

Museum of Accidents 2003

Fondation Cartier - Paul Virilio

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Foreword

by Paul Virilio

"Contemporary civilization differs in one particularly distinctive feature from those which preceded it: speed. The change has come about within a generation," noted the historian Marc Bloch, writing in the nineteen-thirties. This situation brings in its wake a second feature: the accident. The progressive spread of catastrophic events do not just affect current reality, but produce anxiety and anguish for coming generations.

Daily life is becoming a kaleidoscope of incidents and accidents, catastrophes and cataclysms, in which we are endlessly running up against the unexpected, which occurs out of the blue, so to speak. In a shattered mirror, we must then learn to discern what is impending more and more often—but above all more and more quickly, those events coming upon us inopportunely, if not indeed simultaneously. Faced with an accelerated temporality which affects mores and Art as much as it does international politics, there is one particularly urgent necessity: to expose and to exhibit the Time accident.

Turning around the threat of the unexpected in this way, surprise becomes a subject for research and major risks a subject for exposure and for exhibition, within the framework of instantaneous telecommunications.

As Paul Valéry explained in 1935: "In the past, where novelty was concerned, we had almost always seen only solutions or answers to very old—if not indeed age-old—problems... The novelty of our present situation consists in the unprecedented nature of the questions themselves, not of the solutions, in the statement of the problems, not the answers to them. Hence a general impression of powerlessness and incoherence predominates in our minds." (1)

This acknowledgement of powerlessness before the upsurge of unexpected, catastrophic events forces us to reverse the usual trend which exposes us to accidents and inaugurate a new kind of museology and museography: one which consists in exposing or exhibiting the accident—all accidents, from the most commonplace to the most tragic, from natural catastrophes to industrial and scientific disasters, including also the kind that is too often neglected, the happy accident, the stroke of luck, the coup de foudre or even the coup de grâce! If, today, thanks to television, "what is preserved is reduced to the event-instant, all progress converges on an inescapable problem which is that of perceptions and images." (2) Apart from the historic September 11 attack and its continuous rebroadcasting on all the world's TV screens, two recent events merit harsh analysis in this connection. On the one hand, the revelation sixteen years too late of the damage done by the contamination of Eastern France by Chernobyl, on which subject the officials in the department responsible for raising the alarm in April 1986 declared, "If something is detected, this is a purely scientific problem." And, on the other, the very recent decision of the Caen Memorial Peace Museum to import an atom bomb—an H-bomb—as a symbolic object from the United States, emblematic of the balance of terror between East and West.

In this connection, echoing the remarks of the French experts who concealed the damage done by the Chernobyl accident, we might say, "If we are exhibiting an atom bomb, this is a purely cultural problem," throwing the doors wide open to the first Museum of accidents!

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If, in fact, invention is just a way of seeing, of grasping accidents as signs, as opportunities, it is high time to open up our galleries to the impromptu, to that "indirect production" of science and the techno-sciences that is the disaster, the (industrial or other) catastrophe.

If, according to Aristotle, "the accident reveals the substance," the invention of the substance is also the invention of the "accident." Seen this way, the shipwreck is indeed the "futuristic" invention of the ship, the air crash the invention of the supersonic plane, and the Chernobyl meltdown, the invention of the nuclear power station.

Let us take a look now at recent history. While the twentieth century was the century of great exploits—the landing on the moon—and great discoveries in physics and chemistry, not to mention computing and genetics, it seems logical, alas, that the twenty-first century will reap the harvest of the concealed production represented by the most varied of disasters, to the extent, indeed, that their repetition is becoming a clearly identifiable historical phenomenon.

Let us listen again to what Valéry has to say on this: "The instrument is tending to disappear from consciousness. In everyday parlance, we say that its operation has become automatic. What we must deduce from this is the new equation: consciousness now exists only for accidents." (3)

This recognition of a failing leads to a clear, definitive conclusion: "All that becomes capable of recommencement and repetition becomes obscure, falls silent. Function exists only outside of consciousness." (4)

Given that the declared objective of the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century was precisely the repetition of standardized objects (machines, tools, vehicles), in other words of the famous "criminal substances," it is logical to observe today that the twentieth century can in fact be said to have swamped us with mass-produced accidents, from the Titanic in 1912 to Chernobyl in 1986, not to mention Seveso and the Toulouse chemical plant disaster of 2001...

So the serial reproduction of the most diverse catastrophes has come to accompany the great discoveries, the great technical inventions, like a shadow, and unless we accept the unacceptable, that is to say, accept that the accident is becoming, in its turn, automatic, the urgent need for an "intelligence (i.e., an understanding) of the crisis of intelligence" is making itself felt in these opening years of the twenty-first century—an understanding of which ecology is the clinical symptom, with the development of a philosophy of postindustrial eschatology still lying before us.

