas avec des buts de pouvoir, mais avec des intentions de coopération et de jouissance.[83]

This rejection of power is particularly illustrated in his music pieces. Commenting on his musical relationship with the musician David Tudor while the two were playing one of his works together, the composer explained that 'c'est un exemple d'anarchie très simple puisque tous deux nous travaillons alors ensemble, mais indépendamment. Je ne dis pas quoi faire à David Tudor, et lui ne me dit pas plus ce que je dois faire, et tout ce que fait chacun de nous fonctionne avec tout ce que fait l'autre.'[84] But if Cage was indeed an Anarchist, can Rosset's thought ultimately agree with its implications?

In fact, regardless of the possible links between the two, in the philosopher's perspective, Anarchism falls into the same general category as Buddhism: that of Naturalism. This categorisation is not directly obvious as far as Buddhism is concerned, owing to the ambiguous nature of negative acceptance, but the case of Anarchism is significantly easier to evaluate. Insofar as it corresponds to a political commitment, Anarchism believes in a better future; in other words, it relies on duplicates to explain reality and justify intervention. That Cage's creed of Anarchism did not involve violence and sabotage does nothing to change the fact that it is only possible within the wider framework of hope.[85]

Given Anarchism's fundamental Naturalism, it is interesting to note how much the composer's attitude is in fact mirrored in Rosset's examination of Naturalists: Cage's suggestions for improvements, such as 'nous devons simplement changer notre système d'éducation' or 'je souhaite que la police ne contrôle pas le trafic ou les voitures',

[83] *Conversations*, p. 342.
[84] *Conversations*, p. 353.
[85] In the interest of fluidity, I am not dwelling on these aspects, as they already appear in previous chapters and their re-consideration at this point would add no further dimension.

for example, more often than not introduced with the modal verb 'should'; or again his optimism: 'j'ai bien peur que mon optimisme soit "personnel"'.[86]

Anarchism is therefore as much at odds with Rosset's system as Buddhism, not so much in the details as in the deep roots both philosophies have within Naturalism. This strong opposition was nuanced in the case of Buddhism insofar as Cage selected those precepts that most attracted him rather than 'buying into' the entire system, but with Anarchism, such nuance is not possible, and the assumption that Cage himself is a Naturalist is the only logical conclusion.

Summary

The comparison of the way chance constitutes an integral, or even central, part of Rosset's and Cage's thinking has been highly informative. Owing to his links with philosophical systems belonging unmistakably to Naturalism, the composer departed from the path drawn by Morellet. Indeed, with the case of Cage the radical use of chance in art has been proven not necessarily to be the preserve of Artificialists. At the same time, the composer has somewhat blurred the distinction, until then thought clear-cut, between both movements, at least between the way they are able to translate into art. If Cage is a Naturalist, his thought meets that of Rosset on so many occasions that only the 'hope element' characteristic of the Asian tradition and Anarchism seems to separate them.

More interestingly still, the division between Rosset and Cage, or Artificialism and Naturalism, is further complicated by the fact that it is the artistic *mise en oeuvre* of a typically Naturalist system, Anarchism, that provides the composer with a form of chance-as-art that proposes a solution to the problem exposed in Morellet's work, at the same time as gives a more complete picture, and a more thorough understanding, of the complexity of chance. Implied in Rosset's definition of the concept, but missing in the way both the philosopher and Morellet translate it, directly or indirectly, in art, the richness and,

[86] *Conversations*, pp.350, 354 and 351. In the latter quotation, it is important to understand the meaning of the adjective 'personnel' and its emphasis. Here the speech marks do not point at irony, thus expressing pessimism, but at the fact that Cage's optimism is rooted in the individual, in the belief that changes valuable to society are to be undertaken within the individual first and foremost.

in the end, compossibility of objectivity and subjectivity within chance became the most arresting feature of Cage's relationship with the concept.

Conclusion

This chapter has evidenced John Cage's longstanding interest in creating music pieces involving chance. The reasons behind this interest are complex but, as in the case of François Morellet, its most obvious effect consisted in the composer's coming up against the role he felt should or should not be assigned to subjectivity. Chance operations first, then experimentation with a blending of these and indeterminate techniques, progressively challenged Cage's compositions and his thought.

Seen from this perspective, the composer's work parallels that of Morellet's. For both creative artists, despite their approaching the same phenomenon from different philosophical directions, chance was viewed from a traditional standpoint, and in the same way as Rosset too defines it: it is the opposite of man. Chance and man are contradictory terms, two magnets having the same electric charge and therefore bound to repel each other. Whilst this is true, it is puzzling to note that the theoretician of chance, Rosset, saw Artificialism only in artists who are not at all at odds with subjectivity, and, even more puzzling, failed to talk about artists who are interested in giving chance more space within their field. It would seem that, in the philosopher's view, nontology (radical objectivity) and aesthetics (radical subjectivity) are necessarily unrelated. This is understandable in that, for him, chance is beyond representation, beyond 'capture'.

Following this logic, Morellet's approach could not ever succeed: objectivity cannot be created, or pinned down, by a subject, however willing. The alternative 'objectivity-subjectivity' (represented by Rosset) and 'objectivity-objectivity' (represented by Morellet) seems, furthermore, to overlook another possibility as regards chance-as-art. This alternative rests on an 'essentialist' definition of the concept of chance, or rather, a partial understanding of such a definition. Again, Rosset and Morellet agree that chance is incompatible with subjectivity. However, at the same time, both insist that, owing to its status as the origin, the overarching principle, of reality, chance

encompasses all that there is. Interestingly, when it comes to the eventuality of combining thought and art, both, in their own ways, stress the first aspect aforementioned (the notion of definitive incompatibility), while omitting completely to acknowledge the second aspect.

Until he created the musicircuses, John Cage was on the same wavelength with regard to this notion as Rosset and Morellet, his aim being continually to reduce the breathing space left to subjectivity within music. But with the musicircuses, the way Cage understood chance changed radically. Influenced by elements in the Asian tradition as well as by Anarchism, these pieces leapfrogged, as it were, the previously stressed alternative and instead emphasised a holistic interpretation of chance. As a result, within the same musical event, they managed to promote both objectivity (through indeterminacy and chance operations) *and* subjectivity (through the acceptance of highly subjective elements, even Deterministic ones, such as choosing the colour of a balloon). The open conflict between these two poles present in the thought of Rosset and the aesthetics of Morellet found in the musicircuses a solution, as each was recognised, in equal parts, as a contributing factor to the same entity.

Cage therefore represents an intriguing middle ground between the philosopher's and the visual artist's positions, insofar as he 'injects' objectivity, where Rosset saw only subjectivity, and subjectivity where Morellet saw only objectivity. This, it must be stressed, does not imply a reductive approach to either pole on Cage's part, and even less an abandonment of his beliefs: indeterminacy in the musicircuses is as thorough as in previous pieces, and his stance as regards subjectivity and self-expression did not budge. But he ceased to see them as necessary *opposites*; his perspective widened; and he was able to combine them a-hierarchically, complementarily.

With their work following similar lines for many years, the critic could be forgiven for thinking that Morellet and Cage had equally similar ideas. And this is true to a considerable extent: there is clearly a convergence of thought, of sensibility, between the two artists. However, this convergence applies only to those specific aspects highlighted above. It is in the larger scope of the philosophical framework underpinning their creativity that the two differ. Rosset's Artificialism is conceived by Morellet as an explanation of the thinking behind his canvases, sculptures, installations and mixed-

media works. Cage, on the other hand, was influenced by both the Asian tradition and Anarchism. In the last analysis, and despite the existence of several points of convergence between these two seemingly disparate positions, the common implication underlying the latter two contradicts the former. Cage, in other words, is a Naturalist. A 'strange Naturalist', like a strange attractor, however, who has proven that Naturalism and chance-as-art, just as objectivity and subjectivity, are not necessarily exclusive.

General conclusion

On the relationship between Artificialism and chance-as-art

The present work set out to explore two questions. First, is a thought-system, a philosophy based on chance a prerequisite for artistic endeavour that is also based entirely on chance? Second, is such a work of art possible? In order to answer them, the philosophical system of Clément Rosset was presented and examined, its implications drawn upon, and the thought and work of three artists from different fields much preoccupied with chance – André Breton, François Morellet and John Cage – were analysed, then compared and contrasted with Rosset's system.

Breton was found to have invented many techniques, games and methods designed to stimulate creative production that were based on chance. However, a close study of these, as well as of his professed intentions, revealed that the concept did not constitute an aim in itself for Breton: his artistic movement sought to use chance as a way to get closer to its real aim: surreality. This secondary role given to chance in the field of aesthetics placed Rosset's thought at odds with that of Breton, whose clear-cut Naturalism disagreed on almost every count with Artificialism.

The opposite was the case with Morellet, for whom, artistically speaking, chance proved to be both arrow and target, tool and goal. As a result, and despite the involvement of Breton with the concept of chance, any answer to the second question posed by this study must start with Morellet. As regards Morellet's thought, he himself drew the parallel with Rosset's. Of course this comparison needed verifying, but analysis showed that it was indeed founded. Thus, with Morellet, one is in the presence of an artist who seems to correspond to the Rossetian definition of an Artificialist, both in his work and in his ideas.

The third creative 'subject' investigated, John Cage, might at first seem to corroborate what could be inferred from the study of the two previous artists: that only a thought pervaded by chance can support a work equally steeped in chance. Indeed, Cage's dedication to chance in the field of music maps remarkably neatly on to Morellet's on the visual level. Both encountered the same questions, answered them in similar ways, and faced the same difficulties and aporias. However, analysis of Cage's ideas revealed, despite appearances to the contrary, a fundamental divergence from Artificialism: regardless of the many points in common between the composer's thought and that of Rosset, Cage's interest in the Asian tradition, Buddhism in particular, and most significantly his belief in Anarchism, unmistakably marked him as a Naturalist. This is of course just a 'label', but for Rosset it implies a system based on duplicates, and duplicates are the issue at the very root of the Artificialism-Naturalism antinomy.

