Inadvertent - Ars Accidentalis

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Abstract

Even though art is the product of an intentional act of fabrication, the serendipitous spill of an ink or paint, the unforeseen slip of a pen or brush, sudden shake of a camera in the analog realm have the potential of generating an unconscious lead in the planned course of action. The consequential shift in direction may completely change the aesthetics and content of an artwork. An artist should always be open to such 'accidental' dimension which will help him / her to take the original idea out of its initial framework and recontextualize it for a new conception.

The outcomes of software 'failures' in digital technology made a similar type of aesthetics emerge: Glitch aesthetics. The 'dirty' and sometimes 'chaotic' nature of glitches made things look much more organic and human, as opposed to mechanically computerized. This unrefined aesthetics has recently become so popular among designers that some of them have made specific websites as tributes to the process.

Despite the fact that the accidental dimension in art looks more compatible with analog practices, there are various instances it finds its niche in the digital world as well. Mystifying benefits like freedom from preconceptions, momentary skepticism about planned course of action, avoiding mechanical thinking / prejudices, reaching a more natural / authentic result, discovering unusual and unique aesthetical domains, etc. will always make 'ars accidentalis' an indispensable part of art practice.

1. Introduction

While having been educated as an architect at a time when computers started to be highly influential in the design and art worlds (very beginning of 1990s), I also had the chance of having been exposed to analog methods in the creation process. This enabled me to get to know various materials, experience how they feel, touch and smell, as opposed to just assigning them as a surface map on a 3D model without knowing how people will react to it. Being familiar with materials also helped me to speculate on how they would fail, and in turn, how this failure would lead to a particular result that would add something to the creative process.

Though art is the product of an intentional act of fabrication (beautiful sunset is not art because there is no wit behind it), serendipitous spill of an ink or paint, unforeseen slip of a pen or brush, sudden shake of a camera in the analog realm have the potential of generating an unconscious lead in the planned course of action. Similar effects can also be obtained in analog photography with light leakages that burn the film, unplanned compositions, flaws in focus, random exposures and mistaken double exposures due to mechanical errors. The consequential shift in direction may completely change the aesthetics and content of an artwork. An artist should always be open to such 'accidental' manipulations, and moreover take them for granted. The reason for this expectation is the fact that this accidental dimension will help the artist to take the original idea out of its initial framework and recontextualize it with a new conception.

Figure 1: *Two mistakenly overexposed slides sandwiched in order to create a new photo. Murat Germen, 1990.*

2. The place of the 'unexpected' and the 'random' in the recent history of art

The presence of serendipity is not a novel occurrence in the history of art. Abstract expressionism, which was an American post-World War II art movement, valued the importance of experience in art. An important precursor to abstract expressionism is surrealism, with its highlighting on spontaneous and subconscious creation. Jackson Pollock's dripping paint onto canvas is a modus operandi that has its origins in the work of Max Ernst.

Figure 2: *Jackson Pollock painting in his studio, Springs, New York, 1949 © Time Inc.*

Emotional intensity as the result of an experience that can be practiced during the process of creation is of prime importance here. Anti-figurative aesthetic and impression of spontaneity govern, yet most of the works created required meticulous preparation due to large sizes involved. Robert Motherwell, another abstract expressionist, was among the first American artists to cultivate accidental elements in his work. Mark Rothko, in a joint statement with Adolph Gottlieb to Edwin A. Jewell (often referred to as a 'manifesto' written 7 June 1943 and published 13 June 1943) stated that "To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risk." The risk mentioned here refers to the accidental dimension of art.

