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Serendipia: migración como oportunidad

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ANTJE VON GRAEVENITZ: 'Lucky chance' as partner of the artist. Serendipity in Modern Art

Abstract:

Como decía Picasso "iYo no busco, encuentro!", el método de serendipia en el arte es una cuestión de encontrar, sobre todo fortuita. Algo que se podría determinar como un método, una estrategia o un motivo en la creación de una obra de arte podría llevar a una nueva intención para la creación de arte en general. Lo que atrapa al ojo aparece como una epifanía. La pregunta es si la suerte en el arte se puede comparar con una serendipia o si es la casualidad la que conduce en el arte al hallazgo fortuito. Por otra parte, el observador asume un papel importante: los artistas siempre han querido darle un rol creativo; la serendipia se lo retribuye a través de su participación. El observador también debería 'encontrar' algo en el arte, algo siempre imprevisto pero descubierto como iluminación.

'When you travel you have a story to tell' (Wenn einer eine Reise tut, so kann er was erzählen) wrote the Romantic poet Mathias Claudius - in particular one may tell about unexpected events that one has experienced happily.1 Travels of an artist can sometimes lead to surprising results. Picasso for example painted three (pink) graces in Dutch costume with their typical bonnets when he travelled north in 1905. He must have been very astonished to meet the Dutch girls and all of a sudden to discover them as the mythological group of girls, daughters of Zeus which were always scultured as gracious leaning together. Picasso transformed the mythical theme in a humurous way into an ethnographical one and painted the three girls in their Dutch costumes. As many artists of Picasso's time, he was suddenly interested in a motif of which he didn't know anything before. Painting mythical and ethnographical themes was previously strange to him. He brought the two things together, a kind of sacrilege of his time. For this case of finding the unexpected on your way, which might have consequences for you, the term serendipity is un common. But until now, not so much for the arts. It is therefore exciting to look for examples. Certainly Piasso did not travel to North-Holland to meet the three graces, he found them. But the Dutch painter Bart van der Leck on the other hand travelled to Algeria on an assignment from his benefactor to inspect a coalmine for him. He came for his subject: the coalmine. As it so happens, he all of a sudden saw at the entrance to the mine a construction that

¹ First sentence of the poem "Urians Reise in die Welt." In: Claudius, Matthias: Der Mond ist aufgegangen. Frankfurt a.M., Leipzig 1998, p. 161.

would become a decisive image for him composed by a triangle of beams and crossbeams, which he painted in endless variations (Minetriptych nr.4, 1916). This, too, happened in terms of serendipity because it had far reaching consequences or his further career as an artist. It brought him to a kind of half-abstract art within the Stijl-movement, next to far more abstract working artists like Mondrian and Van Doesburg. The title 'Minetriptych' may be ambiguous, in the sense of a mine, and of 'of me'. Van der Leck knew that he had assimilated something new and constructive to art already in 1916, three years before the Stijl-group was established. These two cases of Picasso and Van der Leck are typical examples of Serendipity: the lucky chance from which the right conclusions are drawn. They were eye-catching and afterwards eye-openers. Both artists found something unexpected by the side of the road, so to speak, that had fruitful consequences.

The perfect art work as 'trouvé'

Might it be possible to use the unexpected as a sincerely used method of an artist to make art, or would this strategy be in conflict with the rules of serendipity? This question asks for an example to be analysed. It would totally depend on a pedestrian which direction the American artist Vito Acconci would follow in his home town New York. In 1969 he just followed any arbitrarily selected passanger on a street until he or she would disappear into a building. That was the only rule in this ritual of the socalled body art performance. Acconci surrendered the complete control over the work to an unknown person. So what was serendipity in this case? Everything that happened during this Action called 'Following Piece' - part of his series Street Work IV, was unexpected; the intentions of the person that was followed were unknown, and he even was unaware of being followed as well. It was as if one were letting the unknown person determine the way in which the work was made and its end-result. What would she do? Who would he meet? Buy what? How does he get through the rain? Turn onto which street? Would it lead to an exciting end? The work of Serendipity remained invisible, and it depended completely upon the unexpected, the unforeseen. Acconci found it during his walk as if it in priciple and in its concrete realization was a unexpected gift by the passerby.

