

## Accident School

### “Please push: door opens inward”

JUAN VILLORO

#### Aviation as a metaphor, or: “accident is my co-pilot”

On Saturday December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010 when I arrived at the ComRadio facilities in Barcelona to do my weekly appearance in “Ways of Living” show I found that the studios were transformed into a “war room.” All TV’s, all news cables and phone calls dealt only with a single subject: the air traffic controllers refused to watch the skies, condemning the half a million passengers travelling for the Constitution holiday to chance. The cease of operations happened without previous notice, like a natural cataclysm.

Months before, on April 2010, the ashes from the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Island were responsible for the gravest civil aviation paralysis in European history. In a way that is not always necessary, our modern way of life depends on travel. Tens of thousands of passengers travel to unknown places. Sometimes they do it due to an emergency; mostly they do it because low-cost companies offer good deals. In a society on the move, the possibility of transport decides our destiny. Movement has become an end unto itself: travel is sport, leisure and addiction—an acquired need.

Today, a curriculum without travel is synonymous with failure. Well-known artists rarely limit themselves to living in a single city—they are only “based” there. The nomadic condition is the last name of the postmodern condition.

At the Science Museum in London, there’s a video exhibit on trash that humans have sent out to space. If those detritus could emit their own light, nights on earth would be lit by its shifting shine, a vast swarm of sick glow-worms.

Alienated from the environmental impact and the real needs of the population, societies organize themselves to move. Their provisional god is mobility. Is there a limit for the species on the move? Ending movement seems inconceivable.

Amongst the many expressions that Spanish journalists sought to describe the chaos caused by the air traffic controllers, the main one was “savage strike.” It’s no coincidence that it was so indeed. Nothing’s more opposite to progress and its lineal arrow that the closing of airports—a primitive revolt, the raw negation of our times.

And yet, despite everything, it’s possible to find something enlightening in the chaos that forced thousands to sleep next to their luggage.

Paul Virilio has suggested that an Accident Museum be created to understand technology through its failures, the forced pauses in celerity. Every mistake is pedagogic since it represents the exception in the habitual functioning of an organism, a system, a theoretical paradigm, rhetoric, or a regulated circumstance. Malfunctions allow for unusual access.

In the preface to the French edition of his novel, *Crash*, J.G. Ballard writes that, “The capital fact of the Twentieth Century, is the appearance of the notion of *endless possibility*. This mandate of science and technology calls for the vision of a brutally parenthesized past—the past is no longer pertinent; the past is dead—and for innumerable alternatives given to the present.”<sup>1</sup> In the years that have gone by after the birth of Twitter’s six-speed blender, the gadget society heightened its confidence in pushing buttons. Instant gratification is an essential consequence of this shift. The species that evolved thanks to the opposable thumb falls into despair if a gadget “presence of money in a bank account and Internet offers sexual satisfaction online.

From the intravenous paradise of the sixties to the virtual paradise of the new millennium, the demand of the Age of Aquarius—enjoyment Here and Now—has come back as technological doping. It’s no surprise then that numerous psychedelic veterans turned into Silicon Valley techno-gurus: altered states of consciousness—the “separate reality” as Carlos Castaneda called it—take place inside computers.

How can we pull the breaks on our instant gratification society? An accident represents a suppression in time and space—energy in an unheard of state of repose. It’s not alien to movement but feeds on its broken speed.

To investigate the importance of the accident, we must understand to what extent we’ve become transportable subjects. Airports are the sanctuaries of a Society of movement. They are delocalized spaces that respond to a nowhere design with a trademark—that is: the multinational pencils that intersect at the offices of Norman Forster, Renzo Piano or Jean Nouvel. From the point of view of their physical profile, they increasingly resemble hangars: open areas, determined by the tasks of storage and flow. The reason behind this transformation is simple: users accept travel as an urgent trouble; they belong to the final stage of nomadism—that of mistaking themselves for cargo. At the dusk of airmail, airports symbolically substitute mailboxes: no one goes there to travel, but rather, to be sent.

<sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: This citation is taken from the “Preface to the French Edition” (Préface à l’édition française) of *Crash!* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1974)

Building design has become progressively mild and transparent: it prefigures an aerial destiny on earth. In 1930, Tempelhof airport in Berlin was built by the Nazi government to glorify terrestrial power. It imposingly places in stone what the traveller leaves behind, what is “lost” by taking flight.

From 1956 to 1962 Eero Saarinen built another construction that was emblematic of old aeronautics: the TWA terminal in New York. Although the curves on the roof resemble futurist aircraft fuselage, the interior remits to a primordial past, an immense grotto, a spectacular version of the maternal uterus. Airborne is the adjective that Saarinen’s placenta truly merits.

Appropriately then, the building was described as the Grand Central of aviation. The vaults created not only a terrestrial, but a submarine illusion as well. The risk of flying was conjured through a cavern, a tunnel, a telluric shield.