Frank Stella, influenced by the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock, said that a picture was 'a flat surface with paint on it - nothing more.' This was a departure from the method of constructing a painting by first making a sketch. This departure brought a 'free will' process which was much more open to accidents, momentary decisions, random leads and finally unplanned artistic activity. Same approach can also be found in Helen Frankenthaler's thoughts on painting: "A really good picture looks as if it's happened at once. It's an immediate image. For my own work, when a picture looks labored and overworked, there is something in it that has not got to do with beautiful art to me." [Ros75] The short-term notion of spontaneity mentioned here can be related to one stance which is seen in many examples of art practice: Questioning the nature of reality. When reality is defined, the objective is usually long-term. The ones who prepare this definition may base their future plans on this particular definition and consolidate their system. Yet, when we talk about casualness, it is not the reality that matters, it is in fact a particular feeling at a specific moment, which is not necessarily a shared opinion, therefore not 'reality.' Again related to the notion of reality, ambiguity is another tool for artists who are motivated to cause unexpected reactions, as "ambiguous artworks pose serious problems for traditional concepts of artistic identity and aesthetic evaluation." [Tor83] Different from the concept of indeterminacy, ambiguity is a manifestation whose sense cannot be determined from its context; similar are random / accidental developments, because there is no preconceived perspective there is no context and no determinations can be derived.

On the other hand, Dadaism has taken the challenge of dealing with randomness in various ways in order to end up with unusual results. Since Dadaists were politically against the World War I-era academic / cultural values of art and were in an "anti-art" activity, randomness intrinsically generated within the course of fabrication was one of the ways for them to defy traditional aesthetics, describable deterministic patterns or predictability. This can also be defined as the use of chance as a foundation for the denial of an era's fashionable art practices, where we allow chance to have an effect on decisions and change fixed arbitrary or aesthetic values predetermined by the popular tendencies.

Figure 3: *Fountain by Marcel Duchamp, 1917, photographed by Alfred Stieglitz at his 291 gallery after the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibit.*

The 'unexpected' which stems from accidental processes and / or randomness has always been an intriguing and much used tool for artists, novelists, film makers, musicians, etc. in order to create tension, attention, mystery, interest in their works. The 'indeterminate' dimension in the unexpected generates potential for surprise, amazement and disbelief in the spectators' eyes and induces feelings of a new experience. This fresh perception is advantageous on the artist's side since sole novelty may sometimes be enough to startle people. Therefore, it is possible to say that visual indeterminacy possesses capability to add to aesthetic experience.

3. Digital World

Since computers depend thoroughly on digits and their particular combinations, they explain, resolve, perform everything by numbers. This tendency leads to perfection since the user has to think too much about numbers, units, fractions, ratios, matrices, etc. and this premeditation lessens the likeliness of ending up with accidental developments. "It is failure that guides evolution; perfection offers no incentive for improvement" said Colson Whitehead in 1999. Alternatively, "Leonardo Da Vinci insisted 'that painter who has no doubts will achieve little', and he advised

artists to seek out inspirations for their paintings in the stains on walls" [Bri94].

One of the most typical 'accidents' that could take place in the computerized work environment is that when you try different effect filters in order to modify a particular image, a filter gives you an 'amazing' effect that would make you stop and decide to finalize your creation process. Yet, this is a more 'controlled' accident to the point it can almost not be called as an accident, since you are conscious when you issue a particular command. But the spill of an ink would never be that conscious since a spill can also destroy the artwork instead of making it more 'interesting.' So, you would never take the risk consciously and initiate the spill on purpose, since there is no 'undo' command available in case you do not like what the spill does to your work.

Figure 4: *A 'nice' fog effect obtained by Photoshop plug-in Nik Color Efex Pro v.3, Photo: Murat Germen, 2007.*

4. Ars Accidentalis vs. Art Brut

When there is an accident that takes place during the creation of an artwork and the artist likes the result, s/he may decide to keep it as is, instead of trashing it. Though the result is unintentional, the decision of taking advantage of it is surely conscious and intentional. "Processes with an element of randomness or unpredictability and an element of order or predictability are called stochastic processes. Such processes have more artistic interest than do completely random processes." [PC71] Since the accident is part of the experience, it is possible to seek how the accident took place, how it affected the work and then try to simulate the same accident at a later time in order to get a similar result with a different work. In this case, experience in the 'acquaintance' sense becomes experience in the 'personal knowledge' sense and leads to a certain level of predictability.

The value of art lies in the process of discovery and in its involvement within the depth of human experience.

