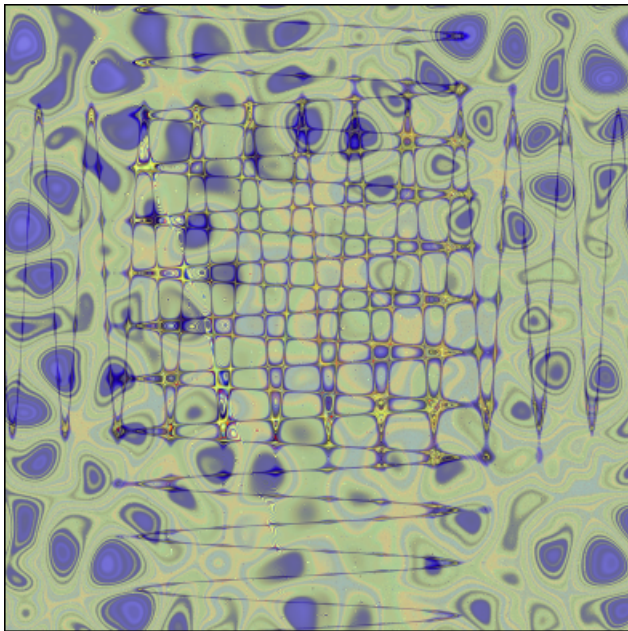


Chance and a Hidden Order

Brian Evans

Meaning, a much maligned yet simple word. Western culture has mired itself in a philosophical tarpit for nearly two centuries over the search for meaning and whether meaning has any meaning. Darwin came along and gave us the ability to factor God out of the equation of our existence by showing us to be part of the chance process of random mutation. Ever since it seems many of us flounder to justify morality, justice, charity, grace. Without a belief that we part of something greater than ourselves life becomes dark or blindly hedonistic. Without a belief that we are part of something greater that



ourselves why create art? What would be the intent?

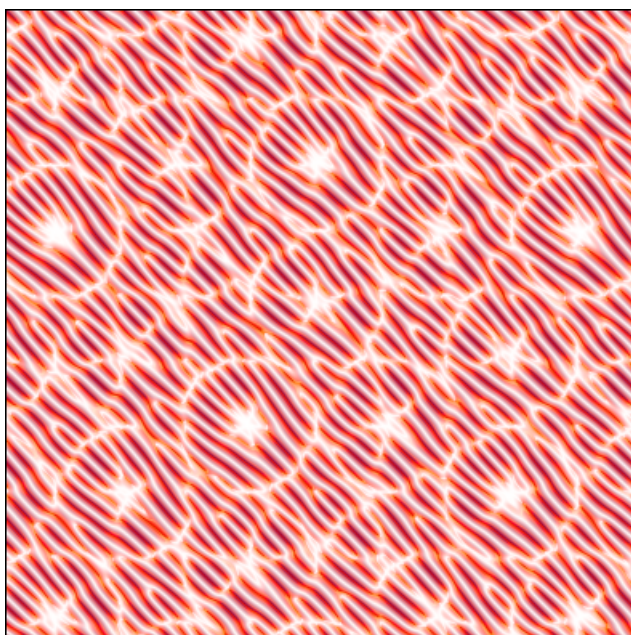
- If the intent is to make money, is it art or marketing and commerce?
- If the intent is to become famous, is it art or simple vanity?
- If the intent is to persuade or control is it art or politics and the desire for power (which probably reduces to vanity)?

It is important here to separate the ideas of process and intent. Both are necessary to create art and in good work they nicely enfold each other. Art that lacks intent, is all about process, is not really about much at all. It unfolds itself with no significance. Conversely, a work filled with intent, but weak in process, is usually poorly crafted and will at best be misunderstood, and at worst completely undermine the intent. Artists compete with much in trying to engage an audience. A poor balance of process and intent creates a danger of boring an audience or developing within the audience a contempt for the artist or the art. The enterprise fails. Better to encourage walks in the woods and to let the synchronicities of nature sing to us.

