

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, gob-smacked, 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

major work of unconscious scientific genius, the fruit of Progress and of the labour of mankind.

Note, on top of this, that if techniques are always streets ahead of the mentality of *users*, who need several years to get used to a new technology, they are also streets ahead of the mentality of *producers*, those engineers busily engineering the invention of engines – so much so that the mechanical unconscious once flagged by psychoanalysis here proves its validity as a *proof through absurdity* of the fatal recklessness of scientists when it comes to knowing about major risks.

‘There is no science of the accident,’ Aristotle cautioned a long time ago. Despite the existence of risk studies which assess risks, there is no *accidentology*, but only a process of fortuitous discovery, archaeotechnological invention. To invent the sailing ship or steamer is to *invent the shipwreck*. To invent the train is to *invent the rail accident* of derailment. To invent the family automobile is to produce the *pile-up* on the highway.

To get what is heavier than air to take off in the form of an aeroplane or dirigible is to *invent the crash*, the air disaster. As for the space shuttle, *Challenger*, its blowing up in flight in the same year that the tragedy of Chernobyl occurred is the *original accident* of a new motor, the equivalent of the first shipwreck of the very first ship.

An *indirect invention* of the breakdown of computer (or other) systems, look at the economic upheaval in the financial markets when suddenly, with the stockmarket crash, the hidden face of the economic sciences and technologies of automated dealing in values rears up, like the iceberg before the *Titanic*, only on Wall Street, in Tokyo and in London.

And so, if, for Aristotle some little time ago and for us today, *the accident reveals the substance*, this is in fact because WHAT CROPS UP (*accidents*) is a sort of analysis, a techno-analysis of WHAT IS BENEATH (*substance*) any knowledge.

It follows that fighting against the damage done by Progress above all means uncovering the hidden truth of our successes in this accidental revelation – in no way apocalyptic – of the incriminated substances.

Whence the urgent need, at the threshold of the third millennium, for public recognition of this type of innovation that comes and feeds off every technology, as the twentieth century never ceased stunningly demonstrating.

On this score, too, *political ecology* cannot long go on sweeping under the carpet the *eschatological* dimension of the calamities caused by the positivist ideology of Progress.

So the *dromologue*, or, if you like, the analyst of the phenomena of acceleration, is consistent in thinking that if speed is responsible for the exponential development of the *artificial accidents* of the twentieth century, it is also every bit as responsible for the increased impact of *ecological accidents* (the sundry instances of pollution of the environment) as, let's say, the *eschatological calamities* that are looming with the very recent discoveries of genomics and biotechnologies.¹

Once upon a time the local accident was still precisely situated – as in the North Atlantic for the *Titanic*. But the global accident no longer is and its fallout now extends to whole continents, anticipating the *integral accident* that is in danger of becoming, tomorrow or the day after, our sole habitat, the havoc wreaked by Progress then extending not only to the whole of geophysical space, but especially to timespans of several centuries, to say nothing of the dimension *sui generis* of a ‘cellular Hiroshima’.

Actually, if the substance is *absolute and essential* (to science) and if the accident is *relative and contingent*, we can now identify the ‘substance’ at the *beginning* of specific fields of knowledge and the ‘accident’ at the *end* of the philosophical intuition that Aristotle and a few others pioneered.

Far from urging some ‘millenarian catastrophism’, there is no question here of making a *tragedy* out of an accident with

the aim of scaring the hordes as the mass media so often do, but only of finally taking accidents *seriously*.

Along the lines of the work of someone like Freud on our relationship to death and the impulse towards it, it is now a matter of scrupulously examining *our relationship to the end*, to all ends, in other words to finiteness.

'Accumulation puts an end to the impression of chance,' wrote Sigmund Freud, some time between 1914 and 1915. Indeed, after the twentieth century and the sudden *capitalization of tragedies and catastrophes of all kinds*, we really should draw up the bankruptcy report on a technoscientific Progress that the nineteenth-century positivists were so proud of.

Since those days the serial production of the wizards of business has literally *industrialized the artificial accident*, an accident whose once *artisanal* character most often expressed itself discreetly, even while *natural* accidents took on a cataclysmic dimension all of their own, with the exception of wars of annihilation.