Saarinen’s imagination was directed to a sedentary species, nostalgic of a lost underworld. Aztec culture is also familiar with this idea of belonging: all Prehispanic cosmogonies see the earth as womb and tomb—the alpha and omega of the life cycle. Chicomostoc, the place of seven caves, is our mythical origin. It wouldn’t have been surprising that in the last century, during the sixties, an architect influenced by Félix Candela’s domes would have proposed an airport like Chicomostoc to climb to the heavens, with seven caverns for take off.

Saarinen’s terminal received the battering of its time, and in 2001 it was bought by American Airlines. By then, a cultural displacement had occurred: terminals are no longer used to comfort earthlings fearful of leaving, but rather to tend to millions of vocational deserters. Revealingly, it was thought that the TWA terminal merited the museographical destiny of a restaurant and convention centre. Then they preferred to adapt it to contemporary uses, which required vast spaces for travel. The ensconced walls had to be opened. This singular clam suffered a natural death.

Transformations in travel culture have brought symbolic changes causing the abandonment of architecture that presupposed the preeminence of the sedentary to move on to the supremacy of transience: the hangars for people in transit.

Paul Andreu, who has built airports in China, Dubai and Jakarta, conceived terminal 2-E in Roissy, Paris, as the most elegant hangar: a cyclopean tube covered in fine woods. Richard Rogers covered the ceiling of Barajas’ terminal 4 in Madrid with undulating wings (the waiting room as a ship), and Renzo Piano created a sort of superwarehouse to wait for planes in Kansai, Japan. Old airparks, belonging to a civilization of space, calmed us with their terrestrial metaphors of permanence. Contemporary airports, representatives of a civilization of time, calm us with metaphors of transience.

Airports are still created with links to an old conception of nature, such as Santiago Calatrava’s airport in Bilbao. Nonetheless, these are decidedly exotic places. Calatrava’s low, curved ceilings suggest the insides of a whale. After Jonah’s myth, after Moby Dick and Pinocchio, arriving there leaves us with the feeling of being shipwrecked (our only consolation is that our luggage also landed there).

Summary of the world, the modern airport negates the notion of “local colour,” offering products from globalized franchises, and reducing destinations to letters and numbers. Standardization zones where race is dissolved in codes: when the boarding call comes, being male, Caucasian and catholic is the same as being an Islamic woman also heading to gate 37-B.

At times, this citadel that negates difference and individuality is humanized by disaster. A snowstorm, an attack, or a mechanical failure suspends routine. An offense to the religion of haste appears on screen: DELAYED.

Putting an airport on the map is as problematic as administering it. In developed countries, airplanes usually encounter the opposition of environmentalists; in poor countries they encounter that of people who distrust a modernity that excludes them.

It’s no coincidence that in Mexico, in the past thirty years, the most severe conflict surrounding public works had to do with an airport project. The failure of former president Vicente Fox to find an alternate venue to the capital’s air traffic in Texcoco or Atenco represented a clash between the needs to a globalized country and a sector of the population for whom the benefits of the twenty first century are alien. The Doorway to the Skies was supported by transnational cosmogonies, but didn’t take into account vernacular factors, or only took into account the landowners in order to expropriate their lands. The nomadic ambition was unfamiliar with sedentary demands. In 2001 and 2002 two historical times collided: peasants armed with machetes stopped the international airport project. Atenco is the place where flowers are cultivated for the different rites of our life cycle—from birth to death. The clock belonging to that market follows paused biographies that every so many years require roses or gladioli. On the contrary, diverging clocks rule the airport where the common time-zone is jetlag. Two completely opposite conceptions of space and time entered in collision. There wasn’t the least precaution taken to synch clocks.

Fabrizio Mejia Madrid perfectly summarized the situation in his book, *Salida de emergencia (Emergency Exit)*: “a small dusty town combats the State of global, millionaire investments for one reason only: to be taken into account. This is San Salvador Atenco’s demand to the authorities who announced the construction of a new airport on television, who where never present to dialogue—not even when the elected

mayor was removed from office, or when geological measuring machines and construction workers were taken hostage—and who never reacted to their demonstrations with machetes held high. It's not that they wanted to bring the machetes with them, but rather that only the blade of a weapon could create an impact and allow them to be heard, that is, 'televised'."

A large part of the planet cannot conceive life without airports; another part only becomes visible when they rise in opposition to an airport, that is, when they place a local bolt on global expansion.

How necessary is it to take off from the earth's crust? Most airports are saturated. At the same time, most airlines present losses. How have we arrived to an economy where overbooking leads to bankruptcy? The society of movement's illusions feed on jet fuel. Both technological expansion, where means often become ends in themselves, and the travel imperative, have created an intoxication that is hard to sustain—an economic doping that subsists on overdose. To confront the crisis, one airline fuses with another and an airport bankruptcy is resolved with the creation of an alternate airport: the problem is not solved; instead, to diminish its scale the framework within which it happens is broadened.