The examples I gave thus far are representative of a certain kind of Serendipity: the artists were travelling or simply walking. They had a plan (1) that they carried out; they opened themselves up the unforeseen (2); and (3) they used it for the creation of a work of art. In other words, they incorporated the unexpected in their work. A prime example is Picasso's dictum: "I do not search, I find."² This finding may have been his method, but there was nevertheless always a plan, for he often expected to find the unexpected. This intention of expectation was always part of the search.

Can serendipity be used for an art-making strategy?

Instead of the word 'travel' or 'plan' notions such as 'strategy' or 'intention' can be put at the beginning of the creative process. And also terms like 'openness' for the unexpected, intuition and finally the ability to use what was found, to translate it and incorporate it in one's own work. In all this, the artist is nearing the first form of serendipity.

In art this first form can be found in almost every category: Jackson Pollock was after the lucky chance in a technically sophisticated form of dripping paint on a canvas. He put a canvas on the floor and the dripping and splashing on dotted lines in an overall-structure, that did not allow a hierarchy of forms, was now a much simpler method. The result we see now is an unexpected mesh, a grid of winding paths of paint, as in the 1950 painting 'Autumn Rhythm', which is totally open to any way of interpretation. It is no wonder, then, that these painting were called "Iteneraries": the viewer can decide for himself what he wants to see, how he wishes to see. With our eyes we follow the lines, behind or in front of others, in waves or over uninterrupted distances.

This method already had a certain tradition, because – concerning the method in a principal way only - Leonardo da Vinci did not do things very differently. Looking for the best possible contours, he would draw a Madonna, some babies, a cat several times in quick succession, so to speak in a ball of yarn, quite chaotically. In these lines he then found the perfect drawing. In the case of the babies that means: they were born – as a drawing. What makes this so special is that he did not plan the perfect line in his head as was the ideal of the 'Divine Artist' and then put his pen to paper and draw this only possible line. No, Leonardo was looking for the ideal line in a chaos of lines while drawing. In Leonardo's Renaissance that would have been a kind of blasphemy, because a real 'Divine Artist' should first plan his line in his spirit as a perfect contour and not by sketching scrawls on paper.³

² In 1926 Picasso wrote: "On me prend d'habitude pour un chercheur. Je ne cherche pas, je trouve." In: Parmelin, Hélène: Picasso dit...Paris 1980, p. 20.

³ Wiemers, Michael: Bildform und Werkgenese. Studien zur zeichnerischen Bildvorbereitung in der italienischen Malerei zwischen 2450-1490. München 1995.

Participation

Participation of non-artists – such as the public – in a work of art has been an issue for quiet some time now. On his so-called 'Small Glass' of 1918 (I donot mean his 'Large Glass') Marcel Duchamp for example had left a peep-hole through which the viewer should look at the world for a whole hour, as the artist prescribed, in his own manner as the artist himself could not have anticipated. Control and lack of control were the work's crucial points; the work bore the title: "a regarder (l'autre côte du verre) d'un oeil de près, pendant prèsque une heure".⁴ It was perhaps asking a bit too much of the viewer, but the conditions for serendipity were there, the artist's concept would guarantee that. He might have got the insight, that is own view now belonged to the art-work and that this would enlighten his theory what art in fact should be about.

Chance versus serendipity

There is more. Chance played a major role now in art. This little emptiness in the work had to adopt every meaning that the onlooker was prepared to give to it. A void, however, does not mean emptiness: the viewer will be able to recognize this. But chance is not completely identical with serendipity, at least when we use the definition of Horace Walpole – theoretician, cosmopolite and writer – that he formulated in a letter of 1754.⁵ It must be a lucky result or an unwanted and unexpected product that is more or less the outcome at the fringes of a deliberate process or act, when you originally have been in search of something else. It is true that chance might play a role in cases of serendipity, too. But there is a very important difference between both of the definitions: chance and serendipity: Chance plays a role as a category, as an overriding absolute principle, which can have a good or a bad effect, while serendipity must always have a lucky effect in the end. And at least, as art is good in principle, so serendipity in art, of course, must have a good quality.