Even if there is certain level of expectedness this does reduce the value of the accidental experience. Because, "accidental art attempts to outwit illusion by reducing the activity of art-making to blind chaos. The intention here is to integrate contingent particulars into the artwork without recourse to a previously formulated harmony. […] What it has done instead is simply substitute a more or less uncontrolled illusion-generating mechanism for a more or less controlled one without impinging at all on the dynamic of illusion production." [Huh85] This casual process can also be taken to the relatively undefined territories of Art Brut (French for "raw art"), which the art of children and anyone not producing art for profit or recognition. Coined in 1945 by French artist Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985), Art Brut was often celebrated in the work of Dubuffet who appreciated its being done for its own sake and not for concern of profit. (Sources: Kimberley Reynolds, "Illustrated Dictionary of Art Terms"; Chuck and Jan Rosenak, "Contemporary American Folk Art: A Collector's Guide")

5. Immanuel Kant's subjective purposiveness

Congruent with Art Brut logic, "Kant argues that we can enjoy an artwork only if we do not view it as intentionally produced. If we regard it as intentionally created all satisfaction will vanish and there will be no free play of cognitive faculties in place. The outcome of this surprising contention is that we need to regard artworks as products of nature, free from any human purposes. […] On the other hand, unintentional art sounds like a contradiction in terms. Intention must be there, although it does not aim at a particular sensation or concept. […] Thus art can be a product of purposive human mind, although this purposiveness remains subjective and the artist is not necessarily aware of the rules that guide him in the process." [Zun07]

"In judging things as beautiful, we suppose that they possess certain qualities which allow the perceiving subject to feel pleasure or displeasure. These qualities come down to a certain *form* that is capable of inducing the feeling of harmony in the subject with regard to his faculties of representation. This harmony is what Kant calls subjective purposiveness. […] Kant asserts that universal validity […] must be derived from an analysis of the autonomy of the judging subject with respect to the feeling of pleasure in the given representation. If we do that we realize that the universal validity of aesthetical judgment rests on our own taste." [Zun07] Resting on this statement, the question to ask would be: Does the surprise factor within accidental art make its perception more open to all points of view since accidents are not particular to a specific culture? Consequently, is it possible to say that 'accidental art has more potential of carrying universal validity of aesthetical taste?' Since accidental works of art are not results based on particular premeditated processes / sequences / rules but are usually unpredictable occurrences that we have not seen before, their consideration is more compliant to all tastes and this fact makes their existence more independent since we cannot know how the object was assessed in the past as it

did not exist before. This could also be supported by the statement that "while scientists can demonstrate how by means of fixed rules and air tight proofs they have achieved their results, artists cannot explain their creative process and cannot state any universal rules on how to repeat it." [Zun07]

6. Found object vs. inadvertent art

The same approach can also be found in Tolstoy's assertion on accidental art: "Authentic art cannot be taught and cannot be produced on demand: its origin and form are beyond the control of the creator / artist. It follows logically that any work of authentic art must be an accident, in the sense of a thing that happens without foresight or expectation. Art is an event incommensurate with and unpredictable from its cause. Throughout his critical writings on art, Tolstoy acknowledges the aleatory origin of art." [Den03] One can easily stumble upon this random dimension that is present in 'Ars Accidentalis' in experimental design exercises that involve 'found object' implementations in art and design education.

I personally find found object art / design projects very valuable and apply its logic in some of the photography assignments that I give to my students. In the particular 'found object' assignment, students are asked to go to the flea market and / or second hand book sellers and obtain a minimum of five and a maximum of 20 old photographs. They are also asked to pay attention that no two photographs would be from the same series and all photos have different subject matter. What was important was the concept of 'scavenging' and the idea of the 'found object'. They were then asked to write a story based upon a collection of photographs that were found, i.e. not their own.

Figure 5: *Clieve Vazro, "found object" movie made of photo stills, Emrah Kavlak, Sabanci University, 2006.*

As Michael A. Denner states in his text titled 'Accidental Art: Tolstoy's Poetics of Unintentionality', "Tolstoy's theory of 'accidental art' bears only a passing resemblance to the Dada / Surrealist / postmodern notion of an '*objet trouvé*,' i.e., the provocative declaration that some given thing that clearly was not originally intended to be considered an object of aesthetic contemplation is, in fact, an *objet d'art*. When Duchamp turned a urinal on its back, placed above it a placard that read 'Fountain,' and submitted it to an art show; or when Koons put a Hoover in a Plexiglas case and displayed it in a gallery, each was (I suppose) reframing the given thing in a highly self-conscious maneuver aimed at dismantling the concept and validity of art itself." [Den03]