During the spring of 2010, the Eyafjallajökull volcano revealed the lack of rationality of contemporary civil aviation. The ashes floated right at the height at which airplanes fly and winds weren't blowing enough. This atmospheric alteration had immense effects.

The airplane hiatus revealed that Europe had given up on transportation alternatives that had previously proven effective. Commercial navigation had been suppressed and trains no longer sufficed. A world without a Plan B. In this quandary, aeronautics experts gave a proof of technological fundamentalism: they asked for more flights, more planes and permission to circulate at different altitudes. By ramifying variables, partial damage is supposed to diminish, but this does not discard another chain reaction of even more dire consequences. The accident demands an essential change in order not to present itself again.

Virilio has explained that each technology creates its own accident: electricity produces blackouts. In societies that abandon their previous faculties this causes serial misfortunes. Lack of electricity at a stationary store in Mexico City means the end of all activity: employees don't even know how much an item costs because prices are on the computer. Before we get to know them, machines generate the superstition that they work. It is rarely anticipated that they will not. On the other hand, error correction is delegated to the machines themselves (or to the next generation models) with the risk that self-regulation might signify further breakdown, as happens with HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

It is even less anticipated that people will behave as accidents, as during the "savage strike" in Spain. This event reveals two handicaps in a modern society: that of anticipating a contingency, and that of facing it. The army occupied airports efficiently, but this did not settle the air traffic controller's problem, a problem created during years of abusive syndicalist policy. Under similar circumstances, Ronald Reagan resorted to massive layoffs. Did Spain have recourse to a different contingency plan? Facing a lack of alternatives, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's government prolonged the state of alarm, transforming the emergency into a norm—human accident was faced by converting crisis into habit.

In what way is it possible to foresee the unexpected and guarantee rescue options? It is impossible to eradicate the possibility of an accident. Weather, societies and machines break down. What is left over are the red numbers—the notion of error.

### **Publicity stunt: triumph feeds on failure**

While air traffic controllers opted for technological blackmail as a pressure technique, an ad for Sabadell Bank covered the streets of Spain. On it, Pep Guardiola, trainer for the F.C. Barcelona soccer team affirmed that, "what makes you grow is defeat, a mistake." Praise of the fall coming from the only trainer who has conquered six titles in one season. An ulterior result—absolute triumph—justified that eulogy of failure. No doubt there are mistakes of high pedagogical value: they serve as warnings to overcome future challenges. At times, an artist corrects a problem in a work in his or her following piece, in the same way that a doctor better his treatment in his next prescription.

Accident does not completely annihilate: to speak of it, there is the need for external survivors or witnesses. But it's not a defect that is easily overcome (such as the failure of a soccer team that will have other opportunities). On one side is life; on the other, death; in the middle is the accident. The failures that lead to that border are neither invigorating nor publicity stunts.

A pedagogy based on this class of mistakes would lead to radical learning. Accident admits no repetition—it is by nature unique. The lesson it teaches is definitive, it questions the chain of causality that lead to that point of no return. This means the end of the process that made it possible. The supersonic Concorde flew for 27 years. It was the top technological display of civil aviation. In a way that is typical of a doped-up economy, it was also bad business until it was in an accident on July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2000. Then, on November 26, 2003 it broke the sound barrier for the last time.

On January 16<sup>th</sup> of that same year, the Space Shuttle Columbia exploded as it made its re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere. Everyone in the seven-person crew died.

In the case of the Concorde, its routes were kept up for three years after the accident. In the case of the Space Shuttle Columbia, its next flight was postponed year after year, until in 2010 the program was cancelled.

As opposed to the postman, who always rings twice, accidents do not offer second chances. Studying them does not help to face the same thing under different conditions, but rather to get rid of or modify the mechanism that allowed for them to happen in an extreme way. In this sense, they are a resounding option for self-criticism. They teach us to be better, if not different.

How to enter Accident School? I don't mean the admittance tests or requirements, but the physical situation: the gateway. Every threshold symbolizes a border and the way of crossing it anticipates what will be found on the other side. Security checkpoints inhibit not only weapons transportation but also spontaneous conduct. Conversely, revolving doors suggest a continuum—entries and exits without beginning or end. Others yet encourage access even more: they open with an electric eye at the very presence of the newly arrived, generating the feeling that we possess a special power to be admitted.

Doors that open to the outside waken the suspicion of haste. Voracious thresholds, they hit your nose in their urgency to be crossed.