In the beginning there might be chance, but this fact could lead to a lucky consequence, which opens one's mind up to a very serious insight, the important access of a new involvement in art.

This occurs when there is no plan at the beginning, but only pure chance. Wassily Kandinsky for example saw quite by chance in 1910 a picture by

⁴ Shambroom, Donald: Leonardo's Optics Trough the Eyes of Duchamp: A Note on the Small Glass. In: Notes. Tout-fait. The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal. Vol 1/Issue 2 May 2000, p.1.

⁵ The Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Oxford. Vol 3. 1753-1759 (Richard Bentley) London 1846 (letter 1754); Walpole found this term serendipity after he read the old fairytale of the "Three princes of Sarandib" by the Persian author Amir Khusraws.

Claude Monet 'Haystack near Giverny' (1891) at an exhibition. Kandinsky did not know the image. At first he was disappointed about the quasi non-figurativeness and of the vaguely painted work; soon, however, he understood that it was not about the figuration of it but about the 'sound' of the forms, lines and colours that had become detached from the image itself.⁶ For Kandinsky this understanding brought him in 1910 to the birth of abstract art. In itself, Kandinsky felt, abstract painting was not valid enough. Only in the mind of the viewer, participating in his work, his kind of painting would create inaudible sounds and enable a universal participation in a synaesthetic way towards the "spiritual in art", as he called it. Kandinsky had found just by chance a solution and key to his entire future art.

In other forms of art pure chance might lead to a solution: the discovery of the collage, for example, that Hannah Höch and Kurt Schwitters made and valued highly. Two artists that lived years later discovered the technique for themselves again. Actually, it was the American artist Brian Gysin who claimed to be the inventor of the collages entitled "The Third Mind" as he used to have layers of newspapers lying on his table at the Beat Hotel in Paris, the former "No-name-Hotel" in the 9 rue Git le Coeur in Paris, where he and the writer William Burroughs lived around 1960 in different rooms. They were just collages, or cut-ups as they were called then, due to the fact that Gysin inspired Burroughs already just before in Tanger to make use of cut-ups for his boek "Naked Lunch" and due to the fact that the pages of the manuscript of this highly experimental novel was already found in Burroughs' room in Tanger in complete desolation, lying spread around on the table and on floor in a mess with food, excrements, sperm-stains and drugs on them. When Gysin cut some articles or illustrations out of these fragmented newspapers with a razorblade or a Stanley-knife, all of a sudden new and different information or stories would be neighbours. In this time in Paris around 1960, both friends even started to produce scrap-books as a sort of atlas with cut-ups, almost glued together by pur chance. Three of these books of their collaboration were made, from 1963 onwards to 1972. According to Gysin these books inspired the birth of their series "The Third Mind",⁷ starting in 1965 of iconographic material, inspired by themes as natural disasters, criminals and violence in big cities and the death of the mafia-boss Dutch Schultz about drugs and the effect on the disorientated mind by texts etc., also drugs

⁶ Hahl-Koch, Jelina: Kandinsky. Stuttgart 1993, p. 37/38.

⁷ Graevenitz, Antje von: "The Third Mind" of William S. Burroughs and Brian Gysin. In: Hibbard, Allan & Barry Tharaud (ed.s): Bowles/Beats/Tanger. Performing Tangier 2008. Tangier/Marocco 2008, p. 139-146 (Series Conferences and Colloquia No. 5).

which might actually create "The Third Mind". The Third Mind, could this title not have been another name for serendipity?

Chance can also be lucky in photography. The story goes that Louis Daguerre found his special method – indeed now called daguerrotype – by pure chance. In 1837, after the death of Niépce (who invented the unfixed photograph), Daguerre found a method of duplicating photographs. Absentmindedly, Daguerre exposed a photograph to mercury vapour and left it there. After returning to his laboratory he saw to his great surprise that the picture was now fixed to the plate. He still remained making unique pictures, until he began appreciating the value of his new invention of duplication. This unexpected find happened to become one of the most lucky ones in the history of photography from which we still benefit the greatest cultural uses.

