

Notes to After Mallarmé Part 3

21 June – 19 July 2024

...perhaps...a constellation

Michael Newman

A constellation is written towards the end of *Un coup de dés* in two ways, through a noun that designates it, and as an image in the layout of the type on the page. It is posited in the poem that it also appears in the night sky, but in the mode of 'perhaps'. This means that it may or may not be. The particular constellation, the 'Great Bear', is supposed to point to the North Star, a star used for orientation.

Does a star have a different mode of existence to a constellation? A star is a scientific fact: we detect it with instruments, or see it with the naked eye. A constellation is a set of relations between stars interpreted to form a figure. It is in the reading. We read the sky like we read the words on the page. Words become image: we look at letters on the page as we do at the stars in the sky.

'Perhaps' refers to contingency and potential. Something is contingent when it would just as well not be: perhaps there is a constellation, perhaps not. If the constellation is not actual, it is retained in the virtual mode as potential. That the mariner in the poem hesitates to throw the dice indicates the desire to remain at the moment of potential.

The constellation could be said to be the outcome of the throw of the dice, like the pattern of the dots, especially since as the 'Great Bear' as 'Septentrion' associated with a number.

For Mallarmé, writing at the time in his lecture 'Crisis in Verse', the question was whether poetry was to be free verse or involve metre and rhyme. Free verse would be the explosion of poetry, which would need to find another basis for its necessity, what made a poem beautiful or right. Classic French poetry is structured by the 12-syllable Alexandrine - getting it right would be like throwing two sixes. Free verse would also need a relation to number, but in a different way. It would also need its own way of spacing in relation to silence and the blank which are no longer outside or beyond.

As the title suggests, chance is not abolished by the number thrown. This does not just mean that the constellation or the poem are provisional, since the aim for Mallarmé is to overcome chance through the necessity of what is achieved by writing and reading. This could mean that the necessity of the poem or the law of the cosmos are themselves contingent (as Quentin Meillassoux suggests, and Duchamp had already demonstrated in his *Three Standard Stoppages*).

If the constellation is the offer - momentary, illusory, based on nothing, yet glimmering above - the prospect of salvation, or at least of a meaningful universe, the stars may also wander out of their place. Disorder. Chaos. The dice are cast by a mariner from a shipwreck, out of disaster, *dés-astre*.

John Murphy

Mallarmé wrote a number of poems called *Éventails*, 'fans', which were written on fans that could be opened and closed and used to create a cooling breeze. These were gifts to women, including his wife and daughter, and his close friend Méry Laurent.

John Murphy similarly wrote lines from a poem on a found fan that contained images of flying storks and foliage. The lines, which include 'filled endlessly with folds of dark desires', come from the poem 'Emplie de' by Henri Michaux, which also provides the title to the work. So lines playing on the word 'pli', 'fold', a word also dear to Mallarmé, are written in the folds of a fan. A fan involves folding and unfolding, whatever is on it will appear and disappear, like when one opens and closes a book. For Michaux, the fold is mobile, implying that destruction and creation are intertwined, a theme also of other works by Murphy who has made 'leprello' or concertina books, which are mid-way between a book with a single gutter, and the zig-zag of the fan. But a fan is also used to reveal and conceal the one who uses it, and to create a cooling breeze, which implies a certain heat of the flesh.

The fan of Murphy's *Emplie de* (1997) is probably antique Chinese, and already had images on both its sides. Along certain folds the artist wrote by hand lines from Michaux's poem, in the original French on one side, in English translation on the other. The fan also has a dedication, and is what is called in relation to poems of Mallarmé, 'occasional', it was a gift. The fan, even on display under a vitrine, always implies the performative, and in Mallarmé's time this type of fan would typically have been used by women attending the opera, concert or theatre, so it has an association with music and dance.

On the 'English' side, there are birds and flowers, on the 'French' side storks are flying over waves, with scatterings of dots perhaps suggesting clouds. That there is water is apt to the storm and shipwreck of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* - perhaps the storks imply some kind of salvation, like the constellation.

An atlas of constellations sits under a vitrine beside the fan. It is in effect an altered readymade made in 2013. Murphy has picked out with dots of gouache the constellation of the Great Bear, which is the one that appears in Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* as a shape of the text as well as a reference. Different colour dots are used according to the size of the stars. The atlas page has the form of the bear drawn to join the stars.