The Accident School deserves a solid door, uncomfortable to a certain extent, a door that summons will and strength to be pushed and that opens to the inside as an example of what is housed within. Many things have broken here. What burned and plummeted and cracked and was charred has a story to tell. Its mystery is always an "inside." Someone was in the midst of that twisted mortar. The accident matters because of that. Haloed in dust and detritus, the body suffered an unrepeatable circumstance. Accident is the armour of chaos. Seeking what is inside is an act of introspection. Accident students are delayed victims. As survivors or witnesses, they understand that they too could have succumbed. Realizing what they just missed, they discover their loss: they know they are vulnerable. The first impact of a catastrophe is physical; the second is psychological. What happens as cataclysm comes back as an examination of one's conscience.

Accident School: door opens inward.

### **Accident as aesthetics or "the black swan doesn't use a safety belt"**

The stock markets have become privileged centres for accident contemplation. It's no coincidence that one of the most popular texts on the subject came out of them: *The Black Swann*, by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, a Lebanese expert in erratic money flows.

Even though the book collects commonplaces, it also sheds new light on certain subjects that dominate the news. Taleb created the "black swan" theory to define events that have three characteristics: they are unexpected, have massive repercussions and generate explanations in hindsight destined to suggest they could have been expected. World War I, the attack on the twin towers, or influenza A are examples of "black swans."

It is worth thinking further on the third characteristic Taleb mentions: the accident gives rise to unfounded calming explanations. In order to not face the apparent lack of meaning that the unexpected brings with it, we accept a diffuse but incriminatory responsibility: danger was in full view and could have been prevented. Sharing a feeling of guilt helps dealing with the accident as an "oversight" and, therefore, as something that would not have happened if we were paying attention.

Most stories that give meaning to disasters in hindsight are warnings for the future: "we committed a mistake that we must not repeat." The internal logic of the accident is rarely recovered. What is decisive, what is sedative is to think that the partial fault has a palliative: when five cyclists break their skulls, law forces us to use helmets.

This is how social atonement is created ("we learn from our mistakes") and destiny is granted a statistic difficulty (a helmet corresponds to each cyclist).

Taleb's sworn enemy is precisely statistics. In his opinion, there is no way to predict or explain events that are distinguishable for not complying with the norm. The tide of opinion polls, flow sequencing, trends and other measuring instruments suggests we dominate our surroundings. Nonetheless, one of the paradoxes of data abundance is that it becomes hard to distinguish amongst them. The volume of information hinders communication.

To avoid the mere study of reiteration, Taleb proposes a fractal approach to Black Swans. Instead of accumulating data of what happens in the same way, exceptions must be foreseen. It's not about guessing the future but about admitting its unexpected condition.

Notions of error and failure are usually not much studied in the era of technical reproduction. Since technology is not keen on finding solutions in a previous era, there is no "classical" reserve that serves as a permanent source of solutions.

On the contrary, art benefits from its previous resources and admits error in its creative process. Subject to interpretation, the perfect work of art does not exist. "Fail better," Samuel Beckett suggests as a way to improve in an always-tentative activity.

Accident has had a fecund artistic career. The history of aesthetics has been that of a shift. If the Pythagorean ideal judged things to be beautiful in themselves and responding to a natural harmony, in his philosophy of composition, Edgar Allan

Poe considers beauty to be an attribute of the gaze. The world before art was not beautiful, we discover its beauty through art. The exercise has undergone all kinds of bragging and whims.

Once it investigated the possibilities for order, modern art concentrated on disorder. In *The Golem*, Gustav Meyrink writes: “the world exists so we can think it to tatters.” All of the artistic genres of the twentieth century used fragmentation, appropriation, trash, crevices, the possibilities of everything that comes into shock and falls apart—accident—as resource.

The gaze adopted new ways of enjoying the unexpected. Lautréamont canonized the new beauty as “the chance meeting on a dissecting table of an umbrella and a sewing-machine.”

It would be impossible to sum up the ways of accident in art. For now I stop on an example that is closer to testimony than to the deliberate search for the aesthetic.

For over sixty years, photographer Enrique Metinides has created a unique registry of the accidents that take place in Mexico. His more than 100,000 images offer a documentary archive of catastrophe. According to an urban legend, when ambulances and fire trucks drive in front of his house, they turn on their sirens to salute their biggest witness.

Walter Benjamin warned on the loss of “aura” in the work of art through mechanical reproduction. This became more acute with digital processes and the ubiquitous cell phone cameras. The immense majority of photographs are neutral testimonies: they lack aura, the invisible presence of the artist who modifies the real by registering it in a subjective way.

Since he began photographing at the age of 12, earning the nickname of El Niño, Metinides saw disasters in a particular way. His images put into play what Milan Kundera calls “beauty by mistake,” i.e. elements that are destined to reject taste but instead generate a strange attraction. And yet, to solely underscore the aesthetic of these forensic images is to distort them.