7. Personal practice & methodology

Coming back to individual experiences, involuntary patterns I obtained after many panoramic photography stitching experiments were not really new to me since I have been trying panoramic stitching for long since year 2002 and I have ended up with many failed stitches that usually looked 'uninterestingly' erratic. But, in one of my recent attempts, I was trying to stitch a panorama with multiple pivot points (multi-plane projection with multi-view) and resulting pattern added so much to what was there that I decided to keep it as is. Alfred N. Whitehead says "art is the imposing of a pattern on experience, and our aesthetic enjoyment is recognition of the pattern" in his 'Dialogues' dated 1954. The pattern on this particular experience was worthwhile to impose for personal recognition.

Figure 6: *Accidental result of a panorama stitch session using AutoPano Pro 1.3 Mac version. The very first image that made me start a series, Murat Germen, 2007.*
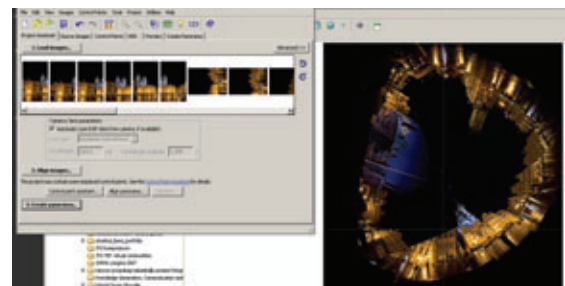

Figure 7: *Accidental result of a panorama stitch session using PTGui Pro 7 Windows version. The preview window allowed me to change the horizon line of the linear panorama and with an accidental slip of the mouse vertically, the linear panorama turned into a circular one and I decided to keep it. Artwork: Murat Germen, 2008.*

After I obtained the above results and decided to take advantage of them at later experimentations, I wanted to resolve the logic behind these mistakes in order to be able to repeat them in the future. The mistake during the session in Figure 6 was trying to stitch photos taken at

multiple pivot points. Such panoramas are usually joined 'manually' within Photoshop since they accommodate multiple perspective planes. Panorama stitchers usually stitch single pivot point panoramas with single perspective plane. The mistake during the session in Figure 7 was easy to detect: Sudden faulty mouse gesture which is quite easy to replicate.
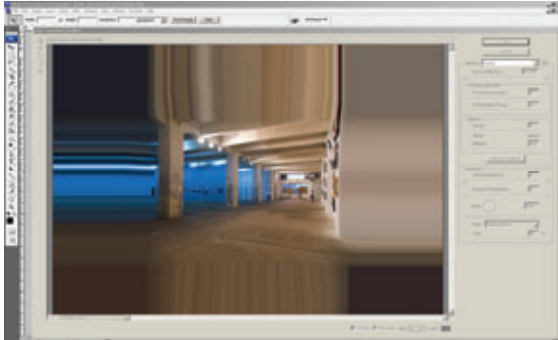

Figure 8 & 9: *Accidental result of a "Lens Correction" session using Photoshop CS3. The accidental slip of the mouse took place horizontally this time and it made me max the lowest slider to the left. Murat Germen, 2008.*

Figure 10: *Accidental result of a "Camera RAW" session using Photoshop CS3. The accidental slip of the mouse made me max the over-exposure of the photo and I decided to keep this overexposed version. Name of Artwork: Anticipation, Murat Germen, 2006.*

Figure 11: *Accidental result of a panorama stitch session using AutoPano Pro 1.3 Mac version. Two photos were taken with a perspective correction lens' shift feature, even though there was about 15% of image overlap the software was not able to make a decent joint. Artwork: Murat Germen, 2007.*

Figure 12: *Accidental result of a panorama stitch session using AutoPano Pro 1.3 Mac version. The series of images that completed the 360-degree turn were all included and two images almost had the same content. Once one of these images was omitted in the next stitch I was able to obtain a 'correct' stitch. Artwork: Murat Germen, 2008.*