If we take the realm of private car ownership, for example, the way the carnage on the highways has become commonplace is Freudian proof that the accumulation of traffic accidents largely puts an end to 'chance' – and the multiple security systems our vehicles are equipped with don't alter this fact one iota: in the course of the twentieth century, the accident became a heavy industry.

But let's get back to this psychoanalysis revelatory of 'substance' – in other words, what lies beneath technicians' knowledge. Techniques are always streets ahead of the mentalities of competent personnel in the area of innovation, as the essayist, John Berger, likes to claim, in any case (*In every creation, whether it involves an original idea, a painting or a poem, error always sits alongside skill. Skill is never presented on its own; there is no skill, no creative talent, without error*).² But this is because the accident is inseparable from *the speed with which it unexpectedly surges up*. And so this 'virtual speed' of the catastrophic surprise

really should be studied instead of merely the 'actual speed' of objects and engines fresh off the drawing board.

Just as we need to protect ourselves (at any cost) from *excess in real speed* by means of breaks and automated safety systems, we have to try and protect ourselves from *excess in virtual speed*, from what unexpectedly happens to 'substance', meaning to what lies *beneath* the engineer's awareness as producer.

This is the 'archaeotechnological' invention itself, the discovery evoked above.

In his *Physics*, Aristotle remarks at the outset that it is not Time as such that corrupts and destroys, but what crops up (*accidents*). So it is indeed *the passage of Time*, in other words the speed with which they crop up that achieves the ruin of all things, every 'substance' being, in the end, *a victim of the accident in the traffic circulation of time*.

That being the case, it's all too easy to imagine the havoc wreaked by the accident in Time, with the instantaneity of the *temporal compression* of data in the course of globalization, and the unimaginable dangers of the synchronization of knowledge.

And so, the 'imperative of responsibility' evoked by Hans Jonas really ought to be applied, in the first place, to the need for a new intelligence or understanding of the *production of accidents*, this reckless industry that the 'materialist' scientist refuses to think about, even though the 'military-industrial complex' bombarded us, throughout the entire past century, with the sudden militarization of the sciences, most notably, the fatal invention of weapons of mass destruction and a thermonuclear bomb capable of extinguishing all life on the planet.³

In fact, the *visible speed* of the substance – that of the means of transport, of computing, of information – is only ever the tip of the iceberg of the *invisible speed* of the accident. This holds true just as much for road traffic as for the traffic of values.

If you need convincing, all you have to do is look at the very latest stock exchange crashes, the successive burstings of the speculative bubbles of the single market in a financial system that is now interconnected or has gone on-line.

Faced with this state of affairs, very largely catastrophic for the very future of humanity, we have no choice but to take stock of the urgent need for making perceptible, if not visible, the speed with which accidents surge up, plunging history into mourning.

To do this, apart from searching in vain for some black box capable of revealing the parameters of the contemporary disaster, we have to try *as fast as possible* to define the flagrant nature of disasters peculiar to new technologies. And we have to do this using scientific expertise, of course, but also a philosophical and cultural approach that would wash its hands of the *promotional expressionism* of the promoters of materials, since, as Malraux said, 'culture is what made man something more than an accident in the Universe.'

3 The Accident Argument

Progress and disaster are two sides
of the same coin.

Hannah Arendt

Lately, as though an accident was now an *opinion*, a privilege granted to chance to the detriment of error or the desire to do harm, the accident argument has become one of the mass media's pet themes, flagging, by this very fact, the confusion now creeping in between sabotage and breakdown, on the one hand, and between the suicide bombing mission and the industrial or other accident, on the other.

Actually, the unprecedented increase in the number of catastrophes since the start of the twentieth century and right up to the present day when, for the first time, 'artificial' accidents have outstripped 'natural' accidents, makes everyone aware that they have to choose, meaning opt, for one or the other version of whatever calamity might be under way. Whence the weirdly academic expression: the accident argument.

And so, since the end of the past century, disruption – fracture – has gradually become a matter of conjecture and no longer, exactly, an unexpected surprise, causing the very term 'accident' to shed its classical philosophical meaning, which it has enjoyed since Aristotle.

Suddenly, an accident is no longer unexpected, it turns into a rumour, a priori scandalous, in which the presupposition of a fault tends to outpace anything involuntary or, conversely,