It is obvious that morbidity and perversion can play a role in the contemplation of corpses. So, is Metinides’ collection of atrocities the work of a sybarite of tragedy or that of someone who gazes with childlike candour? In a deep way, the photographer has not stopped warranting his El Niño nickname: collector of miniature ambulance and police cars, he stages toy accidents to photograph them. But his photographs do not depend on an aesthetic composition. One of his most well known photos is that of Adela Legarreta Rivas. The journalist was leaving a beauty salon when she was run over by a car. She remained crushed under a lamppost with the serene attitude of a mannequin. With her fresh make-up, this victim does

not pose for eternity of her own will or that of the photographer but by that of chaos. If the protagonist of “Un sueño realizado” (“A Dream Come True”) by Juan Carlos Onetti seeks to stage a real death, the woman captured by Metinides’ camera captivates with the ambiguity of she who, without knowing, was done up to die.

J.M. Servín has called Metinides “the paparazzo of hell.” This expression is exact. We face a voyeur of unlikelihood. He does not necessarily like what he sees; he likes to see exceptionally what could remain unseen.

This grammar of disaster reaches singular moments in a Mustang that sinks in a lake; the girl who cries next to her dead boyfriend in Chapultepec park; a body throwing itself into the void from the Latinoamericana Tower; the woman hung in a park; the Hotel Regis turned into a pile of debris after the 1985 earthquake; a subway car cut in half. In all of these cases, the gaze’s opportunity is surprising—unlikelihood at the moment it happens. Even though Metinides arrives on the scene after the event, his camera gives it the illusion of the present. His merit is not that of a sum (the added gaze of the artist) but rather of a subtraction (by avoiding any gesture alien to the catastrophe, Metinides preserves the instant before it has history and is normalized by interpretation: we face the unusual that doesn’t stop being unusual). The “aura” of these images emanates from the accident itself—what nonsense that which incoherence communicates by putting reality in doubt.

It is absurd to understand these images exclusively as an aesthetic project. Even though they are sold in galleries and are the object of critical snobbery, they also belong to the realm of criminology: they are evidences of the gaze.

Enrique Metinides’ photographs combine the gruesomeness of the real with impassive testimony: clashes, intersections, accidents of sight.

### **Edifying catastrophes**

“All blondes have their points,” wrote Raymond Chandler. He then compiled an inventory of all the dangers they provoke. With disaster, the opposite occurs: danger makes difficult the understanding that each accident has its own thing and can seduce.

Routinely Hollywood has filmed photogenic catastrophes (we Mexicans can’t forget *Earthquake*, the 1974 superproduction with sensaround sound that prefigured the fall of our capital city eleven years later). The planet has ended numerous times on the screen without killing the cameraman. Rarely do those expensive conflagrations serve to explore the positive lessons of fright.

The recording of catastrophe has had more generous interpretations in literature, where fractures generate resilient accounts. Daniel Defoe makes shipwreck into a baptism that makes possible the start of a new life in a desert island (*Robinson Crusoe*).

While wandering across the battlefield in Borodino, Tolstoy's characters realize that shrapnel does not interrupt the torrential flow of everyday life (*War and Peace*). In a city devastated by an epidemic, Camus discovers unthinkable links of solidarity in moments of health (*The Plague*). In Auschwitz, Primo Levi finds moments of indelible dignity (*If This is a Man*). John Hersey minutely recovers the testimonies of six survivors of the atomic bomb: six ways of surviving in the charred air (*Hiroshima*). Ballard conjectures that the total suppression of violence in the gated communities of the rich leads to aggression as recreation (*Millenium People*). Heinrich von Kleist takes advantage of a seism to sound the paradoxes of destiny by bringing down the walls of two prisons: the earthquake frees two lovers who were unjustly imprisoned; they understand this is a sign of providence and they believe they have been forgiven yet they ignore that the trials of men does not cease their thirst for vengeance and that the earthquake can be seen by others as divine punishment for the sins of the couple who procreated outside marriage (*The Earthquake in Chile*). Cormac McCarthy invents a posthumous ecology and narrates what happens when the world ends (*The Road*).

Surviving tragedy can waken the guilt of not having followed the ways of others, or, on the contrary, the vanity of feeling chosen to go forth. Is that second chance a demand for self-criticism and amends, or a prize that arrives like a blank check?

Literature has explored the complex and contradictory reactions of those who discover, amazed, that they are still alive. In some cases, once it is written, the horror transforms into a source of pleasure. J.G. Ballard scrutinized the pleasures of the predator. His main contribution to science fiction consisted in placing it in the present, suggesting that modern technology is more haunted than a Victorian mansion. In relation to this, he commented that, "The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality."

Convinced that Homo sapiens require a certain amount of functional violence, Ballard revised the aseptic illusions of wellbeing, security, and a "perfect" life. *Millennium People* deals with gated communities where the absence of fears transforms violence into sport. In *Cocaine Nights*, this idea expands into a luxurious community in the South of France. In this well-manicured ecosystem, everything is agreeable; there's only the need for a touch of cruelty so that it remains human.