On the opposite page Murphy has written by hand the inscription: 'Meaning Coagulated on the Flank of the Bear', which is also the title. He collects quotations for the inscriptions in his work, often juxtaposed with an image, and forgets the source. This suggests that what is important is not the relation to the source text, but precisely the separation or displacement of the fragment, and its being rendered enigmatic as a provocation to the imagination in the space between the inscription and the image or object. Mallarmé also placed poems either written on objects (such as envelopes or stones), or beside them. His poems, too, involved enigmatic breaks which both suggested that the words were written over a kind of nothingness, and opened up new relations through syntax.

For Mallarmé the constellation, which arose in Mesopotamia and Ancient Greece, often involving stories of violence and metamorphosis, represented a transfiguration. The constellation seems to come out of the throw of the dice by the mariner whose ship has been wrecked in a storm. However, after the death of God, or the withdrawal of the gods, the constellation can only be in the mode of 'perhaps'. Whether there is meaning in the universe, rather than the horror and indifference of the infinite night sky, is undecidable.

The repetition of the name 'Paganini' which Murphy in a work of 1998 has written on one side of a folio of music manuscript paper 96 times creates an emptiness or void that the very repetition in a sense 'circumscribes'. (Murphy has also made a monochrome painting where the faint outline of Paganini's hand may be seen at the upper right corner.) The staves on the other side are empty, so if on one side there is an evocation of nothingness, as if by the frantic, automatist repetition of the bowing of the virtuoso violinist who was supposed to be possessed by the devil (and therefore already the corpse suggested by the whiteness of his skin). On the other side there is the paradoxical notation of silence. This recalls the score for John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), where instead of notes, whatever sounds are occurring at the time are punctuated and framed by the raising and lowering of the piano lid three times. Cage, like Mallarmé, aligned his work with chance and contingency, and in other works through his use of the I Ching related this to cosmology, but without seeking the necessity of form that Mallarmé pursues (eventually by seeing this necessity as itself contingent).

Another thing that Murphy, together with other artists in the three parts, shares with Mallarmé, is that silence and nothingness or the blank rather than being outside the work are internal to it, while at the same time the relation of inside and outside is completely transformed by the fold.

Cerith Wyn Evans

In Mallarmé's poem *Un coup de dés*, the constellation of Ursa Major points to the North Star which has historically been a means of orientation for mariners. This visual fix depends on the stability of the cardinal directions, what is up and what is down, and that the horizon, which divides earth and sky and acts as a visual limit that moves as we move, does its job. But what if the horizon took time off, put itself out of work, *désœuvré*? And what if it became, instead of the condition for the perspectival gaze, an object itself?

Cerith Wyn Evans's works titled *Leaning Horizon* (2015) loiter, leaning against the wall, perhaps as a come-on, or regarding the viewer with a hint of contempt. They seem to be performing, to invite a degree of anthropomorphism, at the same time as they have detached themselves from service. Their relationship is also with each other. They are of different lengths, and their temperature is not the same, one is warmer, the other cooler. How does that reflect their relationship? The space created between them seems more emotive than geometrical. It is important that they are neither horizontal nor vertical, that they are leaning, they 'incline' in all senses of the word. Queered horizons. This is different from the horizon's role in perspective, locating the vanishing point of the monocular eye of the bodiless spectator in a Euclidean geometry. Wyn Evans allows the horizon to multiply and assume their own bodies, tubes of illuminating gas. Normally the horizon is where the world, centred on the human viewer, disappears. Is it the flipped gutter of a page? For his notes on the horizon, Wyn Evans uses the typographic form of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, which implies also that the works with objects and light involve a poetic.

That the horizons are neon strips switched on, subliminally flickering or pulsating, introduces duration. Light is finite, it can flash up and vanish, a quality of fireworks beloved by Mallarmé and his friend Whistler, and utilised when Wyn Evans presents text in fireworks. In other works, Wyn Evans has turned this durational characteristic of light into morse signalling of texts. We could also say that the *Leaning Horizons* signal to the viewer, or ignore them, which may come to the same thing.