Seeing all these new results and visiting some of the old ones, I decided to start a new series to be exhibited and called it 'Inadvertent.' Since I was able to understand the logic behind the unintentional processes, I started to invoke them intentionally.
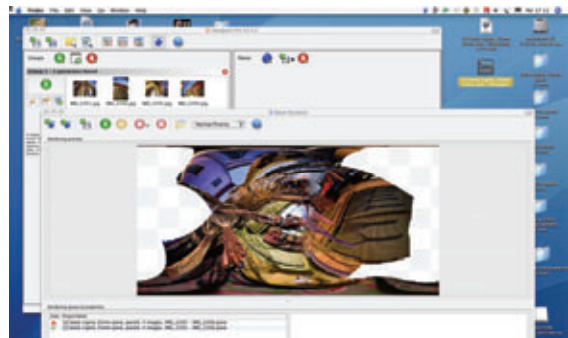

Figure 13: *AutoPano Pro 1.4.2 Mac version's application interface and the preview window that gives the user a hint what sort of an image s/he will get.*
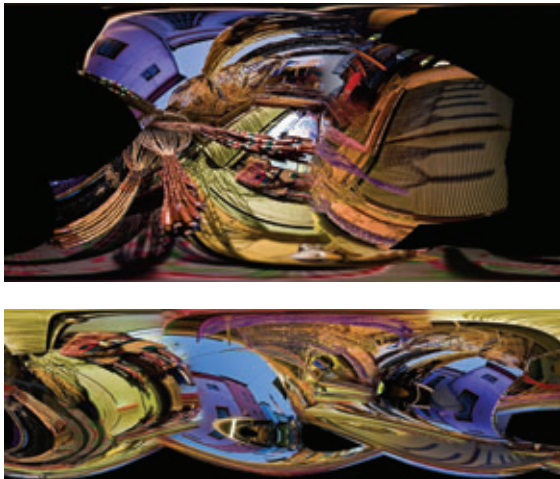
Figure 14 & 15: *Two different results from two different stitch sessions of the same batch of images using AutoPano Pro's versions 1.3 and 1.4.2.*
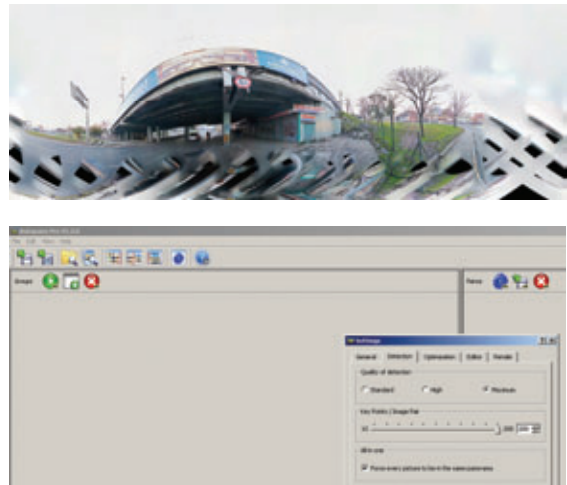

Figure 16 & 17: *Two intended 'faulty' stitches using PTGui Pro 7 Windows version. This time, the previous 'accidental slip' of the mouse in the preview window was initiated on purpose.*

Figure 18, 19, 20, 21 & 22: *After many tries, I discovered that when I checked 'Force every picture to be in the same panorama' option in AutoPano Pro's settings dialog box (see bottom image), the software would force itself into finding more key points in image pairs and make 'faulty' stitches. All of the above images obtained after such forced stitches (figures 18, 19, 20 & 21) are results of conscious act; i.e., I knew that images would come out irregular / unusual yet I, of course, did not know what specific shape I would end up with. This course of action can be considered 'stochastic' since there are elements of randomness and a certain level predictability at the same time within the same process.*