In *Crash*, Ballard crosses a decisive limit in the literary imagination. The plot reveals little of the interior life of the protagonists: marionettes of technique, they are over determined by an essential desire—to have accidents. The author noted that in these pages he had accomplished the first narrative encounter between technology and pornography. *Crash* describes the erotic possibilities of injured bodies. Auto bodies compress like luxury wrappers of the industrial era; windshields

fly into shatters; the gear stick penetrates the driver's flesh. The grammar of desire is not alien from media temptations: in the society of the spectacle, fame is an extension of eroticism. There are famous accidents that others try to recreate. To die following a code of gest is a cultural fact: accident as quote, high-impact montage as tradition, prior victims as precursors.

Danger can be an essential component of attraction. In Japan, the fugu fish attracts because its venomous bladder is lethal: an expert chef extracts it, but what is interesting is he could fail. This gastronomic Russian roulette combines pleasure with death, or rather, allows pleasure to emanate from death's proximity. The same occurs with a number of extreme sports, or with the hobby of breeding venomous spiders. *Crash* associates speed's failures with delight; characters are attracted to each other because of their wounds. They are the counterfigures of another technological obsession: eternal youth through the use of collagen, liposuction and scalpel. Ballard finds a rare technological humanizing in broken bodies. Botox freezes homogenized faces, conversely, injuries singularize. A wound is a proof of character. In the eighteenth century, Lichtenberg wrote that, "It is enough for someone to have a physical defect for them to have an individual opinion."

*Crash* deploys the alphabet of hurt flesh: each scar tells a story. Ecstasy is shared accident. Eros and Thanatos above the speed limit.

Revealingly, Ballard praised his novel's pornography, not its eroticism. His characters submit to a mechanical exhibition: bodies like "soft machines," to use Burrough's expression. Slaves of speed and technique, they court their annihilation until they achieve it. In his narrative survey, Ballard criticizes fetishism of machinery—the spectres of status and sensuality that emanate from it.

The same critical effort lead Mexican artist, Teresa Margolles, to elaborate jewellery with glass from vehicles that had been riddled by bullets. The frost from the shattered windowpanes can enter the victims' bodies or remain on the asphalt as a violent shine. By transforming it into necklaces and bracelets, Margolles reveals the obscenity of violence: horror as luxury, its possibility as fetish. How many pleasures that we enjoy come from opprobrium?

Accident can be the subject of a work, but also its method. Hunters of fate have created combinatory devices to escape the censorship of consciousness—from Ramon Lull's thinking machines, in the thirteenth century, to the twentieth century avant-garde: from Dadaism to surrealism through OuLiPo and William Burrough's Cut-Up.

Each technology enables chance appropriation of previous material. In 1986, The Beastie Boys recorded "No Sleep Till Brooklyn," a videoclip that announced a

new recycling. In it, the musicians arrive to a club and the manager asks them “Where are your instruments?” They show him an LP: “This is our instrument.” DJ sampling had become an art.

Digital photography has allowed flat sculpture on Photoshop, cell phones film on a microscreen and blogs are a one-person newspaper. Each new device makes an accidental appropriation of an older craft. In a simultaneous act it consumes it while giving it prestige. Digital transformed analogue into a classic method, in the same way that plastic gave prestige to steel, brick and stone.

Agustín Fernández Mallo, author of *Nocilla Dream*, has proposed the creation of an exonovel: a plot whose skeleton is outside the book (on twitter accounts, social networks and blogs created by the characters). The first effect of this multi-articulation of stories that progress in real time consists in remembering that Don Quixote achieves the same thing, without electricity. Fernández Mallo allows for an interesting play in perspective, an exercise in parallax where the object observed changes due to the spectator’s movement. His proposal of a future causes an accident in the past: innovation discovers something new in Cervantes.

In the milieu of visual appropriation, Carlos Amorales has proposed the creative use of copy and piracy. The artist makes circular designs in the hopes that they will be exploited by others, and that fate will allow him to recover them once they’ve been modified. Thus, he collectivizes designs. The process depends on accidental associations. Such is the case of his black butterflies created as a plague, ready to escape from the gallery and to invade other spaces. Amorales’ butterflies have been copied to decorate boutiques around the world and even made up a lingerie line. The artist incorporates these echoes and distortions into new pieces. The ebb and flow is incessant: a simple design (and therefore appropriable) is sent to the ocean of images in the hopes that it will come back to the shore with another castaway’s contribution.

The examples of the creative use of chance are endless. As an aesthetic means, violent and fortuitous shock is a bloodless process. As a life experience, it causes discourses of permanence. Catastrophe demands phrases that utter it. We only know that we truly survive once we find a way of saying it.

### **Accident as ethics: carnival, apocalypse, attack (the difference lies in the cause)**

“Perhaps we only have words for states of extremity.” Wrote Nietzsche. Each tragedy, each exacerbated moment creates its own rhetoric. In “The Writing of Disaster” Maurice Blanchot further formulates this: “The question concerning the disaster is a part of the disaster: it is not an interrogation, but a prayer, an entreaty, a call for help.” Nonsense sets off a search for signs—emergency literature.