Until now serendipity here is just about the technical side of photography; it can also be about the picture itself, as the French philosopher Roland Barthes observed. One aspect on which a photographer is concentrated is what he wants to photograph, and this exactly is what Barthes called the 'studium'. This word characterizes the aim the photographer had in mind. But he can, later in the dark room, notice that something has been taken unwillingly on the sensitive material, something that was there in reality but was not part of the idea when the photograph was taken. This of course was in the days of analog photography. Nowadays, photoshopping can alter an image completely. But old-school photography, on which Barthes was theorizing in 1980 when he wrote his 'Camera Lucida', could contain details by pure chance that were unwanted and unexpected, but for the spectator they still were telling. For these unexpected details, Barthes used the term 'punctum'. He wrote: "The second element will break (or punctuate) the studium...I shall therefore call punctum...A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me, also bruises me, is poignant to me."8 Here Serendipity is drawn close to the notion of the unconsciousness, and 'studium' towards the consciousness, the intention to create with a lens and in a laboratory a work of art in the first place. 'Studium' and 'punctum' are close on each other's heels, and in time hardly distinguishable, as in the age-old question of what comes first, the chicken or the egg. Barthes provides various illustrations to make his 'punctum' clear, but I don't think they are very convincing. A better example for me is this picture by the famous Malian photographer Sevdou Kaita (born 1921 in Mali and died in 2001 in Paris), which is untitled and was taken in 1956. Please look at the shoes of one of these two

⁸ Barthes, Roland: Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography. Translated by Richard Howard. London 1984, chapter 10 p. 27 (Orig.: Chambre claire. Paris 1980).

friends. The 'studium' of the photographer was surely the similarity of the patterned dresses in front of an also patterned background, quite clearly remembering paintings by Matisse. The shoes of the lady on the right do not seem to be matching. The toe of her left shoe, that only just comes from underneath her dress, seems to be white, and the other one seems more coarse and undecorated. Such a difference is to me as a viewer in complete accordance with what Barthes called 'punctum'; it is a lucky chance, but it says something more. In a socio-political context it says something about an elderly and poor woman who could not afford a fitting pair of shoes and likely only dressed this way for this picture.

Undergoing serendipity in a rite of passage

In particular this difference of what you as a viewer of visitor of artmanifestations imagined to get from an artwork and what you all of a sudden, completely unexpectedly would really get, goes as well for the artform happening for which Allan Kaprow in America and a little later Wolf Vostell in Germany developed a theory and gave examples. Kaprow stated in 1959 in his "eleven rules for the game" that "you can steer clear of art by mixing up your happening with life situations. Make it unsure even to yourself if the happening is life or art."9 In a kind of 'coup de théâtre des participateurs' a series of playful activities were planned by happening-artists from 1959 onwards in which the visitors did not know beforehand what to expect and in what sort of calamities they would be involved. In a so-called Superhappening entitled "In Ulm, for Ulm, around Ulm", that lasted for 24 hours, Vostell led the participators in various new situations, in a slaughterhouse, or on an airfield next to a starting aeroplane. They had to cope with all kinds of unexpected situations. The resulting shock would lead to a new level of consciousness. Out of compassion or fear political conclusions could be drawn. This strategy employs in fact that of a rite of passage: you as a visitor of this art-manifestation would undergo a seperation (of the normal situation of yourself), transition (the completely unexpected) and the reintegration as another person (the consequence of your findings). Playfulness and seriousness were very close to each other. An example of this proximity of play and reality is the work of the contemporary theoretician of serendipity Pek van Andel, a Dutch philosopher and ophthalmologist, who received the alternative Nobel prize: for serendipity, play and earnestness are identical.¹⁰

⁹ Kaprow: How to make a Happening. Side 1 Nr. 2. (1968) In: Primary Information 2009; Schilling, Jürgen: Aktionskunst. Identität von Kunst und Leben? Eine Dokumentation. Luzern, Frankfurt a.M. 1978, p. 60 ff.

¹⁰ van Pek, Andel and Wim Brands: Serendipiteit, de ongezochte vondst. Amsterdam 2014.

Chance versus Randomness

Now the question remains whether art historyis, generally speaking, an art history of serendipity itself, since it has opened up around 1800 for the chance processes in art, is really generally speaking an art history of serendipity itself? Is there an art as chance, is there really a serendipity art? We have to keep in mind that there are two kinds of chance in art: as pure chance and as randomness.

