Progress in Preparedness

Vahe Guzelimian

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PROGRESS IN PREPAREDNESS

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THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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At this time my thought and my photographic work are informed by the following: chance and probability, Jung’s notion of synchronicity, and studies in quantum physics. These sources form the background of my attention and thus influence my interpretations of the sensory information the world provides.

The primary purpose of this thesis is to discuss the contribution made by these sources toward my "progress in preparedness." I will examine my current photographic work in an effort to show how this preparedness guides the synthetic nature of my creative process.
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Chance is perhaps the pseudonym of God when He does not want to sign.

Anatole France
The Role of Criticism

The axiom of criticism must be, not that the poet does not know what he is talking about, but that he cannot talk about what he knows.

Northrop Frye

Two notions that must be dealt with prior to a discussion of my place in the world as an artist are relevant to both criticism and to man's perception of the universe. The significance of criticism in the visual arts lies in the fundamental inaccessibility of visual expression. Visual art is not a representation of what the artist knows, rather it is itself the shape of what the artist knows. It follows that visual art is not communication at all, but the inchoate pattern of knowing. The viewer may very well be affected by confrontation with a work of visual art, but the work's meaning remains non-discursive. Northrop Frye claims that "criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb." Since art is anterior to communication, criticism must apprehend the unstated notions of art through the agency of the tradition of discursive writing.

I feel that a work of art is analogous to the nature of the universe. When we behold either art or the world we make sense of them through the interjection of our perceptual, cognitive system. Through this system we are able to expe-
rience both art and the world as stable, orderly, and meaningful. Because we learn this culturally derived system early in our lives, we accept our experience of art and the world as objective. In fact this objectivity is not a fundamental aspect of art or the world, but of our perceptual system. Seeing and knowing are indirect and relative means for arriving at an understanding of either art or nature.

I maintain that an individual's experience of both art and the world forms only one version of them. This version is unique just as every individual's experience of the world is unique. In art, this unique version of the art object occurs as only one instance of the work. It is the role of the critic to articulate other possible ways of apprehending the work of art, other instances of it. Just as one performance of a musical composition forms only one instance of it, and the range of all performances forms a definition of the composition, so the critic's presentation of probable instances of the art object provides us with a fuller understanding of it. Criticism is to art as knowledge is to reality.
Metaphysical Premises

There are very many different equally true descriptions of the world, and their truth is the only standard of their faithfulness. None of them tells us the way the world is, but each of them tells us a way the world is.

Nelson Goodman

The nature of the universe is not available to us directly; we are able to touch it only with our conceptual systems. As an artist, I feel that I must decide whether the order we see in the world is an aspect of the world or is an illusory construct posited by our perceptual systems. This chaos/order question cannot be answered through scientific experimentation, because the very tools of science serve our hypotheses as extensions of our conceptual systems; it remains a metaphysical issue.

That the order of the universe is a construction or that it is a true state of affairs are both tenable positions. The logical positivist tendency is to discard such metaphysical notions which cannot be tested operationally; I believe it is the role of the artist to pursue exactly this sort of endeavor: to explore the scientifically unexplorable. Nietzsche describes art as "the truly metaphysical activity of man." Once we have accepted this notion, we may better understand that art and science are complementary fields of
exploration yielding complementary meanings. My commitment to metaphysical positions such as the chaos/order issue grounds me to a fundamental meaning or faith. This leads me to consider sets of associated ideas whose synthesis is discovered within the progress of the photographic work. My decision concerning the fundamental nature of the universe is a prerequisite for the making of my creative work.

For artists who make photographs the chaos/order issue is a particularly relevant one. The camera image continues the Renaissance tradition of using a geometrically derived system for describing the world. This system offers such an easily applied key for the interpretation of the camera image that the myth of the universal truthfulness of the photographic image is mistakenly taken on faith by most viewers. Our conviction in the transparent nature of the photograph gives it the power to obscure the chaos/order question. Our contact with the ubiquitous photograph continues to affirm the idea that the universe exists in an ordered state. Rather than comprehending the source of this order as integral to the system of representation itself, we assume that it is a property of the world. Photographers who attempt to explore alternative visions of the world may find their efforts thwarted because the camera-derived image locks them into a Euclidian description of the world.