How do accident stories operate? A curious fact serves as an anecdote. An anecdote that has a sense of consequence (things happen for a reason) qualifies as a story yet not all stories qualify as “incidents” or events.

Roland Barthes studied the structure of news facts. How to define those plots of the real? Firstly, by their truthful character and the impact they provoke. The more absurd, improbable or degraded the motivation for an “incident” the greater awe it will cause: “the cause revealed is, in a sense, poorer than the cause expected [...]; paradoxically, causality is all the more notable in that it is frustrated,” explains Barthes.

Fiction also takes advantage of this disproportion between the immensity of a fable and the fragility of the motivation: at the end of the day, *The Odyssey* is the story of a man who wants to go back home; *The Cherry Orchard* arises from the sale of an estate; *The Metamorphosis* is the literal version of a cliché: the protagonist feels like an insect.

News items that become “incidents” depend on a cause that fascinates due to its mundane, weak or outlandish nature. The plot’s impact doesn’t stem from the spectacular consequences but rather from its tenuous pretext. Based on a true fact, Sidney Lumet’s film *Dog Day Afternoon* represents a good example of the effect that caused an unexpected motivation for an “incident.” Revelation comes when Sonny, the protagonist, played by Al Pacino, explains that he wants to pay for a sex-change operation for his lover. He needs a fortune for his lover to become a woman—the unusual motive exacerbates the plot.

When causalities are extremely fragile, they can always be attributed to that inconstant demiurge: chance.

An attack is a tragedy but not an accident because it has a discernible cause (even though it might be irrational or reprehensible, it grants meaning to an extreme action).

On occasions, a violent death is attributed to a fortuitous circumstance in order to avoid political implications. On November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Juan Camilo Mouriño, Mexican Secretary of State, died while his plane plummeted right into Mexico City. He was at the forefront of the internal politics of a government whose principal and almost unique strategy has been the War against Drugs. The suspicion of an attack was almost immediate. Official versions maintained the accident thesis.

If a plane falls due to human or mechanical failure, the threat that it might have been brought down by enemies is dispelled. At first sight, the intervention of coincidence in a political context is calming. Nevertheless, every accident has a political dimension in itself: it represents the failure of an established model, and of

the community that trusts in it. This becomes more acute if the airplane passenger happens to be in the upper echelons of government. It defies reason that the Secretary who is responsible for exerting control died due to a lack of it. In this case, the accident hypothesis offers a metaphor for misgovernment. In the same way that the political explanation of an attack foregoes it from being an accident, an accident in a political environment becomes a self -attack.

### Motivational Apocalypse

Let's get back to chance as a constitutive part of life. If Ballard investigated the hedonistic and necrophilic aspects of catastrophe, Carlos Monsiváis finds in Mexico City and its rituals of chaos a strange conception of disaster. One of his most important formulations is that of "post-apocalypse." What does the vitality of this prefiguration of the underworld called Mexico City explain? Traffic that won't budge, too many people, pollution, lead in our blood, crime, earthquakes and the progressive sinking of the subsoil all suggest a place all too worthy of being abandoned. Has no one informed its inhabitants what goes on there?

It's not ignorance that keeps the inhabitants of the Anahuac Valley from leaving. The average *Chilango* is an advantageous specialist in calamity. If you tell him you were stuck in traffic for three hours, he was there for six. If you speak of a mugging, she's had three. If you show him your rash, he exposes a good-sized chancre. A sybaritism of atrocity leads us to show off the city's defects as reverse-patriotism. Let no one say there are worse places! What makes this monsteropolis attractive—dramatically inhabitable—is that urban disasters are not perceived as an omen of things to come, but rather as the result of what's already happened. An effective collective deceit allows us to feel on the other side of tragedy, in the ruined yet fortunate situation of post-apocalypse: "It was fucked up, but we made it."

In this territory of accidental survival, no custom is more deeply-rooted than partying. He, who was saved by a hair's breadth, uncorks a bottle. In his *Fenomenología del relajo*, Jorge Portilla comments that the least important thing about a Mexican party is its cause. Partying needs no origin. Any date—religious, civic—serves as insinuation. Once the get-together is managed, the pretext that motivated it is erased to give free rein to the operative dynamics of fun.

In *Chilangopolis*, news of the end of the world is compensated with the jubilation of being together. Apocalypse and carnival are assumed as simultaneous—and in some ways indistinguishable—activities. Monsiváis created a neologism to fuse both categories, today's dialectic of heaven and hell, ying and yang: Apocalipstick—the sensuous kiss of the end of time.