To summarise schematically, Breton did not use chance radically, and was a Naturalist; Morellet did use chance radically, and was an Artificialist; Cage did use chance radically, but was a Naturalist. It therefore seems possible to answer the first question guiding this study: a strict adherence to Artificialism, as the most radical philosophical system based on chance, does not seem necessary in order for a creative artist to subscribe to an aesthetics rooted in chance. It must however be remembered that, although a Naturalist, Cage agreed on a great number of Artificialist points.

The possibility of chance-as-art

Potentiality, reversibility

Deliberately or not, through their artistic endeavour and their thoroughness, Breton, Morellet and Cage indicated the possibility of an art form based entirely on chance. Breton's contribution, first, highlighted a number of important characteristics of the concept, the two outstanding ones being that it is disorderly, and that it is in conflict with meaning. This was seen in automatic texts, games, and even in occurrences of objective chance. However, owing to Breton's emphasis on the role of the unconscious, this disorder and lack of meaning soon proved to be underpinned by a latent order, and a latent meaning. Neither, it is true, was to be understood in a conventional

sense, but the fact remains that, although heavily involving chance in its work, Surrealism never had such an anti-Surrealist aim in sight as the creation of a form of art independent of the individual.

Breton essentially used chance as a tool, no more. However, his analysis of chance as disorderly and a threat to meaning agrees with those of Morellet and Cage, whose pieces repeatedly challenged order and the very notion of signification/communication. However, the study of Morellet revealed an important new aspect of chance: potentiality (that is, essentially, the capacity for a piece to evolve). This notion implies a work in progress, an open work whose evolution is itself, and integrally, part of the piece's identity. Potentiality cannot describe, for example, a poem halfway through its writing; it characterises the very endlessness, or at least the dependence upon time, of a given project.

Traditionally, a painting does not include time as one of its components; on the contrary, art was long supposed to aim to encapsulate for eternity, to capture and fix, once and for all, what it was representing: hence the great care taken in exhibiting, moving and storing canvases, as well as in restoring damaged works. In the visual arts, the inclusion of time as a key component of a piece came particularly to the fore with Land art: Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* changed colour as the water level of the lake rose, and eventually disappeared under the surface; Richard Long's famous 'lines', especially those made in grass, were by nature temporary, and likewise, Andy Goldsworthy's leaf or ice sculptures are from the outset destined to melt and disintegrate.[1] This dependence upon time, necessary in the creation of works embracing potentiality, is frequently found in Morellet and Cage. Although man is already in possession of a large number of decimals of pi, for example, what is important from the visual artist's perspective is that it also has an *infinite* number of digits, hence implying the endlessness of his involvement with the number.

Cage's case is different from that of Morellet in that music is by definition a time-based medium. But this basis does not necessarily imply potentiality; in fact, the form of traditional music pieces is equally as 'fixed' as that of traditional paintings, a fact illustrated by the importance of scrupulously following, or learning, a score sheet

[1] See for instance *Land and Environmental Art*, ed. Jeffrey Kastner (London: Phaidon, 1998); Andy Goldsworthy, *Wall* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

for a musician playing, for example, Mozart or Respighi. By contrast, most of Cage's compositions posit time as one of their keystones, particularly in the case of indeterminacy, which rests on the premise that a given work could have no stable identity; that time would repeatedly shape it anew.

Although both Cage and Morellet exploited potentiality in their works, the composer went further than the visual artist in his use of it. Morellet's series with pi rely on a number which will, in essence, always be the same. For this reason, the actual work keeps on evolving, and its shape grows, bends and twists in unpredictable ways, but at the same time its *past* shape is destined to remain the same: pi starts with 3.14, and however large the number of decimals calculated, they will always stay the same, and their sequence will remain identical. A work based on such a number is therefore aleatory *as one looks forward*: it only displays potentiality in that part of it that is yet to come. This fact highlights the problem of chance when it is seen as a number (although characterised by randomness and endlessness): it appears as non-reversible.

On the other hand, Cage's principle of indeterminacy was expressly designed to overcome this problem. Despite using just one set of instructions for any given composition, the composer ensured that these instructions left room for differentiation. Cage indeed addressed potentiality in a new way: instead of relying on 'endlessness', as had Morellet, he turned to *combinations*. Potentiality arose because the concept of identity was challenged from the start: *4'33''*, for instance, is always the same named piece, but always sounds different. Every time it is played it has a new shape, and the past of the piece as well as its present and future are constantly reshaped.

Subjected

Throughout most of this study, chance has been prominently characterised as being in opposition to the subject. Breton's automatism stemmed from a deliberate rejection of the conscious individual, while objective chance was conceived of as independent of the subject; as, somehow, imposed on him by factors to be investigated further. In the same vein, albeit more radically since it concerned both consciousness and the unconscious, Morellet tried to eradicate his self from his works by keeping his decisions to a minimum. Finally, Cage also went

to great lengths to dispossess himself, as much as he could, of the initiative.

This opposition reflects one of chance's most salient objective traits: indeed, whatever the field in which it features, the notion has always revealed this antagonism. The fact that the works of artists concerned with chance, more particularly Morellet and Cage, display the same antinomy between chance and subjectivity, is testimony both to the seriousness of their respective efforts, and to the reliability of the description of the nature of chance as established by scientists and philosophers.

In this perspective, the critic might be led to the conclusion that chance-as-art was from the start doomed never to see the light of day. The reason for this is quite clear: if it is agreed upon that, on the one hand, art is a human activity and the act of creation the fruit of a conscious decision while, on the other, chance is defined as the exact opposite of everything human, no amount of effort will ever bridge the gulf irremediably separating them. No matter how thoroughly the creator distances himself from his work, no matter how many intermediaries he establishes between himself and his creation, and no matter how few decisions are needed for him to produce a piece, his being a human (creative) being will always imply the logical impossibility of chance-as-art in the most radical sense. If the intent of Morellet and Cage was truly to promote chance and demote the creator to the most minor of roles, they were always going to fail.

This failure is, however, the reason why they are still perceived by the public and the critics as artists. All other things being equal, it is because of intentionality (in its simplest form, the mere thought as registered by the artist that he *wants* to produce a work of art) that their creation belongs to the field of art. It is because they failed to turn true selfless-ness into reality that their production is studied and performed to this day. Chance-as-art is, at best, a utopian aim. Naturally, the fact that chance-as-art is an ideal that by definition cannot be attained does not imply that all practical attempts to attain it are equal. The present opus has shown that, even before the notion of subjectivity enters into the equation, the involvement of Breton, Morellet and Cage with chance displayed differing degrees of adequation between the concept and its transformation into creative works. But this divergence naturally becomes even more obvious when one con-

siders the issue of subjectivity: from being salient in Breton's works, its importance seems to decrease significantly with Morellet and Cage.

As a result, the most faithful way to summarise the efforts made by the three individuals studied as regards chance is best expressed in the idea of a continuum: at the far right of this continuum would lie chance, in all its purity and radicality; at the far left, the complete negation of chance, a form of pure subjectivity (equally utopian). On this continuum, the creative artists are placed unevenly: Breton sits to the right of other poets such as Baudelaire or Wordsworth, but markedly to the left of Morellet. The visual artist himself lies to the left of Cage.

The death of...

The very idea of chance-as-art, regardless of its feasibility or otherwise, interestingly mirrors a major trend in 20th century philosophy. This trend is that of the 'death of', as expressed in particular in Nietzsche's 'death of God', Roland Barthes' 'mort de l'auteur', and Michel Foucault's 'mort de l'homme'.[2] Hegel's oft-quoted claim that the age of art is 'over' can also be added to this list.

The conjuncture of these resounding proclamations, although each was made in different contexts and for different purposes, sheds light on several aspects of the cultural life of the last century, and the notion of chance-as-art is no exception. Nietzsche's 'death of God' is the most striking expression of the premise of Postmodernity, that is, the end of a time when solid truths existed, when the basic values of morals, ethics, politics, society, aesthetics and knowledge were inherited from a higher and unquestionable source. Nietzsche was not taking responsibility for this state of affairs: he merely identified or *named* it, making it all the clearer and more striking by the concision of the formula. This 'death of God' implies a cascade of consequences, most notably an overall relativism, the belief that there is no ultimate truth, whatever the field under consideration; that I am, therefore, no more in the wrong than you; that there is no sure way to

[2] '"Where has God gone?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I. We are his murderers"', in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 68. 'La naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l'auteur.', in Roland Barthes, *Le Bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), p. 62. Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 679.

assert definitively that Plato is right, as opposed to the Sophists, or Bergson, or Habermas.

A notable consequence of Nietzsche's seminal observation is Barthes' claim that a text does not tell us anything about its author, in fact does not tell us anything about anyone: 'l'écriture est la destruction de toute voix, de tout point d'origine'.[3] Language becomes its own subject, and only tells us about itself, in a perfectly autotelic fashion. Recognisable in this idea is the Structuralist position, concerned with emphasising the objectivity of the text, and with deconstructing it, which to its advocates is the only meaningful and positive approach to the analysis of literature, subjectivity in literature and art amounting to no more than the misleading expression of one's own individuality.

From this perspective, the notion of subjectivity is discarded from the start: it is the very essence of literature and art to blur it. The parallel with artists working with chance is plain, and can be compared for instance to the effort of the 'nouveau roman' to create an objective description of reality: amidst all their differences, these two sets of creators give practical examples of how problematic the subject would become in 20th and 21st century art and thought. This malaise with regard to subjectivity can easily be seen as an indirect consequence of the initial 'death of god': since values are no longer supported by a supreme Being, they must be devised by man himself, who becomes the authority in all matters previously the province of a divinity.