My metaphysical premises are founded on the belief that there is no order inherent in the universe. I would contend that order is a human construct necessary for the apprehension
of meaning. which in turn is necessary for the satisfaction of survival needs such as food and shelter. The fact that integration and selection occur at the level of the retina itself suggests that it may be impossible to have access to the world before organizing its data at a preconscious level.

Any study of the order of either the macro or micro universe gives us more information about the human system or tools utilized in the study than about the universe itself. This is necessarily so because outside the system of human cognition there is no perception of any sort. All perceptions of the world are couched in thought. We know that the map is not the territory; there is no vision or thought that is not conventionalized. N.R. Hanson says that "we do not begin with the visual sensation and then turn our theories and interpretations loose on it. In a most important way our theories are in the seeing from the outset."
The greatest mystery is not that we should have been flung down by chance between the profusion of matter and the profusion of the stars; it is, rather that, in this prison-house, we can summon from within ourselves images powerful enough to deny our insignificance.

André Malraux

Maurice Merleau-Ponty states that "Science manipulates things and gives up living in them...it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals." He then claims that art "draws upon the fabric of brute meaning which scientific operationalism would prefer to ignore." This is not to imply that science does not give us meaning about the world: science gives us a different form of meaning than that which we receive from art. Science moves from specific experiences within a controlled situation to generalization, whereas art moves from general experiences to a single, synthesized view.

Modern science since quantum physics has given us new conceptual models for the apprehension of the universe. Our conceptions of causality, continuity and determinism have been replaced by the notions of acausality, discontinuity and indeterminism. Certainty has been replaced by probability. These new investigations were not anticipated by
the philosophy of science, but led to the formulation of the contents of current philosophical and metaphysical investigations.

Quantum physics has upset our conventions for the conceptualization of the universe more so than contemporary art or philosophy. By doing this it has served an artistic purpose: to displace old belief systems and to create new and fantastic descriptions of the universe. Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* relates the conceptual modifications that have resulted from studies in quantum physics to the ancient Eastern forms of knowledge. Consider for example the notion that all things in the universe are connected. This is a view shared by both modern science and Eastern mysticism. In his book Capra claims that the "bootstrap" theory of subatomic particle physics leads to the following conclusion:

> In the world view, the universe is seen as a dynamic web of interrelated events. None of the properties of any part of this web is fundamental; they all follow from the properties of the other parts, and the overall consistency of their mutual interrelations determines the structure of the entire web.

That the system of scientific experimentation can spiral out from studies of matter and provide connections with metaphysical and spiritual modes of knowledge is an unprecedented situation for us today.

* * * *

My studies of the work of Marcel Duchamp led me to investigate the concept of chance. With this concept I hoped to clarify the chaos/order question both in philosophical terms and in the terms of image-making. Duchamp
used chance to determine the shapes and locations of various elements within the *The Large Glass*. The form of the three Draft Pistons in the Top Inscription was obtained by photographing a square piece of gauze three times while its shape was transformed by a draft from an open window. To locate the locus of points for the Nine Shots, Duchamp fired matches dipped in paint from a toy cannon at the *Glass* to the right of the Top Inscription.

When chance determines the form of a work of art, some aesthetic decisions are avoided. The artist's sense of formal "rightness" which Duchamp defined as "a habit, a repetition of the same thing long enough to become taste,"\(^{13}\) is suspended since he has no intentional control over the form of the chance outcome; it cannot be a repetition of anything that is familiar. It is idealistic to maintain that with chance operations one may approach a purer aspect of the universe free from distortions imposed by the mediation of the artist's conceptual system.