In the early 1950's composers John Cage and Pierre Boulez followed opposing directions in using processes of chance versus rigorous choice in music composition. At this time (ca. 1951) they both

wrote compositions that demonstrated their methods. Boulez wrote *Structures 1a* for piano, a piece credited by many as the first written with the process of total serialization. All the musical dimensions, pitch, rhythm, loudness, articulation, were controlled by a rigorous serial process. Total control of musical elements was achieved by a systematic, composer-imposed, rational method.

On the other hand Cage's work, *Music of Changes* for two pianos, was written with chance operations. Using the *I Ching*, *The Book of Changes*, Cage sought to minimize the composer's involvement in the process by letting coin tosses make the musical decisions. Random process built the composition.



These two works were seen at the time as expressions of compositional processes at the extremes of the spectrum between chance and choice. Interestingly, on hearing the works, many listeners hear little difference in them. Total choice and total chance as compositional processes seem to join the ends of a line into a continuum. An intent of both composers in these pieces was to move beyond the history

of Western tonal music, while using a tool (the piano) specifically designed to exploit the tonal music system. It's not surprising that the aural result of the two pieces is similar even though the processes are diametrically opposed. The composers were both musically trained in and their work informed by traditional Western musical practice. Their starting points and desired destinations were similar. It was their processes that differed.

A deeper aspect of these pieces had to do with the processes employed and the relationship of those processes to music history and Western history. The composers sought to navigate around references to Western tradition. This was the desire of many artists in the early 1950's, right after World War II, the most recent testament to Western tradition. Chance as a tool, as a process, proved as effective as total choice. (It's interesting that both composers tempered the extremes of chance and choice in later compositions, both bringing in aspects of improvisation and indeterminacy.)

Cage, from the early '50s throughout the rest of his compositional life, sought to remove himself (and Western thought) from the compositional process, yet the pieces were still his works, reflecting an intent beyond chance. He signed his name to the manuscripts, took a bow at their performance, and had very specific ideas on how they should be performed.

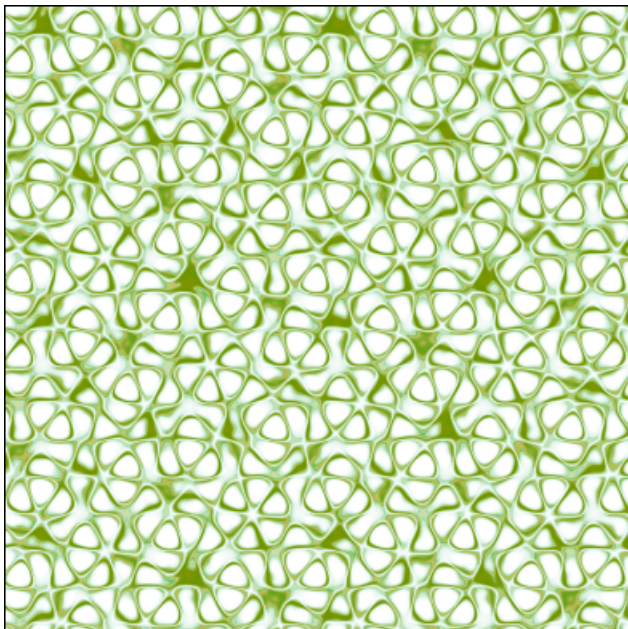
Cage began the use of the *I Ching* around 1951 shortly after the publication of the Wilhelm/Baynes translation of the book. The forward to this edition was written by Carl Jung. In that forward Jung describes the random selection of an *I Ching* hexagram (and its accompanying description) as "an indicator of the essential situation prevailing in the moment of its origin." The hexagram chosen through a chance process is not only coincident in time but in "quality" with the moment of selection.

Jung continues, "This assumption involves a certain curious principle that I have termed synchronicity, a concept that formulates a point of view diametrically opposed to that of causality. Since the latter

is a merely statistical truth and not absolute, it is a sort of working hypothesis of how events evolve out of one another, whereas synchronicity takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers."

