Notes to After Mallarmé Part 2

16 May – 15 June 2024

...contingency, the operator...

Michael Newman

Introduction

Stéphane Mallarmé's poem begins and ends with dice throws. 'UN COUP DE DÉS / JAMAIS /// N'ABOLIRA /////// LE HASARD' ('a dice-throw will never abolish chance') at the beginning and running through the pages in capitals like a headline; and, less often remembered '*Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés*' ('Every thought gives off a dice-throw') at the end.

The dice-throw can be thought in terms of two oppositions: chance/determinism; and contingency/necessity.

What is at stake here is the necessity of the poem - or work of art: that it cannot be otherwise than it is (as in the dictum that the slightest alteration would change it completely).

However the language of the poem and the material of the work of art is contingent. The relation of signifier to signified is arbitrary, and the material depends on circumstances. Mallarmé is working after the rupture or crisis that meant that the necessity of the poem could no longer derive from tradition or from a transcendent source.

If contingency cannot be overcome, then necessity can only come from the 'incorporation' of contingency itself, which is exactly what he does with *Un coup de dés*. Other than the arbitrariness of the signifier-signified relation, the contingency is not incorporated on the side of production (as it was to be later by John Cage), but on the side of reading. Through the way in which he uses the pages and the folds of the gutter, incorporating blank space, every single reading is 'un coup de dés', governed by chance and is contingent. That means that every reading is an event (which is, after all, a lesson for curators of art exhibitions).

If not in his poem, in his notes for '*Le Livre*' - The Book that was never written but never ceases to be written - Mallarmé did conceive a transformation of artistic production in his idea of the 'operator'. His crisis of the 1860s meant for him, ultimately, the end of the great author-creator modelled on the God as creator and ground of everything who was now dead. He wrote of 'the elocutionary disappearance of the author', from which Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault deduced 'the death of the author'. For them, as for Jacques Derrida, this also meant the end of the book, which would be replaced by infinite and endless text of which each work would be an instance or crossing point, ultimately contingent. Mallarmé, by contrast, held on in his notes to the idea of the Book, but transformed it, perhaps into something unrealisable.

One instance in his notes is what we would now call a 'book performance'. There is a moment when, in a place that could be a theatre, and '*operateur*' would place at random pages onto the shelves of a lacquer cabinet. The notes suggest a certain number of pages on each shelf - five - and a sequence of placings that would result in a symmetry amounting to a doubling or pair. Thus something - a book perhaps - may be posited as resulting from this procedure that is both contingent and necessary (random and rigorously ordered), but it is also clear that the Book is the performance itself, taking the form of a series of stoppages in performance.

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A number of questions remain. What is the relation between the one who invents this 'game' and the one who operates is? Is there still an author in this, or has the author-function been displaced and transformed so that we can no longer speak of a 'creator'? What is the relation between the different agencies that go to make a work of art (something that is currently being explored through human-machine and human-AI partnerships).

One thing is clear: with Mallarmé and after him the role of contingency in the work of art changes, and that this has retroactive effects on the tradition of art, and prospective effects on what art might become.

Peter Downsbrough

Peter Downsbrough shares with Mallarmé a proclivity for pairs - the pipes are almost always in twos. This creates an inbetween that establishes the irreducibility of relation, as well as generating spacing. Verticality may predominate, but not as an assertion of the One. It is in a sense a stroke or punctuation. The *Two Pipes (not random)* installed vertically on the wall 10 cms apart are symmetrical as well as instituting a repetition without priority - we cannot say which one is the repetition of the other. Their sameness is produced from difference, which gives priority to spacing which as a gerund is also a temporal modality. For Mallarmé the poem should attain a necessity - albeit a vanishing one - rather than being aleatory, the trace of chance procedures. That the *Two Pipes* are 'not random' implies a necessity, which seems to be immanent to their repetition.

