

## Chasing the Wreck: On Accidents

Michael LeVan

Accidents always seem to come as a surprise, either negatively as a disaster or positively as a collision with good fortune. Though we often think of accidents as intrusive outliers of experience, they are with us, at least virtually, in any situation. The possibility of serendipity or catastrophe is implied in nearly every human endeavor. Every communication and transportation technology, every rhetorical and aesthetic situation, every moment of relational engagement, and every grandiose or mundane event already contains the possibility of exceeding itself, becoming a wreck. Our intentions and expectations are defined by the chance of disruption and disaster. The accident is always with us as an open horizon of fortuity or tragedy.

Rather than being defined in relation to an essential concordance of experience, the accident is an event, a becoming-discordance of our best-laid plans and expectations. It is why we have to believe in the future, though the future these days, according to Paul Virilio, is increasingly produced across a horizon of fear.<sup>1</sup> Accidents, nevertheless, are agents of change, the performative becoming of events. Whether positive or negative, they institute new optimalities for experience and thought, for performativity and performance, for politics and aesthetics. In other words, the wake of an accident is the arrival of a new world, the enactment of a new “normal.” Tragic accidents ending in death immediately refigure the texture of entire webs of relationships; disabling (de-enabling and re-enabling) injuries refigure relations with space, language, perception, and others; good fortune and chance insights can bring innovations, joy, and beauty.

The substance of any techné is sometimes no match for its accident. Accidents initiate their own histories of (aesthetic, epistemic, and ontological) innovation. Paul Virilio, the philosopher of the accident, explains that every technical innovation is at the same time an innovation in accidents. The invention of the automobile also invents the car crash, the train the train wreck, the airplane the airliner disaster. This negative other can be discerned in any mundane technology. The email listserve invents the embarrassing “reply all” message, and the auto-correct function on smartphones creates the puzzling and sometimes disastrous accidental text message.

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**Michael LeVan** is Senior Instructor in the Department of Communication, and Affiliated Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies, at the University of South Florida. He is a founding editor and editor-in-chief of *Liminalities*.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Virilio, *Art as Far as the Eye Can See*, trans. Julie Rose (New York: Berg, 2007).

Yet, as Virilio explains, we always try to disavow and hide the centrality of accidents. He writes, “the beginning of wisdom would above all mean recognizing the symmetry between substance and accident, instead of constantly trying to hide it. Acquiring a tool, any new piece of equipment, industrial or otherwise, means also acquiring a particular danger, it means opening your door and exposing your private world to minor or major hazards.”<sup>2</sup> Any technical “progress” is also a progression of catastrophe.

For our purposes here, we can see that every evolution in the technologies of performance—medium, relationality, identity, culture, etc.—brings with it new particular accidents. For example, add video to live performance and you add the video players, projectors, media, and screens that can all break down, be miscued, or disrupt the time and space of the performance. The innovations and machinery of multimedia and digital performance are at the same time the introduction of a whole new set of ways everything can go horribly awry. But at a more persistent and quotidian level, the habits of our bodies, perceptions, and ideologies also populate technologies of performance. Here we find the secret—the shadowy double—of performativity: in producing itself it also produces the means of its own catastrophic breakdown. Identity, community, discourses, economies, and other assemblages of performative enactment create the conditions of their own undoing. Performativity’s constitutive power of repetition creates both the expectation of sameness and the anticipation of difference while also erasing its status as a constitutive force. Performativity, in any context, is in a constitutive dance with the accident, the conditions of its own dissolution, revealing a primacy of precariousness. Performance scholars and artists are in a position to explore these wrecks—a landscape of accidents—and the contributors to this issue do just this (happy accidents, glorious glitches, embodied vulnerabilities, the smiling face disaster culture, and performing the accident in the blink of an eye).

Virilio only exposes the negative sense of accidents, and it is important not to forget the positive potential of serendipity and chance that also comes with every technical innovation. To extend Michel de Certeau’s notion of “making do,” we can observe that nothing has ever been created that has not also been put to some sort of unintended, alternative use.<sup>3</sup> Think duct tape as the figure of the accident(al) tool *par excellence*. In an aesthetic context, the invention of a new medium, or “technical support” as Rosalind Krauss call the post-medium condition of contemporary art, invites artistic and epistemic explorations of the limits of the medium or technical support.<sup>4</sup> This is a vision of artistic practice as chasing the wreck. To wreck a medium

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Virilio, *A Landscape of Events*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 54-5.

<sup>3</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition,” *October* 116 (2006): 55-62.

by exceeding its limits is a paradoxical *essential accident* required to perform creativity in art, philosophy, science, or living.

The accident-as-chance has a long history in the performance arts, whether in the methods and games of surrealism—such as automatic writing, collage, the cut-up, the exquisite corpse game, and involuntary sculpture—or in the generative methods of improvisation, or even in the stumble-upon epiphanies that comes from wandering through ideascapes hoping for a spark of fortuitous juxtapositions and connections. All of these methods chase the wreck of prior limits.

In his book on the painter Francis Bacon, Gilles Deleuze claims, “modern painting begins when man no longer experiences himself as an essence, but as an accident.”<sup>5</sup> Deleuze describes artistic creation as a battle against clichés, which we might at least tentatively equate with the sedimenting reality-effects of performativity. Artistic creation is thus a matter of wrecking clichés in order to evade and exceed them. The chance accident plays an important role in this, but it is not the same chance as a game ruled by probabilities (e.g., as in roulette or the lottery). A chance is not just a lucky occurrence, but also a “choice or action without probability.”<sup>6</sup> In Bacon’s paintings, chance “is inseparable from a possibility of utilization. It is a *manipulated chance* ...”<sup>7</sup> The accident thus is what gives us a chance at insight and creation. The accident, in this sense, needs to be pursued. Chase the wreck.

Whether it arrives as a disaster, or a stroke of luck, or a manipulated wreck, the accident initiates transformation. Accidents both disfigure and transfigure. They change the world, and thus change how we orient ourselves to and inhabit the world. Through the essential accident we realize that habituation is simultaneously dehabituation. To be at home is to be in exile and vice versa. In the end the only surprise is the absence of surprise.



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<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 101.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 77.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, emphasis in original.