As an 'occasional work' for *After Mallarmé*, Wyn Evans has produced a set of photographs in A5 format that he took of the Shigemori garden at Tofuku-ji temple in Kyoto. It is a Japanese

stone or 'dry' garden, where pillars are placed amid the raked eddies to match the configuration of the Big Dipper constellation, which is a part of the Great Bear that represents the back half of the bear's torso and its long tail. The photos are intended to be handed to visitors to the gallery, so they can inspect them and order them in any way they want. In that way the visitor becomes like the 'operator' in Mallarmé's unpublished notes for the *Livre* performance, who places at random the pages or leaves on shelves of a black lacquer cabinet. What Mallarmé had in mind must have been a piece of furniture in the Japanese style, which suggests that his engagement with chance draws on the aesthetic of an other. The Shigemori garden is after all a piece of reverse appropriation, since the constellations as we know them come largely out of a Western Classical tradition of myth and fable. What does it mean, then, that the designer used for the columns of the Big Dipper the supports of an outhouse, otherwise known as a latrine?

How does a poem become an artwork? What is the relation, and difference, between these two modes? That is a question for artists working 'after Mallarmé'. An artist who famously addressed this is the Belgian Marcel Broodthaers, a poet who inaugurated his transition to an artist by embedding a volume of his own poetry in plaster, rendering it unreadable (and presumably hoping that he could sell it for more). He also performed an operation on the Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*. This involved 'redacting' with black rectangles the lines of text, which in the poem are distributed on the page in different sizes, so that the poem becomes something like an abstract artwork, and unreadable. He also changed the word 'poème' on the cover to 'image'.

For his work *Shadows* (2012), Wyn Evans, rather than blocking in the rectangles on the page, cut them out, creating windows. There is another version, *S=H=A=D=E (evacuate)* (2017) where the pages are in a passe-partout surrounded by a wooden frame, and are to be shown as a complete set. *Shadows* may be seen individually or in sequences, the latter installed so that the gaps for the missing pages are apparent as voids. They are framed in perspex to the size of the page, so that the view through these apertures is to the wall behind. Transparency seemingly replaces the opacity created by Broodthaers operation (we can sometimes discern the text, in reverse on the verso), except that what we see are shadows cast on the wall as well as the rectangles of light. We might recall here Pliny the Elder's story of the origin of painting (really of portraiture and drawing), where Butades the potter's daughter circumscribes the shadow on the wall of her lover who is about to go off to war. Also, the viewer peers into these apertures as if through the peep-holes of Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*, visible at the Philadelphia Museum of Art from 1969, the second subtitle of which, after the waterfall, is 'le gaz d'éclairage', 'illuminating gas'. This reminds us of the dimension of desire involved in looking at and seeking to look through the 'pages' of *Un coup de dés* become surfaces of an artwork in *Shadows*. Nor should we forget psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's interpretation of the story of the painting contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius: Zeuxis who had painted a picture of grapes that deceived the birds who flew up to peck at them, turned to Parrhasius to ask that he draw the curtain that covered his painting so that it could be judged. Of course it was the curtain that was painted, and Zeuxis, rather than the birds, deceived. Looking through rather than looking at. From this Lacan adduces that the peculiarity of human desire is to see what lies behind, that, indeed this just is the definition of desire (including the desire for knowledge, and to interpret the work of art). If there is an allusion in *Shadows* to Plato's cave, where what is to be seen are cast shadows produced behind the backs of the viewers - the cave needs to be left for truth to be discovered in the light of the sun - the 'truth' is desire based on nothing (Mallarméan so far...) but the body.

We might also see the paper surfaces with their excised rectangles as *passes-partout*, the cardboard frames within frames used to present and protect a work on paper. Following

Jacques Derrida we might say that these *passes-partout* are 'necessary supplements' upon which the very presence of the framed work depends. In *Shadows* Wyn Evans in a reversal turns the page itself into just such a supplement, where what is framed by what is framed is an emptiness that makes us want to look through, and what we see is the projection of the light through aperture itself (a photographic metaphor), and the shadows cast by the sheet of paper that hit the wall.