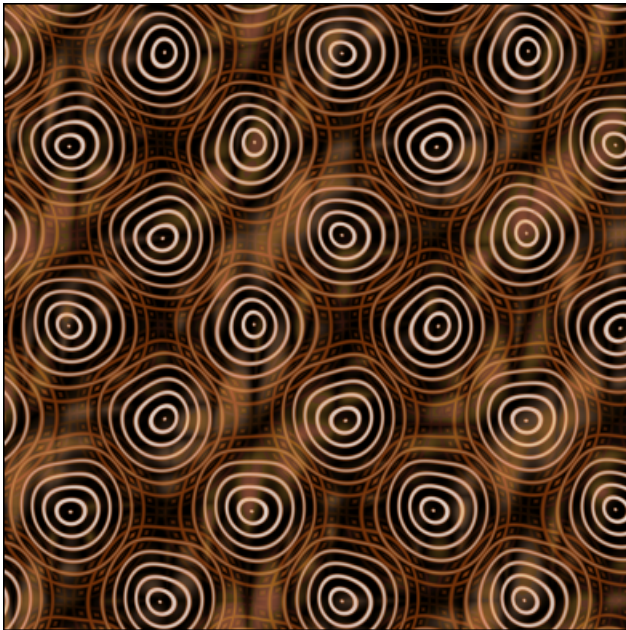
There really is no such thing as a random event only a context undiscovered. For an event to be random it cannot exist in relationship to anything else. It is relative to nothing. From the old rationalist/reductionist view (causality) this is of course

impossible. Every event results directly from everything that has happened before. So much so that, in theory, everything is predictable, nothing is random. Questions of how the whole process got started, or where the natural laws come from, were of great importance to the founders of the reductionist view (Galileo, Kepler, Newton, et al). There was meaning to be found in all events as they, and we, were put into play by The Grand Designer as part of The Grand Design. When Dar-



win replaced the Grand Designer with random mutation, natural selection and non-teleological evolution, meaning became elusive. Yet the grand design was still there as a testament to something great, substantiated by the effectiveness of mathematics and the success of the industrial revolution.

The causal perspective still prevails (without the baggage of purposeful design) but now the quantum view seems to more accurately describe what is really going on. In the face of much of its counterintuitive workings (at least to the Western mind) the onward rush of our technological development in the 20th century (from atom bombs to microchips) seems to validate its truth. The quantum view takes causal certainty out of the game, at least with respect to what we can observe. There is something more going on. The stuff of matter is



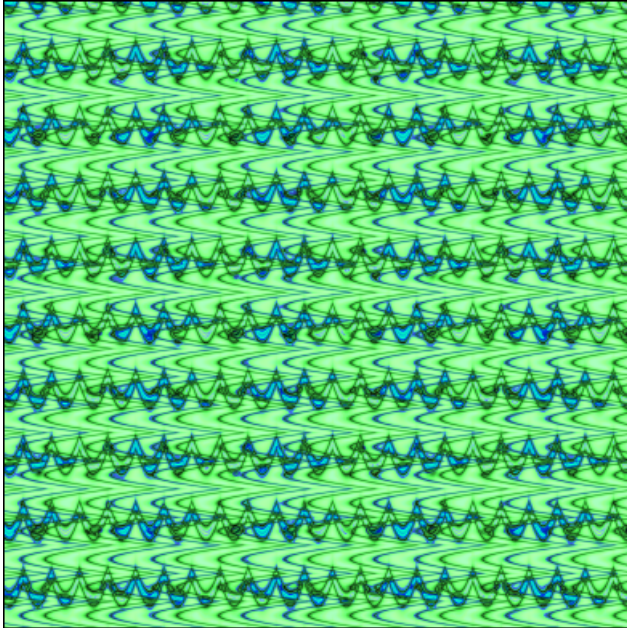
too fine, too subtle, not to be affected by our simple gaze. The act of our observation impacts the observed such that we can never truly know it. We are intimately involved with any reality that we are in. To that end can there really be a random event, a random act.

Every event we observe, whether initiated by us or not, is informed by us. Everything we do exists in relation to, and is informed by, the total of our funded experience, previous action and quantum interdependence. So is there really such a thing as a chance act. The reductionist says no, because given initial conditions they could have predicted it. The quantum

realist says no because our very participation in the act informs it such that it is no longer random.