This 'humanisation' of truth, morals and, amongst other realms, that of aesthetics, is also paired with a symmetrical 'de-humanisation' (as early as 1925, Ortega y Gasset dedicated a book to the question in the arts).[4] It might therefore seem that the task of replacing God had in fact incited some artists to shy away from their own work, as if man was refusing the awesome responsibility of being free. Many interpretations can be put forward to explain this contradiction, including the idea that such a rejection is nothing less than a last attempt at finding ultimate truths, a desperate effort to salvage the objectivity of values. Whatever the answer, it is clear that trust in the powers and ability of the subject is highly topical.

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[3] Barthes, p. 62.
[4] José Ortega y Gasset, 'La Deshumanizacion del arte', in *Revista de occidente*, 1925.

In this context, Foucault's anti-humanist stance only served to deepen the crisis: by building on psychoanalysis and the notion of the unconscious, the thinker questioned the assumed idea of free agency itself, shaking man in his belief in a control over himself, and consequently undermining the rationality of his decisions. Foucault's anti-humanism also relies on the assumption that meaning is not *given*, but is rather created by us; that reality is not fixed, and that even the way it is modelled is not entirely within our control.

It is thus not surprising that the relationship of man to himself in the 20th century should become highly ambiguous. It took on several forms, including the mistrust of reason (Dada, Surrealism, COBRA) and of meaning (Dada again, Structuralism, Deconstruction). Naturally, the emergence of chance in the arts is a logical, one might even say the extreme, offshoot of these coalescing trends.

The future of chance?

That chance-as-art became a feature of the history of art in the twentieth century is, consequently, a very Modernist answer to a very Modernist issue. Breton attempted to sidestep the problem by using the highly Modernistic concept of chance in order to found a new moral system: a new artistic movement, and new values. Morellet, on the other hand, can be said to symbolise the radicality of Modernity, as well as the impasse particular to it, because Modernity is pulled in two opposite directions: the drive toward 'deconstruction' (in a sense not restricted to Derrida but encompassing the aforementioned examples of 'deaths'), and the malaise associated with it (a frustrated desire for *foundation*).

Furthermore, Morellet's framing of the concept of chance was itself, in essence, perfectly Modernist, since he chose to define the notion as contradictory to man. Across the Atlantic, Cage agreed with the visual artist for the best part of three decades. But a point came at which the composer's perception of chance changed. Not that he saw it in a radically new way, nor that he decided to do away with it altogether, but he ceased viewing it from a Modernist angle. As a result, some of his pieces proposed to actualise elements of chance previously overlooked. After having used it, as had Morellet, as a process of exclusion, he henceforth emphasised its inclusiveness.

From what precedes, it is not surprising that Cage's *circuses* coincided with what Pritchett has called the emergence of the composer's 'Postmodernist period'. Insofar as Cage added to chance's radicality an acceptance of the fact that it encompasses the totality of reality, thus actualising both its objectivity and latent subjectivity, he followed Postmodernism's well-documented tendency to amalgamate.

In this respect, it would seem that chance as a creative tool can make the crossover from Modernism to Postmodernism (which is ultimately what Cage appears to have helped it do within his own work), without outstanding difficulty. But can this observation, made after an examination of one individual, be generalised? If chance does still have a role to play within Postmodernist art, it would be instructive to compare the reasons motivating Postmodern creative artists with those inspiring Breton, Morellet, or even Cage. More importantly still, the form taken by the dialogue between their conception of chance, and that of Clément Rosset, theoretician of chance, would also repay examination. Such an investigation is beyond the scope of this study – but would doubtless prove highly instructive.

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Appendix 1

Interview with Clément Rosset
(4th March 2004, Paris)

1 – *Vos écrits traitent éloquemment de l'art dans la perspective de la joie (Offenbach, Mozart), mais un peu moins dans celle du hasard, quand bien même ce dernier occupe dans votre pensée une place au moins aussi importante que l'approbation. Que pensez-vous d'artistes qui, pour placer le hasard en « principe suprême », ont voulu y réduire l'art ?*

Il existe un texte central sur la question même du rapport entre l'art et le hasard, qui est un chapitre de la *Logique du pire*, ou plutôt deux, dont le dernier, le « Rire exterminateur », introduit un thème sur lequel je suis revenu sans cesse, et qui est le naufrage du Titanic, qui me paraît la chose la plus cocasse de tous les temps.

2 – *Ce texte a dû vous créer des ennemis.*

Et des amis. J'ai des collègues qui sont presque morts de rire en lisant ce chapitre. Il ne m'a pas valu tellement, à ce que je sache, de piques morales, mais plutôt des critiques du genre: ce n'est pas de la philosophie, on ne se moque pas d'un tel événement, ce n'est pas sérieux. Pour en revenir à votre question, « L'esthétique du pire 1 » est, de ce que j'ai écrit, ce qu'il y a de plus précis, non pas sur le hasard, mais sur les rapports du hasard et de l'esthétique.

3 – *Il est aussi possible de relire vos « Notes sur Nietzsche » dans* La Force majeure*, voire ce que vous dites de la musique dans* L'objet singulier*, pour comprendre votre position sur la question.*

Oui, mais la musique n'est pas écrite par le fruit du hasard, elle est écrite comme catalyseur de la joie, l'alliance de la vie et du tragique

de la vie. Je ne fais par là que m'inspirer de la sensibilité de Nietzsche qui disait que « sans la musique, la vie serait une erreur ». Je ne me rappelle pas avoir parlé ou écrit sur les rapports particuliers entre le hasard et l'esthétique musicale. Il est certain que c'est un thème qui intéresserait les compositeurs modernes, puisque l'aléatoire a pris à notre époque une grande place, mais c'est un aléatoire contrôlé. Est-ce que c'est vraiment le fruit du hasard ? Je dirais plutôt qu'il faut mettre cette problématique du hasard et de la musique en rapport avec la problématique de l'inspiration. Beaucoup de compositeurs, et je pense en particulier à Stravinsky, qui s'est expliqué sur son esthétique – ce qui est rare pour un grand compositeur –, dans deux livres: *Esthétique musicale* et *Souvenirs de ma vie*. De ces livres, il ressort que le destin musical d'une mesure, de dix mesures, d'une œuvre se décide au hasard, qu'il se décide à l'instant même, c'est-à-dire que 30 secondes avant d'arriver à la mesure qu'il va écrire, il n'en a aucune idée. On ne peut pas parler de hasard au sens strict, mais du moins du rapport de l'inspiration et du hasard: c'est pendant l'instant et au fil de la plume que l'idée surgit. Et pas selon un plan: il y a un plan général, mais pas de plan de détail. J'ai moi-même, sans vouloir me comparer au génie de Stravinsky, dans mes écrits, surtout à partir d'une certaine période, quand j'ai commencé à apprendre à écrire – on apprend à écrire comme on apprend à tout faire, c'est-à-dire pas seulement à l'école, mais en remettant sans cesse son ouvrage en cause, en suivant l'adage latin: c'est en forgeant qu'on devient forgeron –, expérimenté ce phénomène: une minute avant de faire une phrase, je n'avais aucune idée de ce qu'elle allait être. Est-ce le hasard qui m'a inspiré, est-ce le bon dieu, est-ce la muse de la philosophie ou de la littérature, si elles existent ? Est-ce hasard, association d'idées, heureuse rencontre ? Personnellement, je ne crois pas à l'inspiration, et je lui substituerais volontiers l'idée de hasard. Mais il faut alors convenir qu'il y a de bons et de mauvais hasards.

4 – *Certains artistes du 20ème siècle semblent justement avoir absolutisé la notion de hasard. Ils ont en effet prétendu remettre à celle-ci les clés de la création. Ainsi Breton, Morellet, ou encore Cage, dont vous dites dans* Franchise postale*, remarque qui mérite une explication, qu'il est un « grand musicien ».*

Pourquoi j'aime Cage ? Je n'aime pas beaucoup l'homme, qui me paraît un farfelu complet, un gauchiste absurde, auteur d'une théorie fumeuse – il prétend avoir choisi le contrepoint et non pas l'harmonie parce que la note isolée ou en contrepoint est une expression des classes pauvres alors que l'harmonie, avec plusieurs notes, est l'expression du confort des bourgeois ! Dieu sait qu'on peut dire toutes les extravagances possibles, mais là, Cage a tout de même fait très fort. Bien que son tempérament ne fut nullement furieux, il est allé très loin en faisant ce pas. Mais j'aime son œuvre, tout simplement parce qu'elle me séduit par son sens du rythme, par son sens du contrepoint, par son sens du timbre, des petits ensembles dont chaque instrument apparaît au moment qu'il faut, bien qu'à un moment aléatoire. J'aime aussi Cage pour l'influence qu'il a su faire sienne de la musique indonésienne, une musique que je trouve immédiatement agréable, plaisante, envoûtante, une musique à la fois complexe et très simple. Très simple sur le plan harmonique, mais qui, sur le plan rythmique, et sur le plan des tempi, est assez réussie et introduit justement le hasard en le contrôlant. La réussite de Cage vaut non seulement dans ses notes, ses contrepoints et ses tempi, mais aussi dans ses silences. Quand il « écrit » 20 secondes ou 3 minutes de silence, ça tombe admirablement. Ainsi, lorsque une séquence de pianos préparés intervient, on éprouve de la réjouissance, comme si on se glissait brusquement sous une cascade fraîche. C'est une musique qui me touche beaucoup par sa spontanéité, son ingénuité – Cage est très ingénu ! –, et cette capacité qu'elle manifeste à « bien tomber ».

5 – *Pourtant, dans les œuvres écrites à partir du* I-Ching *par exemple, il utilisait des techniques le privant a priori de toute décision de détail. En un certain sens, on peut également voir dans* 4'33'' *une illustration parfaite de ce refus de l'intention, du moindre contrôle de l'artiste sur l'œuvre.*

Un cas unique. Mais il faut faire ici la part de l'époque, de la provocation. Pour l'influence chinoise, il est certain que s'en remettre au livre des divinations est une sorte de confort musical, et il est également certain que l'esthétique extrême-orientale de Cage me paraît faire partie de son ingénuité. L'idée qu'il y a une sagesse orientale que nous, occidentaux, avons perdu, est un vieux ragoût qu'on nous sert depuis 50 ans et me semble irrecevable, même si Cage

la recevait. Cela dit, si j'ai déjà entendu ses œuvres influencées par le *I-Ching*, il est fort possible que je les aie aimées, mais c'était sans connaître leur référence chinoise. Le problème est que la musique de John Cage est assez peu jouée; les disques, sans être rares, ne sont pas très abondants; il écrit dans des styles très différents, et il a énormément composé.