Downsbrough's *Dice* also come in pairs. Three photographs - original prints - are included in Part 2. The dice are particular, in that on each face is either a blank or a word. The only word visible in one of the photos is 'USE'. It would be tempting to interpret this word according to the distinction between instrumental use and free use, a use that is used up, and a use which is 'pure means' without an end (Benjamin and Agamben). This in turn is already reflected in Mallarmé's distinction between journalistic language or language that gets used up in communication (he compares it to worn-down coinage) and poetic language. Speaking of Mallarmé, Downsbrough notes that the '*hasard*' that in Mallarmé is not abolished by the throw of the dice is also the name of a game, in English the game of 'hazard'. Although these days 'gamification' is instrumentalised, and game theory emerged out of war studies, we might say that there is also a sense - an original sense? - in which the game is for its own sake, so that the dice throw becomes a gesture as pure means, even more so in its hesitation.

The other dice in the photographs all show blank faces. We could see this as an equivalent of the blank page, or blank space, in Mallarmé, including notably in *Un coup de dés*. The page...the dice...the wall...the book. Downsbrough's dice photographs relate to his 1982 artist's book *IN PASSING* where the subtitle - if we can call it that, questioning what is inside and outside the book - continues across the pages as 'cut and move (or) a conversation'. Here we have photos of two hands, evidently of a man and a woman, and dice which have the normal numerical dots, as well as words and blank faces. The graphics also include squares and cubes - geometric dice schema - as well as words and 'X's. To read the book is to move through its space (For Downsbrough a book is a 3-D space or volume where the pages are like 2D walls of a room). We might even read *IN PASSING* as itself a reading and re-writing of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés* partly in the mode of a photo-roman.

Before the final picture of two dice showing blank faces (with a hint perhaps of a word on a face that we can't quite see), there is a picture that looks like a poster of a pointing hand, with above it the words 'CHOISIR, C'EST VIVRE' and below 'LA LIBRE ENTREPRISE POUR LA LIBERTE DE CHOISIR'. The hand is pointing towards 'entreprise'. At the bottom of the page

before are the words '..., some time spent one night in May.' The suggestion may be that by the 1980s the radical freedom asserted in the May 68 demonstrations and occupations has become the freedom of the consumer.

This poses the question of where a historical reading of 'hasard' in Mallarmé would lead. Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub in *Toute révolution est un coup de dés* (1977) film a performance reading of the poem as if at a picnic on the slope by the wall of the Père Lachaise cemetry in Paris where the revolutionaries of the 1870 revolution were executed. Mallarmé compared free verse with a bomb, and he certainly had knowledge of and possibly sympathy with anarchism. The name comes from the Greek 'an-arche', without ground or origin or authority. This takes us back to Mallarmé's acceptance of the condition of groundlessness that follows from his religious crisis. In a way the game is the best form of groundless artwork. These works that are 'readings' of Mallarmé devolve from the contingency of the poem, which is not only its relation to factual circumstances, but also the potential that it carries to be passed on in utterly unpredictable ways.

Joëlle Tuerlinckx

Potential is in the modality of perhaps. It may or may not be, it could become this or it could become that. For Part 2 Joëlle Tuerlinckx has added *Le Grand Peut-être* to the Large Glass *Atlas Room*, a bound stack of black paper on an aluminium pallet. Other titles she gives for it are 'The Black Atlas Room Leftover' and 'The Black Leftover'. What, we may ask, is the temporality of the 'leftover'. The most obvious suggestion is past, something left behind, unused, not taken up into the work. But it also implies the future, the leftovers could be used to make a future dish, become part of a new recipe. (That the paper is in Belgium butchers paper, used to wrap meat, suggests such metaphors.) Stacked on the pallet, the paper is very much a material for labour, drawing attention to the dimension of material labour, human work and the social relations entailed, that might combine with the potential of the paper itself to realise a work-to-come. 'The Great May-be' as Tuerlinckx translates it is both inside and outside the 'Atlas Room', both past and future. While the room might intimate the night sky, the inside of a camera obscura, and even catastrophe in its darkness (remember that in *Un coup de dés* the dice-throw comes out a shipwreck), the pallet of paper - an art historical evocation of the stacks and cubes of American minimalism - has a gross, comic, deflationary aspect, yet at the same time with its fastening of two eau de nile bands over brass plates, and the light rippling on its surface, it looks elegant and presentable. It will change with time as the corners curl, just as the Atlas Room itself is also ageing until the sheets are taken down to be folded into the folios of a book. If we read the inscriptions on the paper sheets on the wall, we see that not only do they refer to the features and infrastructure of the room of the installation, but also to work visible from it during Part 1, now replaced by another during Part 2. And of course in Part 3 the sheets will be taken down to be bound as the pages of the *Atlas Book*. The contingencies of material and place, together with the operations performed, are the temporal condition for the unfolding of the 'perhaps'.