Physicists describe chance as an objective construct. They are able to show that if a very large number of cases is studied, then chance may be described by statistical law. When chance is objective, individual outcomes within an investigation may be predicted with significant reliability.\(^{14}\) When a large number of events is studied, however, eccentric results having significant implications cancel each other out in favor of the anticipated objective pattern.

Jung's concept of synchronicity introduced the concept of the subjective nature of chance: "Synchronicity means the
The simultaneous occurrence of a certain psychic state with one or more external events which appear as meaningful parallels to the momentary subjective state...." In Jung's view, the eccentric coincidences in an individual's life are full of subjective meaning and are proper objects for the study of subjective chance. In this context we can better understand Merleau-Ponty's claim that the nature of science leads the investigator to overlook meaning, since the investigator considers large numbers of cases which obscure what may be significant eccentric results. This is a self-defeating endeavor for the scientist looking for the order of the universe because, as Jung claims, "where meaning prevails order results." 

In my view chance acts as a unifying principle for the contrasting notions of the subjective and the objective. Both the objective nature of chance, as determined by statistical law when very large numbers of outcomes are considered, and the subjective nature of meaningful synchronous events, are twin notions spawned by the concept of chance. The beauty of chance is Duchamp's "beauty of indifference." In its indifference chance is the truth of the universe and the truth of living matter. The deliberate use of chance in the making of an art object grounds the work in a truth beyond the conceptually constructed reality in which we dwell.
Progress in Preparedness

For order does not display itself of itself; if it can be said to be there at all, it is not there for the mere looking. There is no way of pointing a finger or a camera at it; order must be discovered and in a deep sense, it must be created. What we see, as we see it, is mere disorder.

Jacob Bronowski

The sources to which an artist reaches out for inspiration and for conceptual direction form his "progress in preparedness." The integration of these sources into the context of an artist's life and work provide him with a directed posture to the world. Preparedness then becomes a structured need for the artist, a need which guides him to new resources and new techniques in the making of art. It determines which aspects of the world of knowledge and experience may be considered as candidates toward art's synthetical function. This progress in preparedness focuses the artist's attention on the world and through this concentration assists him in arriving at a world view.

Unlike the scientific method, preparedness must simplify information of the world without any hope of discovering any conceptual finality since it must confront meaning at every stage of its development. The meaning that informs an artist's progress in preparedness is available for the viewer in the work he produces. However, the viewer's conditioned
sensibility cannot resolve this meaning within any conceptual framework that is culturally derived. Meaning can only be touched by the viewer's background of consciousness where his self resides; this is the same realm in which the artist's preparedness synthesizes his sources, and through which he is able to make art. This is not to say that the creative product is necessarily transcendental or obscure. The essential nature of art is not accessible to a mode of comprehension that is culturally determined. It is also true that the meaning of an art object, though not obscured, may be difficult to articulate with the aid of verbal language.

The work of art is thus a product of a synthetical function. It cannot be converted into digestible material through analysis, which is culturally determined. However, the artist's preparedness may be approached through the parasitical act of a secondary creative act, criticism.
The Photographic Work

This globe has given birth to a representation, act after act, of a cosmic script: we are, in spite of ourselves, the action of a succession that becomes simultaneity; we are the agents of analysis that becomes synthesis; . . . we are the children of chance that becomes symbol.

Richard Herz

The fundamental characteristic of photography is the camera's ability to make an image which may be read symbolically as a record of the world. The manner in which a photographer organizes elements in the world demonstrates his feeling for a desired order; it is an invented, expressive order. My concern for the issues of chance, order, and intentionality led me to concentrate my attention on the randomly ordered objects which lay on the floors of people's work areas. These objects were brought together by an individual's practical needs, yet their locations were determined by an unintended design. The manner in which I composed the photographic image of these objects isolated and thus emphasized the juxtapositions of these objects on the floor.