When I was a student at MIT years ago, I took an experimental computer programming class involving LISP programming. The course was led by Aaron Fleisher & Earl Mark, and it was opened despite the fact that 5 students including myself took it. The experiment was on the exploration of using computers as tools adding to human creativity. In my final assignment, I

wrote a code which engaged 7 nested levels of random procedures and the aim beyond this was that every time the code was run I would obtain a different result. There were three algorithms that controlled different components of an architectural façade: Arches, storeys and windows. The idea behind was very simple: Computers can add to our creativity by offering many more alternatives than we can produce in a much shorter period of time. Finally, humans are still the ones to choose from these alternatives and this is a perfect collaboration of 'homo' and 'machina.' This procedure can also be considered 'stochastic' since there are again elements of randomness and a certain level logicality involved.
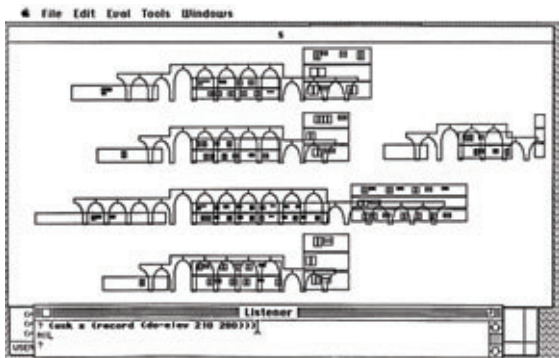

Figure 23: *LISP programming to explore possibilities of using computers as tools to increase human creativity. Code: Murat Germen, 1989.*

This study is related to shape grammar studies which are applied step-by-step manner to generate a set, or language of designs. A shape grammar study is generative by nature and it can be used as a design tool to define design languages and styles, to develop new styles of design on the basis of existing ones.

Going back to the 'accidental' nature of digital processes, the outcomes of 'failures' in digital technology made a new type of aesthetics emerge: Glitch aesthetics ("a glitch is assumed to be the unexpected result of a malfunction" as defined by Iman Moradi). The 'dirty' and sometimes 'chaotic' nature of glitches made things look much more organic and human, as opposed to mechanically computerized. "Even the obsessively rectilinear Dutch modern painter Piet Mondrian left drips and faint wavers in his straight lines to indicate the presence of the human creator behind the abstract mathematical shapes." [Bri94] This unrefined aesthetics has recently become so popular among designers that some of them have made specific websites as tributes to the process (http://www.thesexappealoferror.com). Following this, it is not difficult to see that " […] 'failure' has become a prominent aesthetic in many of the arts in the late 20th century." [Cas00]

8. Conclusion

"Even today, in the post modernist, post industrial reality such evaluation continues to exist, in that glitch art can be considered as pure spectacle, as a vapor trace of digital technology, as digital 'trash'. However, such interpretations have little impact on the philosophical or critical understandings of glitch art or indeed the practice of creating Glitch-alikes." [Mor04]
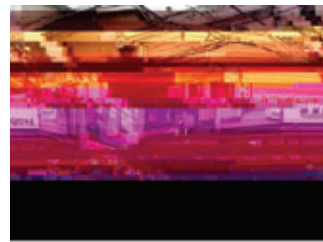

Figure 24, 25 & 26: *The Glitchbrowser is a collaborative artwork developed between D. Lima (dmtr.org), T. Scott (beflix.com) and I. Moradi (organised.info). (http://www.glitchbrowser.com)*

Nearing the end, I would like quote also from Andrew Bogle, who identifies the importance of indeterminate practices in art in a very honest and simple way: "Tossing coins, picking numbers from a hat, throwing dice, exploiting gravity, wind, magnetism, etc., are just a few of the ways in which artists have been able to step outside of themselves and dilute subjective control by a measure of indeterminacy. But always this indeterminacy must apply within certain prescribed limits. No art can be entirely objective or indeterminate - an artist's choice of materials, the scale and duration of the work, the type of variables selected - these tend to be subjective and therefore aesthetic decisions. By the same token, no art can be entirely subjective or controlled. Wear and tear on the bristles of a brush, irregularities in the artist's canvas or paper, varying consistencies of paint, impurities, etc., make it impossible for the artist to predict exactly what sort of mark he or she will make." [Bog81]

To conclude, though the accidental dimension in art looks more compatible with analog practices, there are various instances it finds its niche in the digital world as well. Mystifying benefits like freedom from preconceptions, momentary skepticism about planned course of action, avoiding mechanical thinking / prejudices, reaching a more natural / authentic result, discovering unusual and unique aesthetical domains, etc. will always make ars accidentalis an indispensable part of art practice.

Don't hope, yet expect…

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