

## Notes on After Mallarmé Part 1

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**the page... the place...**

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### Ellipsis

The poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) was a master of ellipsis. Silence speaks through his verses, and the white space is as important as the printed type in his revolutionary layout for his poem *Un coup de dés n'abolira jamais le hasard* ('A dice throw never will abolish chance'). Silence, and the blank, shifts from something outside - a beyond of sense of meaning - to something active within the poem or the work. (Loevlie)

Ellipsis is also a mark of potential: what is silent or blanked could be nothing or anything. Ellipsis is both spatial and temporal, blankness and pause or syncope.

### The page and the book

Looking back from our digital age, it is all the more evident that Mallarmé transformed both the page and the book: after Mallarmé neither will be the same.

In his posthumously published notes for what he called 'Le Livre' ('The Book'), Mallarmé envisages the book as a performance and not only a volume. It is not so much the performance of producing a book - although it is that too - as the book itself *as* performance. This performance is conducted not by an author but by what he calls an 'operator'.

This provides a new model for the work of art, in a way that went on to be explored by other artists like Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, the artists in 'After Mallarmé', and is mutating through collaborations between artists and AI.

In the final form taken by the poem *Un coup de dés* - also posthumously - the page becomes both a surface of the inscription of letters and words, and the place of an event which may or may not take place. How it does - if it does - will have depended on the reader who is free to take different pathways. The visitor to an exhibition is in a similar position.

### The taking place of the place

A broken line of text in capitals across the penultimate spread of *Un coup de dés* reads: 'RIEN...N'AURA EU LIEU...QUE LE LIEU', in Antony Hartley's translation, 'NOTHING...WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE...EXCEPT THE PLACE'.

'Nothing' is not necessarily negative: it could be 'the nothing' as distinct from nothing at all, or pure negation. The difference between 'nothing' and 'the nothing' is a fine one, but crucial. We could read the line as saying that nothing in the sense of 'the nothing' will have taken place, and the 'place' is an exception from it; in other words, the place is a subtraction from nothing. Nothing may also be chaos, or noise. We will encounter the idea of the work of art as a subtraction from chaos in the final of the three exhibitions.

The taking place of the place is an event. (Badiou) Isn't a work of art just that...if it happens?

In Mallarmé's line the event of taking place is given in the tense of the future anterior: 'will have been'. This suggests that the present is an 'in-between', impossible...and yet...: between anticipation and remains; between emergence and debris - from which something else may come to be, perhaps.

## Peter Downsbrough

Peter Downsbrough's sculptures and with poles and pipes (which he has been making since the mid-1970s), and room pieces (since the mid-1980s) are the taking place of a place in a space that is already a place. Downsbrough works in books, on walls and in rooms, as well as in film. He considers a book to be both a three-dimensional and a two-dimensional space, pages and volume, as a room is walls and the space that they bound. Sometimes his ideas have emerged first in books, then are applied to rooms, and it can be the other way round too. In his books we often find lines in pairs, words rotated, inverted, and characteristically split by a gap which divides them into two. We find this on the walls and floors of his rooms, where we also find pipes, characteristically, but not always, in pairs. The words can be 'shifters' like 'here', 'there' and 'now' which are only fulfilled - given their sense - in the specific situation.

At Large Glass Downsbrough has two works: a wall piece, *SHIFT/ AND, AS, THE, THEN* 2018; and a sculpture *One Pipe Leaning Some Standing (3)* 2022. If one is on the wall, and the other on the floor, the leaning pipe connects floor and wall, just as the wall piece transforms the space of the room. 'Shift' is a verb that suggests both movement and the grammatical shifter, which in this case could be 'then' since the meaning has to be fulfilled by the circumstance. Other words are conjunction, preposition, adverb - depending how they are used - and article. On the wall words are tipped to the side to be read vertically (echoing the verticality of the pipes), flipped in the case of 'SHIFT' (which has thus been shifted), or placed just above the skirting. In this way the empty parts of the wall are activated to form an essential dimension of the work, just as Mallarmé does with the blank areas of the page in *Un coup de dés*.