To have fun, Mexicans mix pain and pleasure. Receiving electric shocks; eating chillies that perforate the duodenum; drinking two gallons of *pulque*; or spending all of one's savings on a sheep are nuisances that excite us. Distinguishing the moment when the party degrades into tragedy is as complex as hearing the sound of one hand clapping. The cycle of decay and resistance of a Mexican celebration: first, you run out of ice; then, mineral water; then, soft-drinks; two friends pick a fight to annihilate each other; the end is imminent when you discover, with a redeeming illusion, that there's still alcohol left.

In the episode that Carlos Reygadas shot for the collective film *Revolution*, he records a colossal party, that is, a joyous version of catastrophe. During the climax, a car burns up in flames while one of the partygoers (the typical party crasher) pees with satisfaction.

Here, apocalypse, which only exists in other cultures as the augury of an unquestionable end, is an experience from which you come back with souvenirs. We flirt with annihilation and at the same time we assume we've overcome it. The levels of lead in our blood; the cases of placenta praevia; the recurrence of crime; the traffic jams that compete with eternity do not alarm us because they are perceived as proof of our survival, signs that in another moment, something worse happened. Decline has become environmental conservationism: what stops working serves as ornament, ruins are a tourist opportunity, bad news wakens the optimism of not having been there.

This ecology of calamity has created a culture of resistance—or, more precisely, of endurance—that defies traditional notions of urban chaos.

### The moral of that which is destroyed

In *Discourse on the Horror of Art*, a book of conversations with artist Enrico Baj, Paul Virilio makes the distinction between apocalypse and accident. In its rigorous application, apocalypse imposes the end of the world. Accident, on the other hand, suspends the flow of time without annihilating it. Thus it reveals something of its epoch: its unexpected obverse, the error that constituted it while not manifesting itself. Accident allows us to understand the logic of a system from its moment of exception. It dazzles, surprises and begs for an explanation. This is why it could be seen as an "inverted miracle."

Accident unleashes new and disruptive energies: it defies the mind and stimulates art, but also, and above all, it requires ethical reflection. There is no accident without loss, no collapse without victim.

Virilio proposes a significant cultural shift: after centuries of spiritualizing the matter through art, religion and thought, the society of technology demands a

different answer—locating the human on the side of life, on the side of the body. “All our culture consists in limiting the body in favour of the spirit. Even the horror of the concentration camps has to do with that will to eliminate the bodily. Today, we face the opposite necessity: rehabilitating the body [...]. The invention of the twentieth century is the S.O.S. sent out by the Titanic in 1912: ‘Save our Souls’. The invention of the twenty first century is S.O.B: ‘Save our Bodies’ that threatened by transgenics and huge manipulations.”

Speaking of the “body,” the author of *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* does not only refer to the physical body, but to the social body, the corpus, the heritage we have at our disposal.

The power of art comes from preserving that which is dead or could die. Its offensive audacity consists in refuting losses and giving an illusory possibility of permanence: “Beautiful instant, do not pass away!” Goethe dared to write.

Violence and destruction can only be creatively faced with an ethics of representation. What is inside the accident? A victim.

For the 2009 Venice Biennial, Teresa Margolles presented a noteworthy installation, curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina. This piece’s title was “¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?” (“What Else Could We Talk About?”). For it, the sombre rooms in a palace were “cleaned” with the blood of victims of violence in Mexico. Only at the end, a caption on the wall informed the visitors what they had just experienced. This devastating valorisation of an absence reflects the task of art in a country with over 34,000 deaths in the past four years.

Accident is always an alert call, misfortune in search for meaning. As opposed to massacre, extermination, execution and other forms of serial death, it demands a response in order to not repeat itself: it imposes self-criticism.

Learning from accident does not mean incorporating errors into a dynamic, but doing without them entirely. Degrees of reaction are variable: it is easier to stop producing a machine or a plane than modifying social conducts or natural cataclysms. All in all, incidents force us to recognize a radical failure. To borrow Jorge Ibergüengoitia’s expression, every accident is a “fast autopsy:” it reveals instantaneously what it holds inside.

Benjamin warned that what we call progress is an overpowering storm. The accumulative consumer and technology society finds in accident an ethics of dispossession. Not everything is realizable and there’s always something to save. Life beats defiantly inside the accident. It’s an emergency call, an S.O.B.: “Save our Bodies.”

This demand acquires a special historical dimension in a country that has started to say: “No more blood.”



### Under Discussion (2005)

JENNIFER ALLORA & GUILLERMO CALZADILLA

This piece was shot on Vieques, a small island off Puerto Rico. After decades of local efforts and international protests, in 2003 the U.S. government stopped the military experiments on the island. However, the challenge for the Vieques people has become another: to be able to get their territory back when currently, there are many speculative and turistic interests involved. Through this work, Allora & Calzadilla, make an attempt to mobilize the discussion along the island by creating poetic intersections between power, activism and environmentalism. This was the first public screening of the film in Mexico.