Toby Christian

We see blue lines of what appear to be the traces of string that seem at once to be floating and absorbed into the unprimed linen surface. It looks as if the string is fraying and unravelling, joining yet coming apart at the same time. Shapes are formed which may be figures, on an edge between recognisability and disappearance. It seems to be calling to us, trying to tell us something, but what?

Toby Christian works in partnership with an AI that he calls the Stringer, developed by programmer Gabriel Stones. The Stringer has in its memory an archive of string figures or 'letters' of a string alphabet made by Christian. When a text is introduced to it, whether by reading aloud or as a file, the Stringer responds by selecting and transforming letters from this archive. On the screen a string figure emerges out of darkness, and grows in size as it is transforming. It is programmed in such a way that the string frays and uncoils as it is doing this. This figure moves towards the artist, until it becomes bigger than the screen can contain. Along the way Christian takes screen grabs - effectively 'stoppages' in the becoming of the string figure. These are printed onto tiled sheets of paper to the scale that Christian can engage with bodily. Over a sheet of linen on the floor, Christian places tiled sheets of carbon copy paper, and placing the paper with the string figure on that, goes over it with a stick with metal bearings of a type used to transfer tayloring patterns, so that the end rolls over the paper creating the pressure that transfers the figure from the blue copy paper onto the linen. The lines the Stringer provides form a guide for the movements of the artist's body rather than something to be copied, although there is a *mimesis* of a different kind involved, something like a con-forming of the body. During the process knee, elbow and hand might rest on the paper, producing shadowy imprints. The deposits merge into the linen as they dry. The linen is stretched, and, in this case, finished with a pink ribbon around the edge, creating a pink nimbus, which, as you stare, produces a purple-green complementary.

The speed of light of the digital meets slow time, so slow that it suggests the geologic, and indeed the hand prints are reminiscent of those in the palaeolithic caves, among the earliest images produced by human beings when, in the imprint human meets rock. The time of the work is thus anachronic, also because of the more proximate anachronism of the almost obsolete carbon paper, used to copy typewritten text through pressure. The figures have passed through a series of states, from pieces of string on card, to digital images as zeros and ones, to printout, to imprints that are traces of the pressure of the rhythmic movements of the body. Each adds the potential for further transformation.

For *Stringer study (Un coup de dés)* (2024) Christian gave the Stringer the English translation by E.H. and A.M. Blackmore several times, and chose the string configuration he thought the most interesting. This is then traced on unprimed linen through carbon copy paper. Done on the floor, in this case on a large scale of 90 x 120 cms, Christian leaned on his hand to reach parts of the surface, leaving handprints on the linen. Thus a work made in collaboration with our most advanced technology, so called 'Artificial Intelligence', recalls the very earliest human images made in the caves, which also involved a technology of blown pigment. Christian's use of patterns in string games like cat's cradle' and string figure-making in different cultures including Torres Strait Islanders, and in the Triobrand Islands, Papua New Guinea, where anthropologist Éric Vandendriessche observed that the activity 'consists in applying a succession of operations to the string, using mostly the fingers, and sometimes the wrists, mouth or feet. This succession of operations, which is generally performed by an individual and sometimes by two individuals working together, is intended to generate a final figure. The making of this figure is often accompanied by a song or a recitative (vinavina).' (https://journals.openedition.org/jso/7182) As Vandendriessche has shown, string figures are also used as mathematics in oral cultures. The string configurations produced by the Stringer as responses to texts - it can also be questions - may be compared to an oracle in Ancient Greece, whether enigmatic language emitted at Delphi, or entrails to be read, or the flight of birds. The 'constellation' towards the end of Mallarmé's poem is another such, it's 'perhaps' indicating both its evental character and state of potential.