In Downsbrough's sculpture - in rooms, on walls, inside and outside - we find straight lines, rectilinear shapes, blocks, wedges, words. The pairing of the pipes, like the splitting of the words, creates a gap, or there is a demarcation of an emptiness that is as important as the object or inscription. The doubling and splitting create the between in a process of spacing, which is also the case in Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* - spacing that is not only spatial - a making of space - but also temporal, involving the differentiation including through the repetition of the same, like pipes or lines. (Derrida) Space does not become place by being filled, but rather by the creation of gaps, voids, cuts and the in-between. Where words are concerned, the operations are both a possibility of the materiality of the letters, and drawing attention to it. We are 'in' what we read and see, just as we are 'in' the poem on the page when we read *Un coup de dés*, and would have been 'in' the performance of *Le Livre* were it to have taken place.

To split, rotate and invert a word is to act in relation to it, as to make a line is to act in relation to space or page. But this is not an instrumental action with a goal outside itself, but rather what Mallarmé called the 'restricted action' of the poem (*Divigations*), although it can refer, as Downsbrough's room pieces and books sometimes do, obliquely, to the historical situation in which they occur.

Downsbrough's procedures of inscription, whether in a book or a room, may be thought of in terms of consistent 'operations' applied to different works across media - doubling, splitting, rotating, inverting. This implies a concept for the work of art that was intrinsic to Mallarmé's project for *Le Livre*, and partially achieved in *Un coup de dés* that we see in his description of the operator of the work, an idea we will explore in Part 2, which will include works by Downsbrough concerned with dice.

## Joëlle Tuerlinckx

Joëlle Tuerlinckx's *Atlas* rooms, which she has been making since 2005, perform the operation of a room becoming pages and the pages becoming a book. The walls are covered with sheets of paper inscribed with reference to the architectural and functional details of the room. Their future is to be taken down and bound as volumes, so that the book becomes a 1:1 atlas of the room, literally fulfilling Mallarmé's dictum that 'everything in the world exists to end up as a book.' ('The Book as Spiritual Instrument, *Divigations*)

Of course, the place may become a book in different ways: folio, quarto, octavo - in other words with the sheets flat, folded once or folded twice. The pages to be bound will be numbered according to their order on the wall, then numbered again as pages of the volume, giving two sets of numbers. The fold is important: it will provide the gutter of the book between the pages, and it relates to the corners of the room, both being a kind of hinge - and Tuerlinckx has made other works relating to them.

For the Large Glass *Atlas Room* Tuerlinckx has used black paper for the first time. This has a number of connotations. In relation to Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* it suggests the image of the night sky at the end in which constellations perhaps appear. Papering a room, it summons up the darkness of a camera obscura, which in the 17th century was used as a metaphor for the mind, as a computer is today. The darkness is the condition for an image of the outside to appear through a pinhole. Standing in the room is like being inside a camera, a photographic metaphor. It also refers to the darkness of the cinema, and the 'black box' gallery where artist's projections are viewed. In these cases, the window of the gallery becomes the window of perspective representation, as well as standing for the image produced by a camera, or projected on a screen. The window however is a real one, and let's in the light, which changes in the course of the day, subtly altering the paper over time.

Tuerlinckx places a transparent 'X' circumscribed by a clay medium on the window, which when the sun shines should produce an 'X' of light surrounded by shadow moving across the floor. The 'X' on the window marks a point which in representation could be the monocular viewing point coinciding with the vanishing point, making the mechanism of representation visible through non-coincidence, since the viewer is free to move around. 'X' marks the spot, but you are free to be elsewhere.

A further element in the exhibition is three chromed metal, stamped weights which may be moved around to 'balance' the visitors as they move through the gallery, so that the space doesn't tip over. Titled *There (#1, #2 #3) ou Centre de gravité 'Poids chromé (weight)' ou La Constellation du Peut-être (élément #) exhibition materiel activated by an operator as per instructions*, they embody the idea of art as an operation performed by an 'operator' that we find in Mallarmé's posthumously published notes for the book performance *Le Livre*. These works will carry over to Part 2, where the concept will be further discussed.