My use of the camera in forming this isolation was an intentional one: every compositional decision, every position of the camera was carefully considered. My preparedness led me to particular subject matter and a particular manner of organizing it. The resulting work attempts to synthesize my ideas about the concepts of chance and intentionality. The
achievement of a marriage between chance and intentionality is my primary goal.

Though the color sense and the organization of space described by these color photographs worked well together, I was frustrated by the feeling that my premises remained clouded within the intentionality of the composition of these pictures. I recorded scenes which I found in the world without physically modifying their location on the floor. I hoped to impose meaning on this scene through my intentional composition of the camera-formed image. I thought that this would parallel the manner in which we invent our perceived order of the world through the use of our perceptual system. This aspect of the world, however, remains hidden for the viewer. These photographs appear so tightly composed that the viewer is able to assume that the elements of the scene had been carefully arranged for the making of the photograph. My attempts at presenting a marriage between chance and intentionality had failed.

As I worked in the darkroom attempting to get an accurate color balance for one of these prints, the inside cup of my processing drum fell free from its position and rolled around inside the drum, scratching the print wherever it made contact with it. I threw it into the trash and continued printing. Some time later I retrieved the print and examined it. To my surprise I discovered that the scratch marks and the stain of other chemicals in the trash, though randomly placed, entered into relationships with the photographic image.
This print made more sense than the straight prints I had made; these accidents revealed more clearly hunches that had their source in my progress in preparedness. These marks were made entirely by chance within an artistic context. For me, this had the effect of "canning chance". The idea of disturbing the surface of the print with chance marks as well as the formal quality of these marks, set up synchronous resonances with my sense of preparedness. I embraced this accidental discovery because it clearly advanced the visualization of my metaphysical premises.

The pattern and shape of these marks occur within an uncontrollable random process. They resemble elements of our world which we ordinarily do not see, such as dust in the air, electrostatic energy, and radiation. As I continued to work in this manner, I found that if felt pens filled with water-soluble ink were shaken up with the print before the exposure, I would achieve chance-determined shifts of color after exposing and processing the print. I also noted that as the duration and rhythm of the shaking of the drum was varied, the pattern of the marks changed. In this way, I was able to control the marks' character, color range, rhythm, and intensity. In this way I was able to control the limits of the chance-generated marks.

The rhythm of the shaking of the drum with the objects inside determines to some extent the pattern of the marks and the color shifts. My emotional state as well as the music I hear in the darkroom determines my rhythmic motor movements. The music becomes a new factor which I control by giving the
choice of music some careful attention. As a result, the marks may be considered as expressive as well as chance-generated.

I have allowed some of these scratches to accumulate over a long period of shaking the drum in order for them to compete with the photographic image. In some cases the image maintains its integrity, while in others its integrity is severely challenged. Sometimes the scratches destroy the illusion of the photographic image by bringing the viewer's attention to the surface of the paper while at other times the scratches seem integrated with the image to form a whole.

For the first time, my current photographic work is able to direct me to future work. I am now motivated to begin ordering the objects in the space which I decide to photograph. I am now willing to scratch on the negative itself in an intentional manner. These marks will then enter into relationships with the chance-generated marks on the print. These methods will give me more control over the outcome and thereby enable me to visualize my progress in preparedness more successfully. Arranged chance, however, will remain a primary tool for the making of future photographs.

It may appear to the reader that my wish to take greater control over my photographic process works against my aim of finding a marriage between chance and intentionality. However, in setting up the situation I am to photograph, I will be able to introduce a more diverse group of elements into the photographic composition. Some of this material will allow me to work with symbols relating to my personal exper-
iences; I have been frustrated by the objective appearance of my current work. To date I have not been able to use the symbolic language of photography to deal with personal ideas because I limited myself to the making of intentional, formal organizations of the world as I found it. These future photographs, then, will depict an invented world, a world synthesized by a tendentious integrating principle resulting from my progress in preparedness. Chance will again be the agent for the making of marks on the print as well as for determining the outcome of events which I set into motion.
NOTES


