1 Caution

'One feature, the most distinctive of all, pits contemporary civilization against those that have preceded it: *speed*. The metamorphosis occurred in the space of a single generation,' the historian, Marc Bloch, noted in the 1930s.

This situation involves a second feature in turn: *the accident*. The gradual spread of catastrophic events not only affects the reality of the moment but causes anxiety and anguish for generations to come.

From incidents to accidents, from catastrophes to cataclysms, everyday life has become a kaleidoscope where we endlessly bang into or run up against what crops up, *ex abrupto*, out of the blue, so to speak . . . And so, in this broken mirror, we need to learn how to clearly make out what crops up more and more frequently and, more to the point, more and more rapidly, in an untimely fashion, perhaps even simultaneously.

Faced with this state of affairs in an accelerated temporality that affects customs and moral standards and art every bit as much as the politics of nations, one thing stands out as being of the utmost urgency: to expose *the accident in Time*.

Turning on its head the threat of the unexpected, the surprise, becomes a subject for a thesis and the natural disaster, the subject of an exhibition within the framework of instantaneous telecommunications.

As Paul Valéry explained in 1935: 'In the past, when it came to novelty, we had hardly ever seen anything but solutions to problems or answers to questions that were very old, if not age-old . . . *But novelty for us now consists in the unprecedented*

nature of the questions themselves, and not the solutions, in the way these questions are asked and not the answers. Whence the general impression of powerlessness and incoherence that rules our minds.'[1]

This admission of powerlessness in the face of the surging up of unexpected and catastrophic events forces us to try to reverse the usual trend that exposes us to the accident in order to establish a new kind of museology or museography: one that would now entail exposing the accident, all accidents, from the most banal to the most tragic, from natural catastrophes to industrial and scientific disasters, without avoiding the too often neglected category of the happy accident, the stroke of luck, the *coup de foudre* or even the *coup de grâce*!

Today, thanks to television, 'what survives is reduced to the event-instant, progress of all kinds converging on an inescapable problem which is the problem of perception and image.'[2]

Apart from the historic terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 and its broadcasting on a continuous loop on the television screens of the entire world, two recent events deserve to come in for some harsh analysis on this score. On the one hand, we have the revelation, *sixteen years too late*, of the damage done to eastern France through contamination from Chernobyl, about which those running the services tasked with sounding the alert in France declared in April, 1986: *'If we do detect anything, it will just be a purely scientific problem.'* On the other hand, we have the very recent decision of the Caen Memorial Peace Museum to import from the United States, as a symbolic object, an *atomic bomb* – an H-bomb – emblematic of the 'balance of terror' during the Cold War between East and West.

Apropos, and reworking the dismissive remark of the French experts who covered up the damage done by the Chernobyl accident, we might say: *'If we exhibit an atom bomb, it will just be a purely cultural problem,'* and on that note, throwing open the doors of the first Museum of Accidents.

They say *invention is merely a way of seeing*, of reading accidents as signs and as opportunities. If so, then it is merely high time we opened the museum to what crops up impromptu, to that 'indirect production' of science and the technosciences constituted by disasters, by industrial or other catastrophes.

According to Aristotle, 'the accident reveals the substance.' If so, then invention of the 'substance' is equally invention of the 'accident'. The shipwreck is consequently the 'futurist' invention of the ship, and the air crash the invention of the supersonic airliner, just as the Chernobyl meltdown is the invention of the nuclear power station.

Let's take a look now at recent history. While the twentieth century was the century of great exploits – such as the moon landing – and great discoveries in physics and chemistry, to say nothing of computer science and genetics, it would seem, alas, only logical that the twenty-first century, in turn, reap the harvest of this hidden production constituted by the most diverse disasters, *to the very extent that their repetition has become a clearly recognizable historical phenomenon*.

On this score, let's hear it again from Paul Valéry: 'The tool is tending to vanish from consciousness. We commonly say that its function has become automatic. What we should make of this is the new equation: consciousness only survives now as awareness of accidents.'[3]

This admission of failure then leads to a clear and definitive conclusion: 'All that is capable of being resumed and repeated is fading away, falls silent. *Function only exists outside consciousness.*'

Given that the declared objective of the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century was precisely the repetition of standardized objects (machines, tools, vehicles, etc.), in other words, famously *incriminated* substances, it is only logical today to note that the twentieth century did in fact swamp us with *mass-produced accidents one after the other*, from the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912 up to the Chernobyl

meltdown in 1986, to say nothing of the Seveso chemical plant disaster of 1976 or of the Toulouse fertilizer factory disaster of 2001.

And so serial reproduction of the most diverse catastrophes has dogged the great discoveries and the great technical inventions like a shadow, and, unless we accept the unacceptable, meaning allow the *accident* in turn to become *automatic*, the urgent need for an 'intelligence of the crisis in intelligence' is making itself felt, at the very beginning of the twenty-first century – an intelligence which *ecology* is the clinical symptom of, anticipating the imminent emergence of a philosophy of post-industrial *eschatology*.