First: Chance

Since about 1800 artists and scientists began to get interested in investigating the properties of a stain on paper. It appeared that a stain had auto-poetical characteristics that were not deliberately made by an artist or maker. Enthusiastically, stains were bred, looked at in amazement and analysed. The stain was the most innocent and the most un-academic product of all artistic creations, although the image of the innocent artist as a creative child was a popular theme since the Roccoco period in the middle of the 18th Century. But only at the end of the 18th century the image got its romantic overtones. Similarities between stains and forms of clouds in the sky were noticed, forms that were equally ephemeral and not humanmade. As one of the first artist the English painter Alexander Cozens saw the similarity between stains and clouds and he began designing series of cloud images on paper as if they were half autonomous stains and autopoetical gestures wth the brushes. That was his farewell to the cult of the Romantic genius.

But only in the 20th century a supporting artistic theory in this sense was formulated. Hans Arp for example threw little black and white and coloured sticks in the air and when they dropped onto a flat sheet (paper or canvas) he glued them onto it. Pure chance was the creator, not the hand of an artist. In this way he said farewell to any artistic geniality, in the same way that poets like Mallarmé and Apollinaire had learned from the role of pure chance in poetry. As also Albert Einstein said that God did not throw dice, the purpose of all this was to emphasize the role of chance in the creative process, and thereby minimize and even eliminate a 'divine' principle while making art. In its place art was exposed to unexpected and uncontrollable forces of nature.

Now the question arises if one can recognize in Arp's reliefs that he indeed had worked with a process of chance. One cannot decide this by perception. He could have made his compositions deliberately, in the old fashioned way. This comes to mind rather often when dealing with compositions created by chance. If it doesn't look having been made by chance, the work may perhaps be a kind of fake-chance. This is the impression one gets sometimes, when one sees works by Daniel Spoerri in which he glued the left-overs from a meal onto a carrier (table-top, canvas). He called them Fall-images (Fallenbilder), as if they were made in the same manner as Arp made his reliefs. Although Spoerri mentioned these leftovers in his book "Anecdoted Topography of Chance" there is a possibility that he always manipulated these images: That particular cigarette butt, for example, might never have been left on that particular plate after the meal. Maybe the artist himself put it there using glue. We as viewers can never be certain about what Spoerri did or did not do, even if he really just fixated what his table guests left behind. Was it all pure chance that could not be controlled?¹¹

Second: Randomness

The previous question about the role whether pure chance or manipulation played a role in creating a work is not going to be asked in the second category. This consists of a sort of work that was created by using a chance generator. Such kind of work is called Random-Art and depends on the use of dice or - in this digital era - a computer. In November 1968 in a special edition of the magazine 'studio international' the English art critic Jasia Reichardt identified Random Art for the first time.¹² The title of the edition had the word 'serendipity' in it, as she called it: "Cybernetic Serendipity. The Computer and the Arts." The focus was the uncontrollable aspect of computers in the artistic process; remarkable because computers were seen as instruments of control. However, art that looks as if it has been produced with the use of computers does not necessarily have to be that. A work by François Morellet of 1962 has tiny red or blue squares placed at random in a grid system. It looks as if a digital device was used, but far from it, Morellet used the telephone directory to determine each square's colour and position by even or odd numbers. Certainly: this work of art was the result of random-processes in the sense that the unexpected gives you a new insight for further enlightnment? Does it widen your perspective? What exactly is 'serendipitous' about this for the viewer? Is it a lucky chance? The eyes wander around the image, but cannot catch it at once. The field of little squares makes it impossible to 'have it in mind". You are always 'outside' of the artwork. The same goes for Morellet's Line-fields, with very small variations in a grid of lines. They can be put in some kind of order, but our eyes constantly rearrange them in

¹¹ Spoerri, Daniel: Topographie anécdotée du hasard. (Galerie Lawrence) Paris 1962. (English: Anecdoted Topography of Chance; German: Anekdoten zu einer Topographie des Zufalls. Ed. Nautilus Hamurg 1998).