6 – *Concernant la pensée orientale, vous y faites allusion dans un entretien par l'expression « cuisine orientale ». Avez-vous des affinités philosophiques avec cette cuisine ?*

Il existe beaucoup de personnes plus instruites que moi des pensées chinoises, indiennes, japonaises, et qui ont cru trouver un lien entre ce que j'écris et un certain nombre de thèmes se rapportant à ces courants de pensée. Personnellement, je dirais que ça ne m'a pas influencé, dans la mesure où j'ai écrit la plupart de mes livres avant de regarder de près certains textes hindous, chinois ou autres, et il ne serait dès lors s'agir que de convergences, de rencontres. Il est toutefois certain que, dans certains thèmes de la philosophie extrême-orientale, j'ai retrouvé des choses qui m'émouvaient beaucoup et avaient rapport avec ce que je pensais moi-même. Je pourrais ainsi citer des passages philosophiques des *Upanisads*, dont on ne sait pas si elles sont védiques, ou déjà bouddhiques, qui m'ont beaucoup ému. Je dirais que c'était plutôt l'influence hindouiste, védique, qui me plaisait, par son caractère affirmateur et inconditionnel de la réalité, alors que le bouddhisme, que j'admire beaucoup par son immense pitié pour la vie humaine, ne m'apporte pas autant, du fait de son côté éminemment négateur de la réalité. L'hindouisme est une vénération de l'être, le bouddhisme invite à se libérer de l'être. Pour les chinois, j'admire particulièrement les textes taoïstes, mais je ne m'y reconnais pas tout à fait. Il y a de nombreuses convergences avec des thèmes stoïciens et cyniques de la philosophie grecque, mais ce n'est pas une philosophie dont je me sente proche. Au rebours, je me sens en affinité avec ce qu'on peut deviner de la pensée de Confucius et de son caractère approbateur de l'ordre des choses, qui préfigure à mon avis complètement la philosophie de Leibniz.

7 – *Un autre grand approbateur est Spinoza…*

C'est pour moi le plus grand philosophe de tous les temps.

8 – *Vraiment ? Pourtant, dans vos écrits, c'est à Nietzsche et Lucrèce que vous consacrez le plus de lignes.*

Nietzsche a reconnu lui-même, ayant découvert Spinoza tardivement,: « J'ai perdu mon temps, tout ce que j'ai écrit est déjà dans Spinoza ». Le calme de celui-ci me paraît donner encore plus de poids à la perspective, qui est la même, de la véhémence nietzschéenne. C'est pourquoi, si j'admire infiniment Nietzsche, je préfère tout de même Spinoza.

9 – *Cet aveu peut surprendre vos lecteurs. Y a-t-il alors une raison pour votre silence à peu près complet sur Spinoza ?*

Dans *L'anti-nature*, qui était ma thèse d'état, on m'a reproché d'avoir écrit quelque chose de faux sur lui – qui n'était d'ailleurs pas faux: il y a bien une erreur dans *L'anti-nature*, mais elle concerne les rapports entre la déclinaison épicurienne et (…)[1] Toujours est-il que, pendant la dizaine d'années où j'ai été jugé à l'unanimité indigne d'enseigner la philosophie, le défaut absolu que l'on me reprochait était d'avoir écrit « faussement » sur Spinoza. Je crois qu'en la matière, le membre le plus imbécile de la commission était Monsieur Alquié, qui demandait de ma part une rétractation publique. En gros, il fallait que les parisiens se réunissent, que je monte sur une estrade et déclare: « Je me suis trompé ». Ce qui évoque tout à fait les autodafés et les structures religieuses. C'est peut-être cet épisode qui m'a rendu prudent, je me suis dit: « Spinoza, pas touche ». Disons que, psychologiquement, je me sens plus proche de Nietzsche: tout ce qu'il pense, je le pense aussi, et ses idées me passent tout le temps par la tête, alors que Spinoza est un super-Bouddha de l'intelligence, il nous dépasse tous infiniment. Si vous voulez, ce n'est pas un copain, je ne peux pas le tutoyer, je ne me le permettrais pas, alors que j'ai assez tendance à tutoyer Nietzsche.

[1] The name of the philosopher is indistinguishable on the audio-tape used during the interview.

10 – *Faites-vous une différence entre le panthéisme de Spinoza et votre pensée ?*

Aucune.

11 – *Le double est pour vous une négation de la réalité. N'envisagez-vous pas que, sous certaines conditions, il puisse être affirmateur, en tout cas ne pas nier la réalité ? Lucrèce par exemple commence son* De natura rerum *par une invocation à Vénus. Or, vous le montrez vous-même, Lucrèce est un des grands philosophes du matérialisme, ce qui pourrait sembler en contradiction avec l'invocation à la déesse de l'amour.*

Cette question m'a déjà été posée. Elle revient à dire: est-ce que le simple fait de parler du fantasme du double n'introduit pas une dualité dans le panthéisme – ou monisme dans notre jargon ? Je répondrais que non. Le double n'est pas quelque chose qui s'ajoute à la représentation panthéiste ou moniste unique de la réalité, car il figure un fantasme absolument immatériel, réellement impensable, par lequel on s'imagine qu'il y a quelque chose d'autre, et à partir duquel la raison humaine dérape. Le monde n'a pas de réalité autre que psychologique. Encore que, la plupart du temps, s'il y a un trait fondamental du double illusoire dont je parle la plupart du temps, c'est qu'il ne constitue pas un objet de pensée: il est une espèce d'éclair illusoire, comme cela pourrait prendre quelqu'un qui, à un mètre de la guillotine, réussirait à se dire « non, la guillotine n'existe pas ». Le double ne constitue pas une réalité, mais il ne constitue même pas une pensée consistante: et c'est grâce à cela que fonctionne le fantasme du double, parce que s'il se laissait penser, on verrait tout de suite qu'il est inconsistant. Le recours hallucinatoire à autre chose que ce qui est n'arrive pas à constituer l'image, ni même la pensée, de ce quelque chose. C'est une hallucination vague: le vague est ici essentiel. J'oppose à la réalité la pensée d'autre chose, qui est n'importe quoi, n'importe quoi à l'exception de la réalité elle-même.

12 – *En somme, une pensée lucide du double vous paraît imaginable.*

Une pensée lucide du double est possible. On peut faire du double une pensée drôle, amusante – Pascal l'a fait –, à la fois consistante et

sachant qu'au fond elle ne l'est pas. C'est un jeu de l'esprit. J'ai consacré quelques lignes à la question d'un double lucide dans *La philosophie et les sortilèges*. Je projette d'ailleurs dans un livre à venir un grand tableau à la Kant, une classification générale des doubles. Pour revenir à Lucrèce, je crois qu'il s'agit d'une tout autre question. Il s'agit d'un paradoxe profond, insoluble, insurmontable, de la pensée philosophique de Lucrèce. Nous avons affaire à un matérialiste, donc moniste, donc panthéiste, et nous avons affaire à un esprit empli de pitié pour l'humanité, pensant que l'homme est incapable d'accepter de penser la réalité. Cette immense pitié est une première entorse à sa propre philosophie: pourquoi y a-t-il hiatus entre le sort de la nature humaine et sa faculté d'acceptation ? Le deuxième point que vous évoquiez à propos de Vénus est un problème assez analogue. De même que Descartes a tout mécanisé, Lucrèce a bien décrit le sort qui est celui de toute réalité. Pourtant, il n'a pu s'empêcher de louer quelque chose qui n'est pas du tout matériel, pas du tout mécanique: l'instinct, l'amour physique, l'amour des femmes. Il introduit en somme un thème extra-matériel dans le matérialisme.

13 – *Pour vous, Lucrèce était donc dupe de ce double ?*

Je crois que Lucrèce était un homme complètement désespéré. On prétend qu'il s'est suicidé: c'est peut-être une invention, peut-être pas. Si les hommes ne peuvent pas voir la réalité en face, il en va en quelque sorte de même de Lucrèce. La pensée des hommes n'est pas à la hauteur de la réalité, et je me demande si Lucrèce n'est pas dans le même cas. La question ne me semble donc pas être de savoir s'il est dupe ou pas, car en fin de compte la réalité lui sortait par les trous de nez ! Vénus est la chose qui permet d'oublier tous les péchés, toutes les horreurs de la condition humaine. Le plaisir sexuel rachète tout: s'il n'y a que matière, mais s'il y a plaisir sexuel, la matière est absoute. C'est d'ailleurs assez épouvantable, car il dit: ne soyez pas amoureux, mais faites l'amour.

14 – *Concernant l'acceptation, que vous avez abordé en parlant du Titanic et qui semble en quelque sorte faire défaut à Lucrèce, je crois savoir qu'on vous l'a souvent reprochée. Pouvez-vous dire en quoi elle se distingue du relativisme, qui est un cheval de bataille de*

nombreux penseurs actuels et justifie pour certains la nécessité d'un retour de la morale ?

Il faut faire la part des choses entre le relativisme et l'acceptation de l'inacceptable. La dernière est une accusation qui m'a souvent été faite, mais c'est une accusation morale: vous acceptez la vie, toute la vie, donc vous acceptez Auschwitz, les génocides du Cambodge… Un vieil argument plus qu'usité et auquel je n'ai cessé de répondre – sans convaincre personne d'ailleurs –, notamment dans l'appendice à *Démon de la tautologie*, que j'ai intitulé « Cinq petites pièces morales », en m'inspirant d'Erik Satie.