It is notable that Christian treats the Stringer not as a tool or instrument, in the sense of something that would be subservient to his aims, but rather as a companion. This does not

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necessarily involve anthropomorphising the Stringer which is not in any sense made to resemble a human. Its possibility lies in it being other than human, so that what it produces cannot be decoded accorded to intentions. Here AI meets magic. From E. Evans-Pritchard's book *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande People* Christian learned of the ways the Zande people made and used spells. There is something of a ritual character to the process of production of the Stringer Studies, receiving what you do not understand, transforming its state and passing it on to others. He would not be the first to think of drawing as spells: this was central to the practice - drawings as missives or sendings - of Antonin Artaud. The drawing is not just something to look at, but might have an unknown and unpredictable effectivity. Another way of thinking of this is as potential, which is a way of understanding becoming through contingency. The process of 'transduction' referred to by the philosopher of technology, Gilbert Simondon, involves the excess of potential in any individuation, such as the string configuration, which remains to be transferred, which takes place through a relation, a 'between'. Christian's work in this case involves a series of 'transductions' of potential which manifest as metamorphoses of the figure.

Susan Morris

With the *Plumb Line Drawings* Susan Morris becomes the 'operator', in Mallarmé's sense, of her work. They are made by plucking a builders plumb-line saturated in vine ash (rather than the usual chalk) against a wall of paper, leaving the trace of the string's hit onto the surface. The string is nailed to the top of the paper - a line of holes can be seen with the marks made from pulling out the nail with the claw hammer, and the marks where the body has pressed or leaned on the paper are left. The plumb line is the kind that coils into a container holding the pigment powder. It can be coiled and reused several times, the amount of pigment diminishing. We can see the lines fading, then strengthening as the ash is renewed. The string becomes frayed, which shows in the lines of the paper, creating horizontal patterns across the lines that aspire towards verticality while being subject to an entropic downward pull. The top and bottom limits are irregular. The work is made by gravity causing the string to hit a limit, the paper-as-wall having its potential-to-stop.

Each hit could thus be said to be a 'stoppage', to borrow a word from Marcel Duchamp's *3 stoppages étalon (3 Standard Stoppages)* 1913-14, where the artist dropped three threads and created a ruler from each, rendering the 'standard' itself contingent. He also constructed a box to house the work in imitation of that which held the standard meter in Paris. The date of the work includes the year when *Un coup de dés* was first published according to Mallarmé's precise instructions for its layout. According to Brian Massumi, 'form is a certain kind of stoppage'. Form that is not an idea in the mind but the production of an operation at the edge of the formless.

The drawing is an indirect trace of an activity of the body. We could also say this of the Mallarméan 'operation'. Even if different from the traditional ways of making poetry or art, the operation involves an activity that indexes a moment in the history of the body, of social relations, and of technology. The 'operator' in 'Le Livre\ is an office worker engaged in an activity of filing that is disrupted by being paradoxically random, releasing a potential that is alien to the prescribed order. We might remember that this is also the moment of Herman Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener' with his response to any instruction 'I would prefer not to', ending in a withdrawal from activity which has been read by Giorgio Agamben as a condition of potential. Withdrawal is replaced by futility in Morris's drawings, as brilliantly described by Ed Krčma. The several activities - hammering a nail, filling and shaking the plumb-line cartridge, drawing out the ash-saturated string, suspending it from the nail, plucking it by

pulling it away from the vertically-hung paper and letting go so that it snaps back leaving its trace of ash - are repeated over and over again, until the requisite area is filled. Nothing is constructed using this gauge, a pure verticality approximated but never achieved - this is not even fail, but fail better. The line goes nowhere.

Here it is hard to distinguish between determination and compulsion. The paper that stops the string's trajectory is rendered opaque and material, a form of confinement, as if the artist is banging herself against it again and again. Yet the ash traces, in their elusiveness, on an edge between being and nothing, neither one nor the other, create a strange, shallow yet infinite opening. Because of the hairs of the string, the surface of the paper gives the impression of an absorbant softness. If there is an identification of the body with the string, then the ash might stand for its remains, its vanishing traces, its dust. All things fall.