¹² Reichardt, Jasia (ed.): Cybernetic Serendipity. The Computers and the Arts. In: Studio international. Special Issue. London 1968.

ever changing patterns and groups. They can never be fixed in on place, because our eves always form different groups include one circle and exclude another. We are unable to point at some really constructed forms, because there are none. There are endless possible connections, even undetermined: the work is an ever shifting source of experience and perception. Chaos is seen as a game and end-product. What Max Bense computer and art theorist - wrote already in 1970 seems to fit rather wonderfully: "Thus the surprise of 'random-art' depends on a disturbance, and not on an imitation or abstraction, and not on an illusion or an ideal. The sign, the line on the sheet of paper, must accept the possibility of an injury, as an ice skater must accept a weak spot on the ice. Interruptions, reversals, mis-creations, inundations, panic, stubborn-nesses, mix-ups, rising, falling, set-backs and injuries [...] Man in a new and altered level of consciousness. Advanced and more quick. Also consciousness has been affected. And this has deeply influenced the results and the producing."13 While Bense compared this art with ice-skating, Morellet was thinking about a picnic: a viewer would spread the elements of his perception as if he/she was spreading the contents of his picnic hamper, never the same order, always new and always different. Small wonder, then, that Morellet as member of the Groupe de Recherches d'art visuel (GRAV), saw his playing with the eyes as a metaphor for democracy: in a democracy all kinds of groups will form at random, each member having the same kind of interest and each being part of this mobile arrangement. This is what the viewer of Morellet's work experiences: no hierarchy, as a complete serendipity. Undetermination through an ever changing order becomes a happy discovery. Something along these lines was what Umberto Eco stated in his 1962 book "Opera aperta"¹⁴ or "the open artwork", and also what Mieke Bal - a Dutch art theorist - wrote in her book in 2013 "Endless Andness"¹⁵ stating that it is not art's beauty that will be found at the side of the road, but the ugly, the impure, the negative, a loss of the fixed order as some clarity and continuity that can be thought of as positive, happy learning from something unexpected, from one's own discoveries, from the unintentional.

¹³ gBense, Max: Ästhetik und Engagement. Präsentantion ästhtischer Objekte. Köln, Berlin 1970, p. 56/57.

¹⁴ Eco, Umberto: Opera aperta. Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee. (Bompiano) Milano 1962. (Deutsch: Das offene Kunstwerk. Frankfurt a.M. 1962; Englische Ausgabe: The open Work. Transl. By Anna Cancogni. (Harvard University Press) Cambridge, Mass. 1989.)

¹⁵ Bal, Mieke: Endless Andness. The Politics of Abstraction According to Ann Veronica Janssens. (Bloomsbury Academic) London, Oxford, New York etc. 2013 (chapter about serendipity).

That result differs greatly from the art of pure chance: Random-art is an offer for the eye if perceptual disturbance and disorder, although the work itself seems to be made in a regularity of squares, lines, dots etc., which are disorderly put on a regular grid. The viewer might be able now to analyse the matter and think about the perceptual research. In this sense, the result for him is a lucky finding.

Apparently, the art of the "exquisite error", as one could define serendipity, has now also reached the general computer art, as the author Barry van der Rijt extablished in his book of that same title from 2015.¹⁶ As he was trying out all kinds of codes, he discovered by chance that a bad connection in a cable or error in the signal resulted in new unexpected colours in the images. He calls these images "codex error art". But now it really is the machine that produces the lucky chance, not the eye of the participating viewer as in the op-art work of Morellet.

What characteristics must the viewer or the artist possess if he/she wants to make such an accidental discovery? He/she must surely be capable of thinking wildly (quoting Claude Levi Strauss) that is, non-linear, not only planned and logic, but in contrast sensible, open and above all changeable, so that chance and accident can be happy ones. The previously invalid will become the fateful valid; the unnecessary will become necessary; an inclusion into the surprising results will take place in one's consciousness and one's acts. Something the eye did catch turns out to be the eye-opener. And with these mentionend characteristics we will encounter this happy chance in art.

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¹⁶ van der Rijt, Barry: The Exquisite Error. DMCO-I. (The Eriskay Connection) Breda 2015.

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