15 – *Justement, dans cet appendice, vous insistez sur votre rejet de la morale, mais pour aussitôt lui opposer la loi. Or la loi ne repose-t-elle pas sur une morale initiale ?*

La loi ne repose sur rien, elle est conditionnelle, tout comme la morale. Mais la morale est inutile, aveugle, et ne sert qu'à entretenir les fanatismes, alors que la loi tend à les diminuer. Ce que je dis là est ce que le plus grand moraliste (…)[2]: il n'y aura jamais de progrès de la moralité, sinon amené par un progrès de la légalité. D'autre part, il y a chez moi, il est vrai, un aspect nietzschéen, ou spinoziste, car Spinoza déjà disait à quel point de l'ordre civil dépendait la paix, une paix objective, et non pas subjective, psychologique. Mais il y a également un côté leibnizien qui tend, non pas à justifier l'inacceptable, mais à l'intégrer dans une optique plus générale qui est: ce qui est inacceptable ne peut manquer de faire partie, hélas, de la réalité. On essaie bien sûr de réduire cette part d'inadmissible, mais je ne vois pas du tout en quoi l'indignation morale peut y réformer quoi que ce soit. Un progrès de l'urbanité, de la civilisation, des mœurs (au sens sociologique) et de la légalité, peut – et est le seul à pouvoir – être un instrument dont on peut espérer qu'il amenuise, dizaines de siècles après dizaines de siècles, un peu de la cruauté et de la bêtise humaines. Ce n'est pas en s'indignant qu'on arrivera à quoi que ce soit: il faut d'abord comprendre. On peut ainsi prendre l'exemple de la maladie: une maladie connue, identifiée, comprise, est une maladie déjà à moi-

[2] Again, the name of the philosopher is indistinguishable on the audio-tape used during the interview.

tié guérie. Je ne comprends donc pas du tout les attitudes de ceux qui, par moralisme, par obsession moraliste, s'acharnent à penser que je prends mes délices à l'idée des camps de concentration. Je n'imagine pas de méfaits, de mauvaises pensées, de mauvais actes, sans un certain coefficient de bêtise.

16 – *Leibniz, Spinoza, Nietzsche: trois philosophes qui ont pensé la joie. Vous évoquez aussi souvent Pascal, qui pourtant se range plutôt, avec Cioran par exemple, du côté de ceux qui s'arrêtent à la pensée de la cruauté. En un sens, j'ai l'impression que la joie rossetienne est le pari pascalien, mais pris à l'inverse.*

Je crois, moi, que c'est le même côté. Mais cette question relève du domaine privé, et cela me gênerait moins que vous me posiez des questions sur mes mœurs intimes. Tout ce que je peux dire, c'est qu'il y a de profondes convergences entre le salut par la joie et le salut par la grâce. Ma pensée profonde est que la joie est impossible: dès qu'on a reçu une cuillère sur le pied à deux ans, la joie devient impossible. Donc, elle est l'effet d'un miracle. Je ferais d'ailleurs remarquer que ce miracle se retrouve chez Lucrèce: il y a également un miracle du matérialisme, et un miracle de la sensualité. Un étudiant anglais, lors d'une conférence donnée à Oxford, m'avait ainsi demandé si ce que j'appelais la joie n'était pas ce que lui et sa génération appelaient tout simplement le cul. J'avais hâte d'aller manger, et je lui ai répondu « Tout à fait ». Mais c'est ce qui fait tout marcher: le miracle du sexe, de la joie de Vénus chez Lucrèce, le miracle de la foi chrétienne chez Pascal, voilà ce qui fait tout marcher. C'est pour cette raison que tout est finalement si peu métaphysique, parce que tout est finalement inhérent aux choses-mêmes. Peut-être que les pierres n'ont pas besoin d'être joyeuses – encore que l'hindouisme soutienne dans les *Upanisads* que le chien aime être chien, l'arbre aime être arbre, la pierre être pierre. Ce n'est ni de la métaphysique, ni de l'érotisme: ce dont je parle est la condition *sine qua non* sans laquelle il n'y a pas de vie. Il y a d'abord la distance de la terre au soleil, mais la deuxième condition est la joie.

17 – *Votre lucidité quant à l'importance du hasard, conséquence directe de la joie, a-t-elle été influencée par les découvertes scientifi-*

ques, la théorie du chaos, la mécanique quantique ? Autrement dit, les sciences ont-elles joué un rôle dans la constitution de votre pensée ?

Franchement, je ne me suis jamais vraiment intéressé à la science. J'apprécie infiniment les progrès qu'elle permet: par exemple, réussir à réduire la souffrance du patient chez le dentiste ou sur la table d'opération est d'une importance fondamentale. En revanche, que la terre tourne autour du soleil ou le soleil autour de la terre, j'avoue que peu me chaut. La question du vrai, de manière générale, m'est indifférente. Je ne suis pas un philosophe de la vérité, mais plutôt de la réalité.

18 – *Dans le même ordre d'idée, avez-vous le sentiment que certains penseurs actuels, ou récents, voire certains artistes, travaillent sur des problématiques qui vous sont chères ?*

Ça se saurait ! Le dernier philosophe dont je me sente proche est Bergson. Depuis Bergson, je n'ai jamais trouvé le moindre intérêt sérieux à la philosophie. Par contre, il y a eu des musiciens, des dramaturges fabuleux, de Bergson jusqu'à nos jours. De grands philosophes, je n'en vois pas. Sauf un, il est vrai: Wittgenstein. Il n'est bien sûr pas dans l'œil du cyclone de ma pensée, mais j'avoue que j'ai été très impressionné par son scepticisme et sa profondeur critique.

19 – *Par certains aspects – votre intérêt mutuel pour la pensée présocratique en particulier, son travail sur le hasard –, il me semble possible d'établir des ponts entre vous et Conche, Conche qui est également un philosophe en marge.*

Il y a certainement des convergences. Cela fait bientôt trente ans que nous échangeons une correspondance. Nous ne nous sommes jamais rencontrés, mais je connais bien entendu ses travaux sur les grecs. D'ailleurs, tous les articles des dictionnaires importants de philosophie sur les philosophes grecs et latins mineurs ont été rédigés par Conche. Mais il y a une différence entre lui et moi, et elle tient à ce que c'est un personnage qui est devenu réaliste par désespoir – c'est un peu mon cas aussi, mais notre désespoir est envisagé différemment. Il a un fond, dirais-je chrétien, dirais-je moral, dirais-je hégélien, qui fait que son adhésion à la doctrine épicurienne ne sonne pas tout à fait juste. Il

y a une nostalgie idéaliste, morale, qui est en vue, et se retrouve chez son illustre disciple Comte-Sponville, apparemment plus connu parmi ses étudiants sous le nom de « Dédé la branlette ». Conche a, dirais-je, un besoin de morale, de justice, auquel je n'ai personnellement jamais cru, puisque je suis tenu pour responsable de tous les égarements possibles et imaginables.

20 – *Connaissez-vous son* Aléatoire *?*

Non, mais je lui ai emprunté cette très belle phrase, tirée de ses travaux sur *Montaigne*, *Lucrèce* ou *Héraclite*: « L'ordre est un cas particulier du désordre. » Conche fait partie de ces philosophes qui ont eu une carrière universitaire tout à fait incompréhensible, car lui n'avait pas le défaut que j'ai moi. Il publiait à l'époque à compte d'auteur, il ne faisait ombrage à personne, il est extrêmement sérieux et rigoureux dans ses références, et je ne comprends pas du tout pourquoi il lui a fallu tant d'années pour être accepté par l'université ! Sinon peut-être que, la Sorbonne étant une institution ancienne et fondamentalement religieuse, il faut en gros, pour être intronisé dans l'université, être soit marxiste, soit chrétien. Ainsi, peut-être que le fait d'avoir professé, contre son sentiment profond encore une fois, l'épicurisme comme il l'a fait, a joué en sa défaveur.

21 – *Toujours en ce qui concerne la question des convergences, David Bell, dans son introduction à un choix de vos textes traduits en anglais (*Joyful Cruelty*, Oxford University Press, 1993), dit de Vacher qu'il serait votre disciple. Etes-vous d'accord ?*

Vacher, écrivain pamphlétaire québécois, a eu cette formule qui m'a frappé, que je donne de mémoire: « La philosophie est l'art de créditer des sottises tout en discréditant des évidences. » Mais ce n'est pas vraiment un philosophe, plutôt un polémiste.

22 – *Dans son introduction, Bell établit également des liens entre votre pensée et le courant postmoderne, ce qui m'a choqué. Qu'en dites-vous ?*

C'est tout à fait choquant, mais à la fois tout à fait naturel puisque tout auteur est le postmoderne de quelqu'un, en cela qu'il suit un moderne,

et pour autant que personne n'a jamais su ce que ce mot voulait dire, sinon en architecture. C'est une façon de dire, sans en dire plus: Clément Rosset, philosophe de la deuxième moitié du 20ème siècle.

23 – *Je voudrais maintenant que vous m'éclairiez sur un point qui m'a toujours étonné dans vos livres. Vous insistez sur les points communs entre la pensée des philosophes que vous aimez (Pascal, Lucrèce, Montaigne, Nietzsche, voire Schopenhauer et Cioran) et la vôtre. Or, il m'a toujours semblé que cela vous amenait à supprimer les différences existant entre toutes ces philosophies.*

Il est certain que Nietzsche et Spinoza pensent en gros les mêmes choses, avec un appareil philosophique et théorique très différent. Il est non moins évident que Bergson ou Leibniz, que j'admire énormément, divergent entre eux. Je prends ce qui me sert chez ces philosophes, ce qui me conforte, ce qui illustre ma propre manière de concevoir la réalité.