Let's accept Valéry's postulate: if consciousness only survives now as *awareness of accidents*, and if nothing functions except outside consciousness, the loss of consciousness about accidents as well as major disasters would not only amount to unconsciousness but to madness – the madness of deliberate blindness to the fatal consequences of our actions and our inventions. I am thinking in particular of genetic engineering and the biotechnologies. Such a situation would then mean embracing the swift reversal of *philosophy* into its opposite – in other words, the birth of *philofolly*, a love of what was repressed as radically unimaginable, unthinkable, whereby the insane nature of our acts would not only stop consciously worrying us, but would thrill us and captivate us.

After the *accident in substances*, we would see the fatal emergence of the *accident in knowledge*, which computer science could well be a sign of, due to the very nature of its indisputable 'advances' but also, by the same token, due to the nature of the incommensurable damage it does.

In fact, if 'the accident is the appearance of a quality of something that was hidden by another of its qualities,'[1] then the invention of industrial accidents in (land, sea, air) transport or of post-industrial accidents, in the fields of computers and genetics, would be the appearance of a quality too long hidden by the poor progress of 'scientific' knowledge compared to the sheer scope of 'spiritual and philosophical' knowledge, of the *wisdom* accumulated over centuries throughout the history of civilizations.

And so, the havoc wreaked by secular or religious ideologies, peddled by totalitarian regimes, is about to be outstripped by that wreaked by thought technologies that are likely to end, if we are not careful, in MADNESS, in an insane love of excess, as the suicidal nature of certain contemporary acts would tend to bear out, from Auschwitz right up to the military concept of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), to say nothing of the 'imbalance of terror' kickstarted in New York in 2001 by the suicide bombers of the World Trade Center.

Indeed, not to use weapons, military tools, any more but simple air transport vehicles to destroy buildings, and being prepared to die in the process, is to set up a fatal confusion between the terrorist attack and the accident and to use the 'quality' of the deliberate accident to the detriment of the quality of the aeroplane, as well as the 'quantity' of innocent lives sacrificed, thereby exceeding the bounds once set by ethics, religious or philosophical.

Actually, the *imperative of responsibility* for the generations to come requires that we now expose accidents along with the frequency of their industrial and post-industrial repetition.

This is the whole point of the exhibition at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain as well as its avowed aim. A test run or, more precisely, a prefiguration of a future Museum of the Accident, the exhibition aims first and foremost to take a stand against the collapse of ethical and aesthetic landmarks, that loss of meaning we so often witness now as victims much more than as actors.

After the exhibition on speed also organized by the Fondation Cartier over ten years ago, at Jouy-en-Josas, the

exhibition *Ce qui arrive*, from the Latin *accidens* (unknown quantity in English) hopes to act as a counterpoint to the outrages of all stripes that we are swamped with on a daily basis by the major media outlets, that museum of horrors that no one seems to realize precedes and accompanies the escalation of even bigger disasters.

In fact, as one witness to the rise of nihilism in Europe puts it: 'The most atrocious act is easy when the way leading up to it has been duly cleared.'[5]

By gradual habituation to insensitivity and indifference in the face of the craziest scenes, endlessly replayed by the entertainment markets in the name of some so-called freedom of expression that has morphed into the *freeing up of expressionism*, or even into an academicism of horror, we are succumbing to the ravages of a programming of outrageousness at all costs that leads, not to meaninglessness any more, but to the selling of terror and terrorism as heroism.

Much as the official art of the nineteenth century went out of its way to glorify the great battles of the past in its salons and wound up, as we know, in the mass slaughter of Verdun, at the very dawn of the twenty-first century, we look on, gobsmacked, at the attempts to promote artistic torture, aesthetic self-mutilation and suicide as an artform.[6]

It is, in the end, in order to escape this overexposure of the public to horror that the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain agreed to hold the exhibition, 'Unknown Quantity', organized by myself as an event aimed above all at keeping its distance from the outrages of every stripe with which current events are riddled.

Designed to raise the issue of the unexpected and of the lack of attention to major hazards, the exhibition manifesto endeavoured above all to pay homage to discernment, to *preventive intelligence*, at a time when threats of triggering a *preventive war* in Iraq abounded.

2 The Invention of Accidents

Creation or collapse, the accident is an unconscious oeuvre, an *invention* in the sense of uncovering what was hidden, just waiting to happen.

Unlike the 'natural' accident, the 'artificial' accident results from the innovation of a motor or of some substantial material. Whether the sinking of the *Titanic* or the eruption of the Chernobyl nuclear power station – emblematic catastrophes of the past century – the issue raised by the accidental event is not so much that of an iceberg surging up in the North Atlantic on a certain night in 1912, or that of a divergent nuclear reactor on a certain day in 1986. The issue is the building of an 'unsinkable' ocean liner or the setting up of an atomic power station close to residential zones.

In 1922, for instance, when Howard Carter stumbled across Tutankhamun's sarcophagus in the Valley of the Kings, he literally invented it. But when the Soviet 'liquidators' covered the faulty Chernobyl reactor with a different kind of 'sarcophagus', *they invented the major nuclear accident*, and this, only a few years after the one that had occurred at Three Mile Island in the United States.

So, just as Egyptology is one of the disciplines of historical discovery, in other words, of *archaeological invention*, analysis of the industrial accident ought to be seen as a 'logical art' or, more precisely, as an archaeotechnological invention.

An *art brut* in every sense of the term, but one we can't look at solely as an exception or, from the preventive angle, as a 'precautionary principle' alone. It has to be seen equally as a