The black paper Tuerlinckx uses for the *Atlas* is that used by certain butchers to wrap meat because the blood shows up less than on white paper. (Mallarmé suggested a connection between red stippled edges of books of his time and the violence of cutting the folded pages to open the book to reading.) So the black paper is not only a metaphor for the night in which stars, like those forming Mallarmé's constellation scintillate, but also alludes to bodies and flesh, the bodies that do not disappear into the transcendental subject of representation, and the bodies that are vulnerable to slaughter and disaster.

A block, including black paper sheets, and titled *Le Grand Peut-être* (*The Great May-be*) will be added to Part 2.

## Marine Hugonnier

Marine Hugonnier's work at Large Glass is one of an ongoing series in which she collages over the picture in newspapers with a silkscreened coloured square or rectangle. In *Art for Modern Architecture* (2005), the first of a group of works with that title, Hugonnier covered the pictures on the front pages of vintage newspapers from places where she had travelled with cut-outs from Ellsworth Kelly's book *Line Form Color* (1951) where Hugonnier was drawn to the claim that modern architecture is a monument for everyday life. She describes this as literally "covering" the news. In *Art for Modern Architecture* she replaces architecture with the newspaper as that monument. In the first of what was to become an ongoing series, architecture is replaced by different newspapers from random weeks making seven frames, and the type columns become the support structure for the abstractions that replace the photo reportages. Old news becomes what surrounds the image, which the viewer/reader has to supply by projection or memory. In the second series of 2010 the quadrilaterals covering the news images are in the colours of the Standard Kodak Colour Chart used in photomechanical reproduction: local difference subject to international standardisation. This draws attention to the contrasting ways in which geopolitical events are covered in different countries, whereas the covering shapes are standardised and the same across the papers. We could see these works in the lineage of art that orients itself in relation to news, from Charles Baudelaire, Honoré de Balzac and Émile Zola dealing with the feuilleton with a realism that may or may not be poetic, to Stéphane Mallarmé who, while criticising newspaper language as a debased coin of exchange, drew from the structure of headlines in newspapers for his poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (first published 1897 and in book form in 1914), in effect as if he were to remove the columns of text from the newspaper, leaving the white space of the page between the words of the poem as if they formed headlines to absence. In a related work by Hugonnier, that goes in the reverse direction, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard (l'espace sociale)* (2007), eleven spreads of Mallarmé's poem have images inserted into the blank spaces. Hugonnier frames this with the fiction that 'Richard Hamilton's bedside book had been stolen and its interstices have been filled with images changing its reading for one night.'

*ART FOR MODERN ARCHITECTURE The Guardian, 19th July 1954* (2019) was made as a birthday gift for someone born on that date. The news of that day has become history: in Geneva, hope is low for a peace settlement in 'Indo-China', with the Vietnamese delegation objecting to the partition of their country; Charles Chaplin is entertained to dinner by the Chinese Premier Chou En-lai; there is a new role for the territorial army in the event of

nuclear war; it is a decisive week for Senator McCarthy; and - crucially for media history - the BBC abandons using 'stills' and instead accompanies each item with a news film.

The work is 'occasional' in two senses. The first is that it was a gift for a birthday. Many of Mallarmé's poems are also 'occasional', made for a feast, celebration or commemoration. He also addressed envelopes with a quatrain of verse which the postman had to decipher to deliver the letter to the correct address (four lines because it takes four folds to make an envelope from a sheet of paper). The second sense is that the newspaper itself is occasional, recording the particular historical events on that day. By covering the pictures with silkscreened coloured squares, Hugonnier obscures the representations with a reference to both universal standard colours and to the supposed pure presence of modernist abstract painting typical of the 1950s global West, suggesting that these effectively censor the conflicts and specificities of history.

## Glenn Ligon

For a number of works, Glenn Ligon has printed letters through stencils or silkscreen. These may be of texts by Black authors, or about Blackness and Black history, or instantiate racism, and certainly involve critique as well as articulating the complicated intersection of Blackness and queerness; however the process, drawing on abstraction, also invokes potential - including singularity and unpredictability - not limited to repetition. The medium - paintstick, ink - is sticky or else spreads, and as the letters of the texts repeat down the lines, or from one painting or print to another, may come to saturate the surface, rendering the text illegible, creating a disjunct between the factual materiality of the painting and what the words are saying, in our time of distrust. The materiality with which the letters are produced covers the surface - canvas or paper - with the blackness of the medium. In the process the letters forms assume new, singular shapes. The abstraction produced by the process - which often has results unexpected by the artist - opens up new possibilities.