24 – *Par là, je veux dire que vous semblez parfois réduire ces différents systèmes de pensée au vôtre propre, donnant l'impression finalement que vous dites exactement, ou peu s'en faut, la même chose.*

Je suis un philosophe, pas un professeur de philosophie. Quand je parle de Vénus ou d'un aspect de Kant, j'extrais ce qui est utile à mon propos. Je ne prétendrais pas parler d'un auteur ou d'une œuvre dans sa totalité, c'est tout à fait insensé de le soupçonner. Je parle des philosophes comme un peintre choisit des couleurs sur sa palette: je ne dois pas expliquer tout l'orange, tout le noir, et tout le jaune ! Je ne suis pas tenu, n'étant pas un professeur d'histoire de la philosophie, de donner le contexte. Si on a l'idée que je réduis la pensée d'un auteur à ce que j'en extrais à tel ou tel moment, j'en suis consterné.

25 – *Que répondriez-vous si je vous disais que vos livres répètent toujours la même chose ?*

Que je m'en enorgueillis. Je pourrais vous répondre en disant, comme le Pierrot du *Don Juan* de Molière: « Je disions toujours la même chose, parce que c'étions toujours la même chose, et si ça n'étions

point toujours la même chose, je ne dirions point toujours la même chose. » Je pourrais vous répondre aussi, avec Henri Bergson, qu'un philosophe digne de ce nom est le philosophe d'une idée. Un thème philosophique profond est tellement riche qu'une vie ne suffit pas à l'épuiser. C'est pourquoi, lorsque ce matin, sur France Culture, on m'a demandé, au fond vous n'avez jamais eu que deux idées, le tragique et le double, j'ai répondu: oui, et c'est probablement trop d'une (j'ai ensuite essayé de montrer que c'était la même idée).

26 – *Cette chose que vous répétez, c'est bien entendu, en tout cas en grande partie, la question du double, ce qui me fait dire que votre objectif est par là la désillusion: si vous traquez les formes prises par le double, c'est dans un but thérapeutique. On peut également y déceler l'idée que la seule chose ayant de l'importance à vos yeux est de parler du réel. Or, le réel, vous l'avez montré notamment dans Le Réel, traité de l'idiotie, échappe aux mots, et il est donc impossible d'en parler. D'où votre répétition, une répétition ayant peut-être pour but, à la façon de la théologie négative, de mettre l'accent sur ce que le réel n'est pas pour finalement mieux le souligner en creux. Ces remarques m'amènent à vous demander s'il n'est pas possible de voir ici une définition, en tout cas une caractéristique essentielle de votre philosophie. Mettre en phase avec le réel: cela vous semble-t-il un bon résumé de votre œuvre ? Deleuze disait que le but de la philosophie était la constitution de concepts: quelle est-elle pour vous ?*

Deleuze était un philosophe très cérébral, que j'ai souvent côtoyé pendant une période: il était certainement l'être le plus éloigné que j'ai connu de la réalité. Il ne savait pas ce que c'était qu'un aliment, une chose, il était une espèce de créature entièrement spirituelle. Pour ce qui est de votre question, elle est voisine de cette remarque, qui m'a souvent été faite: vous êtes le chantre du réel, mais vous n'en parlez jamais. Etant donné que le réel est indescriptible, inconceptualisable, il suffit que l'intelligence s'en mêle pour que le réel disparaisse, parce que – c'est exactement ce que disait Plotin – ce qui existe c'est l'Un. Pascal disait: je ferais trop d'honneur à mon sujet si j'en parlais avec ordre, puisque tout mon propos consiste à montrer qu'il en est incapable. Eh bien tout mon propos est de dire que l'être est indescriptible et indéfinissable, et que par conséquent je n'ai pas à le définir. En venir à dire « mettre l'homme en phase avec le réel », oui et non. Si

vous voulez dire par là réconcilier l'homme avec ce qui existe, c'est mon message « moral », mon vœu: être en bon terme avec le réel. Si vous voulez dire, par mettre en phase, mettre en phase intellectuelle, c'est-à-dire comprendre ce qu'est la réalité, alors là non. Tout mon propos consiste au contraire à montrer à quel point l'intelligence humaine n'est pas en phase avec elle.

Appendix 2

Interview with François Morellet
(April 2005, Cholet)

1 – *Le hasard, un de vos outils de travail privilégiés, a connu un certain succès au 20ème siècle, que ce soit en sciences, en art ou en philosophie. Il a donc pris plusieurs sens, et il serait intéressant pour commencer de savoir:*

- comment vous le définiriez
- ce que pour vous il n'est pas, ce à quoi il s'oppose

Je dois d'abord préciser que "mon hasard" a un rôle bien précis, c'est celui auquel je demande, souvent, de prendre ma place, pour choisir des positionnements d'éléments, des couleurs ou des angles.

Cela peut paraître limité, mais pour la forme d'art que j'ai choisie depuis 1952, disons "l'art concret" qui, entre autres, rejette toute "sensibilité" dans l'exécution des œuvres, cela représente l'essentiel des décisions subjectives.

Sa première qualité est de fabriquer de l'imprévisible. Il s'oppose, ou plutôt, prend la place de la spontanéité, l'intuition, le talent, le génie etc. Ce qu'il n'est pas, ou plutôt ce qu'il n'a pas, c'est, à la base, une justification philosophique, scientifique ou mystique.

2 – *D'un point de vue biographique, est-ce que vos débuts de peintre abstrait coïncident avec la théorisation, même vague, de l'absence de décision ?*

Oui, très vite mes tableaux abstraits ont été géométriques et simples, deux façons de limiter mes décisions subjectives.

3 – *Dans quelles circonstances l'impression d'impasse concernant vos systèmes en 57-58 a-t-elle trouvé une issue dans le hasard (influence extérieure, logique interne, une combinaison des deux) ?*

Au milieu des années 50, j'étais mûr pour aller plus loin dans ce "jusqu'auboutisme". C'est alors l'exemple des œuvres réalisées ensemble par Arp et Sophie Taeuber en 1920, que me fit connaître Ellsworth Kelly, aussi bien que certaines de ses propres œuvres dans le même esprit, qui m'ont fait basculer dans le monde du hasard.

4 – *Au nombre de vos techniques faisant appel au hasard, on compte l'annuaire téléphonique, π – qui fait double emploi (décimale = couleur ou décimale= angle) –, l'action du spectateur, mais aussi l'aide de "random devices". En avez-vous utilisé d'autres, et en imaginez-vous d'autres, aussi bien faisables qu'utopiques ?*

Oui, je me suis amusé, suivant les circonstances, à trouver d'autres générateurs de hasard. Par exemple, pour des cadeaux portraits, j'ai remplacé les chiffres par des lettres et je positionnais mes éléments suivant les lettres du nom ou/et prénom du destinataire. Pour une édition de sérigraphies, j'avais juste donné, à l'éditeur, une grille de parallèles 0° – 90° et avais décidé que cette sérigraphie comporterait une superposition de 4 grilles. Il y avait 24 inclinaisons et 24 couleurs possibles. Chaque degré d'inclinaison correspondait à une des 24 lettres de l'alphabet, et le même système pour les couleurs.

Le premier visiteur de mon éditeur après mon courrier donnait par la première lettre de son prénom le degré d'inclinaison et par la première lettre de son nom de famille la couleur de la première grille. Et cela jusqu'au quatrième visiteur.

Pour organiser une promenade aléatoire d'étudiants à Strasbourg, j'avais décidé qu'à la sortie du Musée et à chaque croisement on tirerait à pile ou face. Pile à droite, face à gauche. Un autre système, plus utopique, me faisait parier que j'étais capable d'écrire un livre sur 1 m^2 de terre émergée, tiré au hasard, sur notre planète, etc.

5 – *Y a-t-il des mises en œuvre du hasard par d'autres artistes que vous retenez particulièrement ?*

Bien sûr, les duos Arp Taeuber et puis bien après Ellsworth Kelly, Hermann de Vries, Kenneth Martin, Zdènèk Sykora, Douglas Huebler.

6 – *Pourquoi pensez-vous que le hasard soit devenu un outil aussi recherché par les artistes du 20ème siècle ?*

Parce qu'au XXème on a pu voir une merveilleuse explosion de tous les jusqu'auboutismes, les radicalismes et les provocations. A quelle époque aurait-on pu expulser impunément de l'art: dieu, le prince, la morale, la raison et le génie et s'intéresser au hasard ?

7 – *Cette reconnaissance du hasard et de sa place vous semble-t-elle n'en dire que sur l'art, ou reflète-t-elle une évolution des mentalités, un changement global qui resterait à expliquer – global dans la façon dont l'Occident aborde le déterminisme ou la liberté en général ?*

Vous avez sûrement raison, mais je ne me laisserai pas entraîner dans des régions pour lesquelles je ne suis pas équipé.

8 – *Vos systèmes ont trouvé dans le hasard à la fois une contradiction et un prolongement, une négation et une confirmation, car le hasard est l'anti-système par excellence en même temps qu'une simple contrainte de plus du système. S'il a été si bien exploité dans votre travail, c'est parce qu'il permet donc de sortir des problèmes associés au systématisme radical – l'ennui, la monotonie – sans pour autant tomber dans la solution évidente de la créativité de l'artiste – la réinjection de la subjectivité, et partant du choix. Diriez-vous dans cette perspective que l'intérêt du hasard a été et est pour vous ce que l'on pourrait appeler sa "créativité", une qualité d'invention rappelant la subjectivité humaine sans perdre sa totale objectivité ?*

Oui, je pense que mes systèmes et mon hasard ont la même fonction, soit, celle de faire des "pseudo". Pseudo: pointillistes, expressionnistes, baroques etc. Avec toujours la pseudo transcendance. Pourquoi ? Eh bien, j'ai même une morale: relativiser le rôle des artistes.

9 – *Le hasard vous permet-il de réduire le nombre de vos décisions ? Comment ?*

Bien sûr, grâce à lui, il ne me faut pas plus de décisions pour créer un joyeux chaos que pour faire mes 16 carrés de 1953.