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Let us now accept Valéry's postulate: if consciousness exists only for accidents and if things now operate only "outside of" consciousness, the loss of consciousness of the accident, and of the major disaster, would amount not just to thoughtlessness, but to madness—the madness of voluntary blindness to the fatal consequences of our actions and inventions (I am thinking in particular of genetic engineering and the biotechnologies). This is a situation which would be akin to the sudden reversal of philosophy into its opposite. It would be akin to the birth of a philanoia—literally: a love of madness. A love of radical mindlessness, in which the insane character of our acts would not only cease to worry us consciously, but would delight and captivate us.

After the accident of substance, we would see the fatal emergence of the accident of knowledge, of which information technology may well be the sign by the very nature of its undoubted advances, but also by the incommensurable damage it has done.

In fact, if "the accident is the appearance of the quality of something which was masked by another of its qualities," (5) the invention of industrial accidents in

(land, sea or air) transport or of postindustrial accidents in the fields of information technology or genetics, would be the appearance of a quality too long hidden by the little progress "scientific" knowledge has made by comparison with the scale of "spiritual and philosophical" knowledge, a wisdom accumulated throughout the centuries-long history of civilizations.

Thus, the damage done by the lay or religious ideologies that were the doctrines of totalitarian regimes is about to give way to the damage done by thought technologies capable, if we are not careful, of ending in madness, in the crazed love of excess, as the suicidal character of some contemporary actions tends to prove, from Auschwitz to the military concept of Mutually Assured Destruction (M.A.D.), not to mention the "unbalance of terror" ushered in by the suicide squads who attacked the World Trade Center in New York in 2001. Indeed, to use not weapons, not military instruments, but simple vehicles of air transport to destroy buildings, while being prepared to perish in the operation, is to set up a fatal confusion between the attack and the accident and to use the "quality" of the deliberate accident to the detriment of the quality of the aeroplane and the "quantity" of innocent lives sacrificed, thus exceeding all limits previously set by religious or philosophical ethics.

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The principle of responsibility to future generations requires that we expose accidents now, and the frequency of their industrial and postindustrial repetition. This is the very point, the avowed aim of the Fondation Cartier exhibition. A pilot project for, or more exactly a prefiguration of, the future Museum of the Accident. This exhibition aims above all to take a stand against the fading ethical and aesthetic points of reference, and the loss of meaning in which we are so often now not really actors, but witnesses or victims.

After the exhibition more than ten years ago on speed organized at Jouy-en-Josas also by the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, the exhibition Unknown Quantity aims to provide a counterpoint to the excesses of all kinds with which the great news media swamp us daily, a museum of horrors, which no one seems to realize always precedes and accompanies the upsurge of even greater disasters.

In fact, as one witness to the rise of nihilism in Europe put it, "The most atrocious act becomes easy when the path leading to it has been duly cleared." (6) By progressive habituation to insensitivity and indifference in the face of the craziest scenes, endlessly repeated by the various "markets of the spectacle" in the name of an alleged freedom of expression that has transformed itself into a liberation of expressionism—if not indeed an academicism of horror—we are succumbing to the ravages of a programming of extravagance at any cost which ends not any longer in meaninglessness, but in the heroicization of terror and terrorism.

Almost as in the nineteenth century, when official art strove in its Salons to glorify the great battles of the past and ended, as we know, in the mass slaughter of Verdun, we look on, dumbfounded, in these early years of the twenty-first century, as efforts are made to promote artistic torture, aesthetic self-mutilation and suicide as an art-form.

It is, ultimately, to escape this "overexposure of the public to horror" that the Fondation Cartier has adopted the principle of a critical distance from excesses of whatever kind among recent events.

With its aim of raising the issue of the unexpected and the lack of concern at major risks, the event which opens in Paris around the time of the first anniversary of the World Trade Center attack in New York aims to be a homage to discernment, to (philosophical or scientific) preventive understanding in troubled times—times when threats of a worst-case philanoia (7) are rife, threats of a love of madness taking as its motto the drunken driver's words to his passenger: "I'm an accident looking for somewhere to happen."

Notes

1. Paul Valéry, "La crise de l'intelligence", *Œuvres Complètes*, I (Paris: La Pléiade, 1957).
2. Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*, II (Paris: La Pléiade, 1960), p. 851.
3. *Op.cit.*, p. 212.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Op.cit.*, p. 229.
6. Hermann Rauschnig, *The Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co./Alliance Book Corporation, 1939).
7. Paul Virilio, *Ground Zero* (London: Verso, 2002).

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