Mallarmé, too, draws attention to the materiality of the surface and of the letters inscribed on it. Instead of the words referring to something unspeakable beyond, as in a negative theology, silence is brought into the poem as the blank areas of the page. Instead of following the line in a reading, the text of *Un coup de dés* may be read in multiple directions, so that the poem is manifestly different not only for every reader but for every reading. This freedom is opened up by the way in which Mallarmé incorporates the empty areas of the page as an intrinsic part of the experience of reading the poem. The French word 'blanc' means both blank and white. For Mallarmé paper of the surface of inscription is privileged, with its whiteness both asserted and unmarked: he generally gives 'whiteness' the epithet 'virginal'. In *Un coup de dés* the black print on a white page is elevated, spiritualised, by alluding to the white stars of a constellation in the night sky as they take the form of the constellation of Ursa Major on the page, an early exemplar of a 'concrete poem', a concreteness that Ligon takes in new directions in his paintings.

In Ligon's earlier paintings, the surface - which may be white or other colours - may end up covered by the medium, figure and ground merging in blackness. Unexpected things happen, like the streaks in the *Off Book* paintings of 2009, which Ligon embraces. If a 'blank' emerges, it is fortuity arising from the process or 'operation' rather than than being a basis.

With the *Debris Field* group of paintings on paper the letters have left the lines altogether, and morphed thanks to the viscosity of the ink into shapes no longer recognisable as the letters that they were. They appear to be flying across the page. In the works in the exhibition, *Debris Field (Fence) #3* and 7 (2019) made with etching ink and ink marker on paper, the letter forms are fronted by freely drawn grids - in no. 3 they appear to be escaping above and below the fence, implying a movement towards freedom. It is as if the grid that on a page would guide the placement of type, or the grid characteristic of a strand of modernist abstraction, has come to suggest a fence or barrier, in relation to which we might be tempted to apply metaphors of migration and fugitivity, with respect to both the legacy of slavery and the Global South, to the movement of the morphed letter-forms. Ligon compares these fugitive yet intensely present letter-forms to asemic writing - the written equivalent to 'speaking in tongues', and to the inscriptions of Henri Michaux. It is the very withdrawal of legibility which opens other futures discontinuous with the present repetition of oppression and exclusion, walls and barriers.

A 'debris field' is defined in Wiktionary as 'any area, non-dependent of local, space, or contour, that contains the debris of wreckage, impact, sinking, or other material that once constituted a complete object. Debris fields can be found at the site of air crashes, water vessel sinking, explosions of buildings, collapses, and other events that render a whole entity into components, pieces, or other non-whole items.' Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* describes a shipwreck, with the master poised to cast the dice. The shipwreck would have other connotations if thought in terms of the 'Black Atlantic'. Rather than a constellation, the outcome of the disaster is the debris field. However, in Ligon's painting the fragments, letters freed from line and syntax, are mobile, and suggest the potential for change, for new languages, new forms of writing, and other ways of being.

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## References:

I recommend *Mallarmé*, in French with prose translations by Anthony Hartley (Penguin, 1965) and Stéphane Mallarmé, *Azure: Poems and Selections from the "Livre"*, trans. Blake Bronson-Bartlett and Robert Fernandez (Wesleyan University Press, 2015).

As well as Mallarmé and innumerable authors who write on him, this introduction has benefitted in particular from reading:

Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (Continuum, 2006)

Jacques Derrida, 'The Double Session' in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1981), and  
[https://archive.org/stream/TheDouble\\_201701/The%20Double\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/TheDouble_201701/The%20Double_djvu.txt)

Line Herbert-Arnaud, *Peter Downsbrough: Le lieu et l'espace d'une oeuvre* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2022)

E. M. Loevlie, *Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau and Beckett* (Oxford University Press, 2003)

Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divigations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Harvard University Press, 2007).

Anne Toner, *Ellipsis in English Literature: Signs of Omission* (Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Notes to Part 2 and Part 3 will follow.