10 – *Quelle proportion de votre œuvre donne à votre sens une place prépondérante au hasard ?*

En 1957 et maintenant, peut-être 80 %. Entre les deux, il y a eu quelques périodes sans, comme avec les trames superposées, la *"géométrie dans les spasmes"*, les tableaux déstabilisés ou les *"steel-life"*.

Rosset

11 – *Que retenez-vous de la pensée de Rosset ?*

Il a été, pour moi, l'exterminateur, sans pitié, de la nature dans tous les sens, ô combien imprécis, du mot "nature". Le dénonciateur de tout ce que les hommes ont créé pour se faire souffrir.

12 – *Pour quelle raison a-t-elle compté dans votre cheminement ?*

Il m'a conforté, particulièrement dans mon parti pris pour l'artificiel et la précision.

13 – *Dans quelle proportion l'analyse du hasard par Rosset vous a-t-elle influencé ? A-t-elle agi comme une confirmation ou comme une révolution ? Enfin, a-t-elle motivé des œuvres en particulier, voire une façon nouvelle de produire des œuvres ?*

J'ai un peu peur de vous décevoir, mais je n'ai pas associé Rosset à mon hasard. C'est vrai que je n'ai pas une grande connaissance de son œuvre. Et puis, j'étais déjà très engagé avec le hasard quand j'ai lu *L'Anti-Nature*.

14 – *Rapprochez-vous Rosset d'autres penseurs, ou d'un courant de pensée particulier ?*

Ma faible culture concerne les philosophes en général. J'ai fait une liste des livres qui m'ont le plus marqué, sans d'ailleurs qu'ils traitent du hasard. Je vais essayer de les citer, à peu près chronologiquement, et dans des directions différentes.

Fragments d'un enseignement inconnu, Ouspensky
Le Bouddhisme dans son essence et son développement, Ed. Conze
1. *Le Phénomène humain*, T. de Chardin
2. *L'Apparition de l'homme*, T. de Chardin
La Psychologie de la forme, Guillaume
La Destruction de la raison, Georges Lukacs
Beaucoup d'œuvres de Samuel Beckett
L'Anti-nature et aussi *L'Objet singulier* et *Le Réel et son double*, Clément Rosset
La Distinction, Bourdieu
Critique de la raison cynique, Peter Sloterdijk

Enfin j'ai bien regretté, pour une fois, mon éloignement de Paris, qui m'a empêché d'avoir des contacts avec l'Oulipo et particulièrement avec Queneau et Perec.

15 – *Un article récent comparant votre travail et la pensée de Rosset met l'accent sur la tournure "répétitive" que prend chez vous l'utilisation du hasard. Ainsi que son auteur le précise, cet aspect du hasard est explicitement souligné par Rosset. Cela dit, il est facile de voir que cette interprétation ne rend pas tout à fait justice au philosophe, qui insiste à part au moins égale sur le fait que cette répétition du même est aussi répétition "différentielle". Envisagez-vous vos séries – et vos œuvres en général – comme réitération ou différence ? Comme la redite d'un postulat immuable ou une construction, une exploration sans cesse approfondie ? En d'autres termes, qu'est-ce qui vous intéresse dans la série: la répétition ou la nouveauté ?*

J'ai été très intéressé par la répétition à l'intérieur de l'œuvre. Cette répétition annule la composition et permet au "all over" d'envahir le mur. En revanche, j'ai toujours recherché des systèmes qui, avec le même énoncé, le plus simple possible, produisent des œuvres très différentes, comme, par exemple, lorsqu'on change les chiffres aléatoires qui les animent. Ce que j'aime, par dessus tout, c'est être épaté par les développements inattendus d'un système qui paraissait bien sage. Ce n'est donc pas la répétition qui m'intéresse.

16 – *Voyez-vous un lien de causalité entre l'adoption du hasard au sens "rossettien" et la joie de vivre ? Si oui, pourquoi ?*

Le hasard absurde, frivole, pasticheur, oui, c'est pour moi la joie de vivre. Je pense que c'est assez proche du hasard "rossettien".

Has-art et has-artistes

17 – *Si l'on part de l'idée que le has-art – si on me permet le néologisme – est une forme d'art consacré à mettre le hasard* en œuvre, *à s'en servir pour créer une œuvre (laquelle resterait également au plus près dans les limites de celui-ci), diriez-vous que vous êtes ou avez été un has-artiste ?*

Je suis un peu méfiant, et j'ai confusément peur qu'apparaisse un Hasard proche de ce qu'a pu être la Nature ou Dieu.

18 – *La disparition complète de l'homme (la déshumanisation) de l'œuvre a-t-elle été une de vos aspirations ? Si c'est le cas, l'apparition de l'humour pourrait sembler en signer la fin. Qu'est-ce qui vous a poussé à suffisamment vous défaire de cette aspiration pour accepter le retour (non pas en force, mais retour quand même) de l'individu dans l'œuvre ?*

Je crois que la "déshumanisation" de l'œuvre n'a jamais été mon propos. J'aurais eu trop peur que Dieu ou la Nature en profite pour s'étaler. Tout au contraire, j'aime les œuvres artificielles, faites par des individus qui, bien sûr, n'étalent pas les signes extérieurs de leur individualité. Et l'humour est un gage d'une distance envers le drame, la transcendance et le sérieux.

19 – *Rabelais a écrit la généalogie de Pantagruel. Quelle serait celle de l'artiste François Morellet (ou* celles*: artistique et philosophique) ? Autrement dit, à qui ou à quelles tendances reliez-vous vos idées et vos œuvres.*

Je me sens appartenir à un courant très français qui se caractérise par deux qualités ou défauts antinomiques: d'un côté, la retenue, la légèreté, la clarté, la logique et de l'autre, le non-sens, le cynisme,

l'humour. Dans le désordre je vais citer des artistes, écrivains, musiciens français qui ont eu, plus ou moins, les qualités, ou défauts, cités plus haut: Jacques Villon, Montaigne, l'Ecole de Fontainebleau, Watteau, Lulli, Molière, Voltaire, Marivaux, Musset, Ingres, Corot, Allais, Satie, Duchamp etc. On retrouve, bien sûr, en dehors de l'hexagone, mais avec moins de concentration, des artistes, pour moi, de la même famille, comme par exemple: Paul Klee, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Georges Vantongerloo etc.

20 – *Laquelle ou lesquelles de vos œuvres vous semblent aller le plus loin dans le has-art, ou le hasard ?*

Ce n'est pas une œuvre mais une installation "all over" que j'ai réalisée en 1995 à Dijon, dans une sorte de grand hangar: "L'Usine". Le plus gros travail a été de mettre au point le système de hasard qui a dispersé dans le bâtiment les composantes de 5 grandes œuvres des "*Relâches*", c'est-à-dire 5 grandes toiles, 10 angles de néon, 10 angles d'alu et 10 angles de ruban. Les couleurs des "*Relâches"* et de leurs éléments avaient déjà été définies par un système de hasard. C'est la fois où j'ai été le plus "dérangé" par mes hasards.

21 – *Par curiosité, pourriez-vous dire ce que vous pensez de* 4'33 *de Cage ? Ce que vous pensez être ses qualités et ses défauts en terme de has-art ?*

Je n'ai pas assisté au silence. Je trouve cela sympathique, mais je préfère encore "La marche funèbre pour un grand homme sourd" d'Alphonse Allais.

22 – *Que répondriez-vous si je vous disais que votre travail avec* π *(qui dure depuis 98) me semble votre tentative la plus aboutie dans une perspective has-artistique (ou si vous refuser l'idée de has-art, la plus aboutie de vos travaux avec le hasard) ?*

Oui, *"les cheminements de* π*"* ont amené beaucoup de diversité et m'ont même surpris agréablement. Mais, je dirais que la pièce, avec le hasard, que je préfère date de 1958: *"6 répartitions aléatoires de 4 carrés noirs et blancs d'après les chiffres pairs et impairs de* π*."* Là, le hasard a été génial. Il y avait 5 répartitions différentes possibles:

tout noir – tout blanc – un carré noir – un carré blanc – moitié noir et moitié blanc. Avec les 6 tableaux, que j'avais décidés de réaliser, j'ai eu la chance d'épuiser 5 de ces possibilités.

23 – *D'autres artistes ont-ils pour vous travaillé dans un sens comparable au vôtre ?*

Voir les réponses 3 et 5. Pour préciser, les seules œuvres faites avec un "hasard systématique" avant moi que je connaisse sont les 5 ou 6 duos de Jean Arp et Sophie Taeuber de 1920 et quelques œuvres de Ellsworth Kelly dans les années 50.

24 – *André Breton vous semble-t-il avoir utilisé le hasard, un hasard qui aurait pu vous servir, vous influencer ?*

J'ai été très injuste envers les surréalistes et André Breton, qui me semblaient avoir assassiné Dada. Leur sérieux, leurs exclusions, leur moralité m'ont empêché de m'intéresser à eux.

25 – *Que pensez-vous de son* hasard objectif *? que comprenez-vous par l'expression ?*

Cette allergie pour Breton m'a donc fait ignorer son "hasard objectif".

26 – *Vous écrivez dans* Mais comment taire mes commentaires *apprécier la musique de John Cage – comme Rosset d'ailleurs. Quelles sont les qualités que vous aimez chez lui ? Son travail avec l'indétermination et le hasard vous paraît-il faire écho à certaines de vos recherches ?*

Oui, bien sûr. Mais, en fait, les "Américains répétitifs", et tout particulièrement Steve Reich, bien que plus tardifs, m'ont alors un peu caché John Cage, que j'apprécie sûrement mieux aujourd'hui. En effet, j'ai connu John Cage assez mal et assez tard, vers la fin des années 60 et à ce moment-là, je suis revenu sur mes problèmes des années 50: progression, interférence, répétition, qui étaient aussi ceux de Steve Reich.