Florian Hecker

The title of Florian Hecker's work *Resynthese FAVN* (2017) from his Vienna exhibition of the same year *Hallucination, Perspective, Synthesis* refers to 'L'après-midi d'un faune' which is the title of a poem by Mallarmé which inspired a 'Prélude' by Debussy and the dance by the Ballet Russes with Nijinski in the title role. This multi-channel work with an installation of theatrical decor on a stage, explored the possibilities of the synthesis of timbre, which had become of interest to composers and poets, as had non-local colour to painters in the later 19th century when Mallarmé was writing and attending concerts. Timbre is a specific quality of sound, perceived as a sensation, which is not reducible to notes and chords: the same note played on different violins will have a distinct timbre on each. If timbre is associated with a source like this, can it be produced synthetically, from code (not just digitally recorded). In effect, in experimental music this would cut across the distinction between 'musique concrète' and synthesized music. There is an analogy in perfume, where rather than from natural oils, new scents are produced synthetically by manipulating molecular structures so that the scent produces a particular sensation. It is also possible this way to make a scent that produces a sensation that has no source in nature. This can be described metaphorically or evocatively - 'poetically', or else scientifically, by describing the structure. Synthetic scent was already being produced in Mallarmé's time.

The solution to the problem of synthesizing timbre required a rethinking of the nature of sound. Instead of sound-waves which are added one to another and built up into a construction, which may in a contrary direction be analysed in to constituent parts, the conglomeration broken down into its elements, sound may be thought of in terms of particles which, when they move at random, create noise, a type of chaos. This is sound in its contingency, containing all potential in a virtual state. To actualise means to subtract, or filter, or 'sieve' the particles of sound. Certain operations can allow this to produce synthetic timbres. But how to understand 'synthesis'? How to not think of it as fusion or the production of unity under the auspices of the One. An approach that Hecker has taken to this is 'chimerisation', the combination of disparate sounds without fusing or unifying, like the chimera formed of three distinct beasts.

Speculative Solution 1 (2011) applies this separation across a sonic field. Different sonic formations occur without any apparent connection with what went before or comes after. They are sequenced, but could also be happening simultaneously across a spacial field, like a universe or a cosmos. This challenges a traditional 'metaphysics' of sound, deriving from St Augustine on time, passing through Emmanuel Kant, and reaching Edmund Husserl who takes the melody as the key to the way that time-consciousness works: the melody is heard as such through the retention of the just passed and the anticipation of that which is to come, synthesized with the upsurge of new sounds in an extended present. In *Speculative Solution* it is impossible in the present moment of hearing to remember what has been heard and to anticipate what is to come. Each sound burst or sequence is in a radical break from what has been and does not limit what might, or might not, happen in the future.

It is important that this is not the result of randomisation (used these days for 'temperature in AI') since, as Quentin Meillassoux suggests when he poses the problem of how 'to make perceptible a contingency that would not be random', the random is an aspect of statistical necessity that enters into calculations of probability as they were developed since the 17th century. We are very close here to Mallarmé's question in *Un coup de dés* which is how as a poet or artist to go 'beyond' chance without abolishing it, since a throw of the dice never does that. The constellation is that which is not random, yet seems like an epiphany that comes from the dice-throw as the very operation of chance. This is exactly why Mallarmé does not just state the constellation, but adds 'perhaps'. That is to say that the constellation, which is supposed to overcome chance, and provide meaning, is contingent. Similarly, *Speculative Solution 1* achieves a contingency that is not random, or one might also say a necessity that is contingent.

This cannot be a universal claim, nor are we talking about an 'essential' contingency. Contingency is contingent, which also means historical or archaeological. *Speculative Solution* is dated, and recorded and played on a now almost obsolete technology that is becoming fashionably retro, the CD on a Sony CDP D11 professional CD player. To stand in the gallery playing the CD on a dated player through headphones provokes a certain self-consciousness at the same time as the sound-field that moves around in stereo has a cosmic, trans-historical quality suggesting, indeed that it might be grasped and predicted mathematically, as physicists do with the signals of the material, inter-stellar universe.

Ursa Major might point to the North Star, but constellations are not reducible to start or their 'scientific' basis. As Meillassoux suggests (an idea already proposed by Duchamp in his *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913-14)), there is a contingency to scientific laws which, as Hecker's installation implies, is connected to the historicity of the technologies in relation to which they emerge.

Emma McNally

Emma McNally's drawings of 2023, *VP1* and *VP2* are in pastel pencil and gum arabic on paper. The drawing is both by hand, and with the pastel attached to a drill, and a machine that rubs the surface. Drawing seems more like a process of emergence as a result of a set of operations with different tools - minimally a stick of pastel - than a signature 'writing'. It's rather as if the drawing is brought about by a play of forces and energy fields. A further drawing, *VP3*, has spots of white gouache, like stars picked out in an atlas of the night sky. The lines form spirals, sometimes juddering from the drill, shapes formed by forces, like spiral galaxies such as the Milky Way. These are sites of creation and destruction.