In art, chance as intent is meaningless. To take the composer out of the composition, to take the painter out of the painting, negates the act. Even in Cage's famous silent work 4'33", his decisions frame the work and structure the experience. Chance as process has a long history. It began when the first person chose to document, to frame and structure, an aspect of themselves or their world in some creative way. Just as nature photographer Ansel Adams framed and structured his photographs. His work, it could be argued, was derived from chance operations. He pointed the camera, composed the frame, chose the mo-

ment. The result we see is a random event frozen in a moment of his choosing, a snow-cruled treeline, ice-cracked rockface, pendent moon. Is there a value in an Ansel Adams photograph that transcends the moment it captures. If not then why bother with it when we can go to nature ourselves and have the experience first hand?



So are there really random events, chance occurrences. Or can randomness be attributed to our misunderstanding, misapprehending or misinterpreting a context. The rationalist/reductionist has a clockwork context and a tacit belief in a watchmaker, blind or otherwise. Now in our quantum reality, things can be seen differently. We live in a statistical world where a single event can seem random and meaningless, but when seen in the appropriate context a meaning can be found. The act of observation informs the event as does the complex interconnectedness of things. The devil is in the details, from the photons we

focus with our gaze to the butterfly in Japan who's wing flutter causes an Oklahoma twister. But maybe "God is watching us from a distance."

The Japanese haiku, takes simple, seemingly random events, coincident only in time and/or place, and describes them--a chance meeting of poet and nature, frozen in synchronicity as a haiku moment. The poet simply documents the moment clearly and objectively. But there is a deep meaning to be found, a unity to be discovered between the observer and the observed. A chance event the poet has captured and that we can share. The haiku moment, a quantum reality unified somewhere beneath the surface of things.

The butterfly,
Resting upon the temple bell,
Asleep.

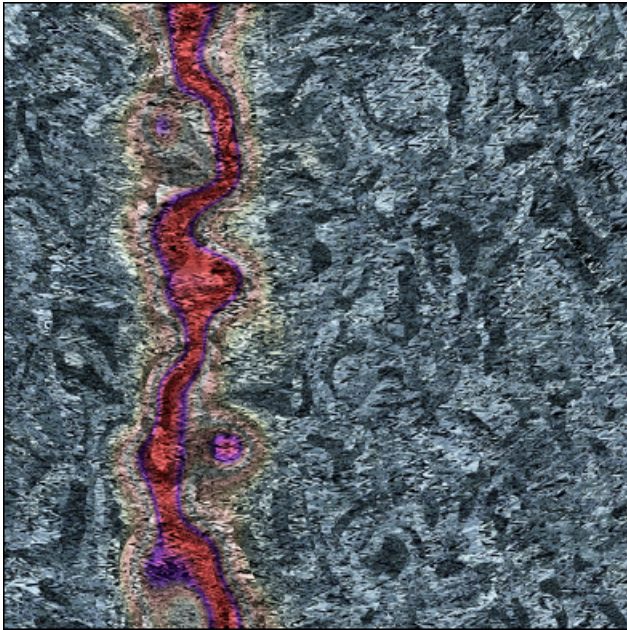
Buson (trans. R.H. Blyth)

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It's in that moment when we really sense ourselves as a part of something greater. It's what some might call an aesthetic experience. Chance as a process has great power to lead us into this moment as it

helps us to see beyond the surface of things. To resonate with a more subtle harmony, to grasp a hidden order. Chance as a process negates itself in intent. It provides meaning, the mother of knowledge.

Art and life are different expressions, with different resonances, each capable of intensifying the other. Being in love, reading *Romeo and Juliet*, each is broadened, made more meaningful, by the other. High art can reach deep and with subtlety. However, If you consider life as fundamental to art then maybe all art forms have a basis in chance processes, to the extent that we are but a manifestation of a series of seemingly random events, from the myriad accidents of life's primordial beginnings, throughout our evolutionary development, to the one in a million chance of our individual conception.



When looking at events in close view we can miss the context (the proverbial trees versus the forest). Without a context of personal value events are perceived as random, chance, by accident. They are devoid of meaning and a nihilism sets in. Trying to understand events beyond the sterility of process lead us to intent, a search for context and meaning. Perhaps the great reward to come from chance operations in art is the realization that below the surface of things there are no accidents, only meaning, something greater than ourselves of which we are a part, waiting be known.