27 – *Dans ce recueil, vous mentionnez également l'Anglais Kenneth Martin. Pouvez-vous nous expliquer la façon dont vous êtes venu à le rencontrer, ce qui vous rapproche de lui, ainsi que ce que son œuvre vous semble apporter à l'art du 20ème ?*

Dans les années 70, la galerie M de Bochum a eu une très grande influence sur moi; son programme se nommait "Neue Konkrete Kunst" et avait parmi ses artistes Kenneth Martin. Personnellement il était charmant, modeste, plein d'humour. Il ne cherchait pas la provocation. Ses œuvres étaient à la fois rigoureuses et vraiment "peintes". C'était, sans doute, le seul peintre du hasard.

28 – *Dans une optique hasardeuse, comment considérez-vous le Found art et le ready-made ? Cela vous a-t-il jamais intéressé ? Pour quelle raison ?*

Je n'étais pas vraiment intéressé par toutes les œuvres utilisant le hasard. Ma passion a été, depuis 1952 jusqu'à maintenant, d'abord la simplicité, le minimalisme, les systèmes, le flirt avec le vide, avec ou sans le hasard, mais pas le hasard sans cet accompagnement.

29 – *Si vous deviez nommer l'œuvre la plus "has-artistique", quelle serait-elle ?*

Une des pièces que je trouve les plus réussies est celle d'Hermann de Vries où il met sous un arbre qui perd ses feuilles un tableau avec de la colle.

Rapports à la science

30 – *Vous mentionnez dans* Mais comment taire mes commentaires ? *la théorie de l'information, que les Molnar, si je ne me trompe pas, vous ont fait découvrir. Dans quelle mesure cette théorie vous a-t-elle influencé, et qu'en avez-vous retenu ?*

Oui, ce sont mes amis les Molnar qui, en 1957/58, m'ont fait connaître cette théorie et rencontrer des chercheurs comme Max Bense et Abraham Moles, tous passionnés pour créer les bases d'une science de l'art. Les débats me dépassaient souvent mais j'étais conforté dans

mon goût du système, de l'expérience, de la rigueur. D'autant que l'on suggérait que mes œuvres pourraient être un matériel de choix pour cette future science.
J'ai donc été conforté et puis déçu par la suite – qu'il n'y ait pas eu vraiment de suite.

31 – *Faites-vous un rapprochement entre Rosset et cette théorie ?*

Sûrement. Je me rappelle approximativement cette affirmation de Rosset: "Le mensonge est l'imprécision, ce qui est précis n'est jamais faux".

32 – *Que saviez-vous du hasard dans le domaine scientifique avant 58 ? Son utilisation à partir de 58 vous a-t-elle poussé à vous renseigner sur la question ?*

Sincèrement …. non !

33 – *La théorie du chaos vous a-t-elle intéressé, influencé ?*

Non.

34 – *Pour quelle raison n'avez-vous pas essayé de travailler avec des programmes aléatoires mathématiques, qui sont censés imiter au mieux (sans pourtant y arriver complètement) le hasard ?*

Pour moi, la qualité nécessaire et suffisante pour un système utilisant le hasard c'est qu'il travaille absolument, clairement, simplement sans moi. Même si l'on s'aperçoit, un jour, que les décimales de π ne sont pas aléatoires, même si dans les chiffres pris sur un annuaire téléphonique il y avait certaines répétitions dont je ne m'étais pas aperçu, cela m'est égal. Alors pourquoi appeler un spécialiste ?

Humour

35 – *Quand et dans quelles circonstances le lien s'est-il clairement et explicitement établi dans votre travail entre art et humour ?*

Quand en 1953 j'ai peint les *"16 carrés"* (3 lignes verticales, 3 lignes horizontales) c'était, je crois, une provocation légère, un rien du tout, un vide, mais solidement construit, sans transcendance, mais sans une dérision déclarée. En revanche, mon *"arc de cercle brisé"* de 1954, minimalisme mis à part, était l'opposé des *"16 carrés"*. La courbe a été dessinée sans symétrie sur les 4 tableaux, bord à bord, puis les tableaux ont été séparés, laissant apparaître le mur. Si bien que le tout apparaît comme une erreur. C'est un humour, un peu iconoclaste, vis-à-vis de ceux pour qui les figures géométriques sont des images saintes. Mes superpositions de trames que je préfère, celles absolument homogènes, étaient pour moi une façon légère et humoristique d'arriver, avec les mêmes éléments que ceux des constructions sérieuses, à un quasi monochrome. Dans les années du GRAV 60-68, mon "non sérieux" a pu être, même, un peu appuyé, comme mes néons avec programmation aléatoire, poétique géométrique, qui généraient des figures géométriques et les mots "*cul, con, non, nul"*. Ou mes "*reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur"*, ou mon *"bonbons, flash, klaxon"* etc. L'humour a été comme le hasard, intermittent mais jamais très loin.

36 – *Pourquoi l'humour, qui est une des formes que Dada prend en vous, a-t-il ensuite (c'est-à-dire encore aujourd'hui) occupé tant de place ?*

Etant donné mon tempérament de rigoureux rigolard j'ai été amené, par le premier qualificatif, à accepter de faire partie des artistes qui utilisent des figures géométriques qui sont en majorité sérieux, puritains, croyants, et le second qualificatif me pousse à rappeler que je ne suis ni sérieux, ni puritain et absolument incroyant. Et puis j'affirme que tout ce qui est sérieux est une affirmation et que je déteste … les affirmations !

37 – *Il n'est pas difficile de comprendre pourquoi, à première vue, l'humour peut sembler en contradiction avec le hasard: en effet peu de choses sont aussi liées à l'humain que l'humour, alors que le hasard en est probablement le plus éloigné. Envisagez-vous donc l'humour comme opposé au hasard, ou au contraire comme sa suite logique ? Le hasard peut-il à votre avis engendrer l'humour ? Existe-*

t-il un possible lien de cause à effet, à tout le moins un rapport privilégié, entre ces deux notions ?

C'est drôle ce que vous dites, car pour moi humour et hasard sont intimement liés. Pris de doute, j'ai cherché les définitions que mes deux dictionnaires, plus ou moins vieux et plus ou moins gros, donnent. Les deux définitions sont un peu différentes, mais me conviennent assez bien. Pour l'une, c'est "une forme d'esprit qui dissimule sous un air sérieux une raillerie cruelle, une situation absurde ou comique"; pour l'autre, il consiste à dénoncer "des non-sens et des incompatibilités dans ce qui paraît normal à tous". L'absurdité, le non-sens, le comique, ce sont des côtés du hasard que j'aime bien.

38 – *Au même titre que le hasard vous a sorti de la monotonie systématique, peut-on dire que l'humour a été une élégante solution pour vous extraire de l'objectivité pure (hasard et système) ?*

Bien sûr.

39 – *Pourrait-on retirer du retour de l'humour l'idée que même le hasard est une farce, que même le hasard n'est pas strict (manière de pensée et de faire éminemment dadaïste), et voir en lui le subtil minage d'une* hubris*, celle de détacher l'art de l'homme ?*

Oh oui ! Le hasard, du moins le mien, n'est pas sérieux. Oui, je suis plus dadaïste que philosophe professionnel. Et, sans bien savoir ce qu'est une *"hubris"*, pourquoi pas l'encourager à détacher l'art des hommes avant, comme c'est probable, qu'ils ne s'exterminent eux-mêmes ?

Le pique-nique

40 – *Vous avez souvent expliqué que vos œuvres ne voulaient rien dire. En même temps, n'étant pas un dictateur, vous avez créé la "théorie du pique-nique" qui semble faire écho à cette maxime de Rosset: " il n'y a pas de délire d'interprétation, puisque toute interprétation est un délire." Certains critiques ont vu dans cette théorie un clin d'œil ironique – dadaïste – à ce besoin de l'homme pour l'établissement d'un sens à toutes choses. Le pique-nique du spectateur vous*

concerne-t-il lorsque vous voyez des tableaux d'autres artistes ? Et envisagez-vous davantage votre théorie comme un doigt pointé vers l'abus interprétatif ou comme la tranquille acceptation d'une caractéristique humaine indélébile ?

Ma théorie du pique-nique est la plus sérieuse de mes plaisanteries et, en tout cas, elle est beaucoup plus que "la tranquille acceptation d'une caractéristique humaine indélébile". Je suis persuadé que l'ambiguïté est ce qui caractérise en premier une œuvre d'art, à la différence de tous les messages clairs qui, d'ailleurs, peuvent eux-mêmes devenir de l'art si on les brouille. Les intentions de l'artiste comptent peu. Au début du XX^{eme} siècle, une grande partie des jeunes artistes occidentaux d'"avant garde" ont été passionnés et profondément influencés par des sculptures africaines. Il a fallu attendre des décennies pour que l'on cherche à savoir pour qui et pour quoi ces œuvres avaient été faites. Les tapas océaniens m'ont fait découvrir la répétition et le all-over, et ce n'est que 50 ans après que j'ai lu une documentation les concernant et où j'ai appris, par exemple, qu'ils étaient réalisés uniquement par des femmes.

Les œuvres de Mondrian ont été pour moi des chefs-d'œuvre jouant merveilleusement avec le vertige du vide. Aussi quand, longtemps après, j'ai lu ses textes, j'en ai conclu, ironiquement, qu'il n'avait rien compris à ce qu'il faisait. Aux pique-niqueurs d'élite, un monochrome, au bon moment, peut suffire. Aux pique-niqueurs modestes, à la culture populaire, un symbole appuyé et clair sera sûrement préférable.

Ma démarche (comme celle consciente ou inconsciente des artistes en général) consisterait à attirer des amateurs (qui me ressemblent plus ou moins) dans une situation telle (ce n'est pas facile !) qu'ils soient poussés à déballer leur pique-nique (ou délirer comme dirait Rosset) sur mes œuvres.

Dans le cas où ils ne me ressemblent pas du tout et qu'ils délirent quand même, je trouve ça encore plus gratifiant. De toute façon, comme disait Marcel Duchamp, le sens de l'œuvre c'est le regardeur qui le donne.