McNally often works with both hands at the same time, one holding the stick of pastel or charcoal, the other the machine that abraids the surface, not so much erasing as creating another kind of materiality out of its energy and movement on the pigment. Form is undone, 'messed up' as McNally likes to say, which releases the possibility of its becoming something else. This process involves different rhythms of making, vectors of intensity and extensibility or distension, a structuring motility irreducible to the opposition of flux and fixity. (David Nowell Smith) While Mallarmé writes that 'toute âme est un nœd rythmique', every soul is a rhythmic knot, which manifests itself in the rhythm of the poem, which becomes all the more crucial in free verse no longer structured by the twelve syllables of the Alexandrine line, for McNally the rhythms of the work participate in cosmic rhythms of many kinds.

McNally's *TC1* is a mobile of two pieces of paper crushed to create a landscape of folds and suspended from the ceiling. The letters refer to 'Topographical Cartographic', indicating both

the topological character of the shapes and their connection to cartography. Classical mapmaking - the kind that assisted colonisation and extraction from conquered lands - developed alongside and through perspective geometry, centered on a 'monocular' subject that owns the property that it surveils. Topological geometry produces a completely different cartography where the distinctions of inside and outside, and the distances of here and there, no longer hold, as points far on the surface touch each other across the folds. The thicker lines with circles where they cross on the lower part suggest the diagrammatic. In the history of science, diagrams came to be used when the nature of the universe and the behaviour of the particles and waves which comprise it could no longer be grasped through representational images. For Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, diagrams map forces, and need to indicate processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, which is very much congruent with McNally's drawing process

Aggregate (2024) comprises of different elements on the ground in the corner, crumpled paper with drawing on, paper made into the shape of a cone, paper soaked with kaolin clay so that it is like something liquid that has solidified, compressed balls of darkly pigmented paper. It is as if different sounds, processes of formation and deformation, different scales all co-exist without hierarchy. As if a dance had stopped for a moment, provisionally, and will pick up again as these could just as well form a different configuration, and another yet again. This 'could always be otherwise' is the very definition of contingency. This is different from the gathering that comes to us from the classical philosophical tradition of the 'logos'. The idea of an 'aggregate' (which comes etymologically from the bringing-together into a flock) suggests a coming together that is not under the auspices of the One (one Being, one God, one Idea, one Good, one big Other). It is rather a multiplicity capable of forming multiple, if not infinite combinations and relations.

McNally's way with contingency is not the same as Mallarmé's. For the poet, contingency is linked to his religious crisis in the 1860s, so with the 'death of God' as Nietzsche puts it. This leads not so much to Nietzschean affirmation, but to the idea that the loss of ground means grounded in nothing, which becomes, as it takes the place of God, 'The Nothing'. McNally's contingency is rather a generativity that grows not so much out of nothing as out of the potential for or potential as chaos. The definition of chaos is all possibilities at once and on the same level, which is also the definition in the dimension of sound of noise. McNally has found a way of drawing, extended into material formation and deformation, that works with this dynamic combination of order and chaos. She ceases to be a subject looking at and making objects and landscapes, and becomes part of the process, of the cosmos. Her constellated drawings - if we can put it that way - are momentary arrests in the process.

Joëlle Tuerlinckx

A small work by Joëlle Tuerlinckx hangs in *After Mallarmé Part 3: Theory of Walking 'Le présent absolument' série PLACE-PAGE (#1)*, a collage where an X bisects a blank beer mat, underneath a newspaper picture with the head of a woman looking downwards, and the headline 'Le présent absolument'. This could refer to the present moment as in 'Yes, absolutely, the present' or the idea of an absolute present. The 'X' on the beer mat below could be read as a cancellation sign - the present cancelled? - or as an 'x marks the spot', the place to stand from where the world becomes present as a perspective. What is crucial is the taking place of the place, which is also the taking place of nothing: 'RIEN...N'AURA EU LIEU...QUE LE LIEU'. The X, of course, also means that the present is precisely not absolute, since it is from a point of view. The beer mat may be a memento of intoxication, that we are in a drunken boat,

which takes us back via Rimbaud to the shipwreck of *Un coup de dés* and the newspaper headlines as a model for the graphic distribution of the poem.

Presentness is performative rather than descriptive - the outcome of a set of operations - which may be extended to the exhibition as a whole.

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