But there is something else. Gravity is a force, the draw of the planet, and the *Plumb Line Drawing* is a conjunction of forces, including the muscular energy of bodily life. Morris made the eleventh in a motion capture studio, wearing the costume with dots used to track and abstract the body's movements filmed by cameras in a voluntary act of surveillance and direct form of 'cinematic drawing' which perhaps reveals the 'choreo-graphic' dimension of any gesture of drawing, even one as attenuated as plucking a string. In Morris's practice the agency is expanded through limitation. Creation is no longer 'hylomorphic', a forming of matter by the artist. The 'elocutionary disappearance of the author', as Mallarmé put it, implies a different genesis, whether the work of language or the contingencies of materials and forces. These manifest themselves as such precisely in the withdrawal from use, the futility of the activity.

Hendl Helen Mirra

Hendl Helen Mirra's works in *After Mallarmé* were made during walks, which is true of most of her practice. The titles of the *Walking Commas* include date and place. Each comprises a photograph and a sheet of unbleached paper with type. The 1st and 7th were made on 2nd October 2013 during a walk in Cortina, and the 6th was made on the 29th May 2014 in Parque Nacional Cajas. The 1st and 7th are from the beginning and end of a seven-hour walk: 'morning sun' for the 1st'; sun down behind mountains' for the 7th, by which time we can see from the cuff that the artist is wearing a wool jumper over her checked shirt. The 6th has on the paper the words 'llama's bones among the pajonal'. By being lifted, the rocks held in the hand become punctuation marks in a walk. As in writing, the comma marks a pause: a pause in the rhythm of the walk to select the rock and make the photograph. Mirra describes many of her walks as lasting seven hours, with a pause to do something towards a work each hour. As in the compositions of John Cage, the time intervals become frame for contingency. This is very different to the traditional relation of form and matter, where matter is passive and form provides necessity. Here the form - the punctuation - comes from the rock, and each is different. The comma is a pause, but also an interruption, a syncope. Rocks can also induce a stumble. The photos are not so much visual representations in pursuit of knowledge, as the traces of moments of being-with.

m mm (2024) is the imprint in walnut ink on linen of a trail sign, from a walk in Yosemite in burn zones a few years after a fire. Mirra remembers this as being in 2017. Mirra reworked the painting in 2024 by filling in the letters other than 'm mm' with walnut ink which is in a lighter shade. The painted shape, which goes over the edge of the stretcher, suggests the shape of a hill. The imprint was taken from an irregularly shaped wood sign of a kind that the National Park Service later replaced with plastic ones. The imprint creates a reverse image.

Some letters - notably depending on the font the 'M's of the title - are the same either way, as well as the arrows that point left and right, suggesting a choice to be made: where are we, and where are we going? The title, '*m mm*' could be seen as writing, or could be read aloud as a sound in which case the gap would be silence, a pause.

Mirra wrote to me in an email (7 Apr 2024):

> The premise is that the view is from, so to say, behind the sign. from the place that is named. That is, of course, a place that isn't what it has been named, that is beyond what is named, and being there is being there, and the experience isn't representable. This text is the best I can say about them in their first iteration.

The imprint creates an indexical sign that references the situation in which it is made. *m mm* is a sign of a sign, the indexical sign of a signpost with names. A name is given by humans to a place for identification, belonging, or to make a claim. Naming the land can be highly contentious, expressing power relations and domination, as for example when indigenous names for places are replaced by those of colonisers, as happened in North America and Ireland, among many other places. There is as question of who is doing the naming, and also from where. Mirra raises a further question, which is that of naming as a human activity. What is beyond or escapes the name? What is the relation of the more than human to naming? *m mm* seems to ask what would the sign, and the names it bears, be from a position or 'point of view' that humans can't appropriate for themselves? If a landscape has from the Western and colonialist point of view since early modernity been seen as background to human action and expropriative activity, a land to measure and a vista to dominate if not wild and alien, subverting this hierarchy, the punctuating pauses in Mirra's walks within and through the open become moments to index traces and to transform, as *m mm* implies, the relations of figure and ground. A kind of ambulating poetry, perhaps.

Reading

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