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Introduction: Three Figures of Contingency

Why has the concept of contingency taken on a marked importance both in contemporary philosophy and in contemporary art practice? And if this simultaneity derives from parallel problems met with in the two different fields, what are their common roots?

At its simplest 'contingency' refers to the attempt to think events that take place but *need not take place*: events that could be, or could have been, otherwise. Why does such an apparently simple concept lead us into a rich new vein of speculative thought?

Contingency implies a particular relation to thought: contingency, real contingency, is that which thinking can grasp only *as event*, not as proceeding from a rational necessity—as having been in some sense, 'already written' and thus in principle, if not in actuality, predictable. This is in direct violation of all dogmatic systems of metaphysics, philosophies that attempt to bind in principle every event, past and future, within an account of *what must be*. Thus the necessity to think contingency spells the ruin of all such systems—systems of thought which would subordinate the events that befall us to some kind of predestined necessity; which argue that, in principle at least, everything can be known in advance; and which, in doing so, imply the possibility of thought's autonomy from events, the possibility that the thinking subject can in principle withdraw from the contingencies of the world into a space where the occurrence of every event has already been written.

Of course, we have not escaped from these dogmatic modes of thought as completely as we might imagine. Uninterrogated, as part of common sense thinking, as 'working assumptions', they continue to support our mundane operations, our everyday survival, in an uncertain world; but they also inform even the most sophisticated tools we use in our attempts to manage, secure and insure

our environment. This is why the rich series of challenges that contingency is opening up for philosophical thought today, has very real consequences.

Our conceptual tools tend to subordinate contingency to other concepts, especially chance and probability. But every attempt to tame contingency through 'risk management' misses its mark fundamentally, by reabsorbing the contingent event into a new rational metaphysics. The ideologies of probability and of chance, no less than that of divine necessity, hallucinate a universe in which—at least—the *parameters* within which events may take place can be circumscribed. But an event, a real contingency, is precisely something that overflows this compartmentalization and management.

For, as Quentin Meillassoux has explained, in his *After Finitude* (a 'primary text' for the contemporary thinking of contingency), unlike the etymology of 'chance' and 'aleatory', which relate to 'falling'—*cadentia*, *alea*, the fall of dice, the eventuality of one of a number of possible outcomes (the faces of the die)—'contingency' comes from *contingere*, meaning 'to befall'—it is an event that happens *to us*, that comes from outside, that simply 'strikes' without any possible prevision. In Meillassoux's words:

The contingent [...] is *something that finally happens*—something other, something which, in its irreducibility to all pre-registered possibilities, puts an end to the vanity of a game wherein everything, even the improbable, is predictable.¹

Once we understand the meaning of contingency, then, the very notion of a 'contingency plan' is revealed as a contradiction in terms.

Consequently, the thought of contingency stands as a kind of ultimate consummation of the puncturing of human conceit—whether in its native form, or sublimated into the ultimate form of divine necessity. It is the bitterest pill to swallow, a distillate of everything indigestible that thinking has served up to us. Freud remarked that modern man had undergone three deep 'narcissistic wounds': Copernicus had demonstrated that the Earth is not the centre of the universe; Darwin, that the human being is a product of natural selection, emerging through the same blind material processes as every other creature; Finally, psychoanalysis was to undermine our impression that we are master

1. Q. Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, tr. R. Brassier (New York and London: Continuum, 2008), 108.

of our own consciousness and destiny, for unconscious processes beyond our perception and control steer our relation to the world and to ourselves.

These are 'humiliations' in the sense that they violate the spontaneous human attitude, the 'natural' perspective from which the human subject can consider itself the central, necessary, and founding fact of the universe in which it lives. The content of the entire series of these 'narcissistic wounds' is that the thinking subject's self-image is not a transparent and originary given from which all thinking must proceed, and upon which all thinking can be solidly based. It is the product of other, unconscious processes and events: processes indifferent to the human and to thought; and events crucial for the emergence and continued existence of the latter, but whose necessity can by no means be established.

The formation of the solar system, the emergence of life on this planet, the descent of man, the determination of the structure of our unconscious through biological heredity and social evolution—itself now subject to the accelerated technological reformattings of capital.... We are the product of contingent events, material histories, webs and networks of anonymous forces.

Thus, contingency, real contingency, is, as Meillassoux says, 'a rather menacing power'. It subtracts the historical fact of our existence from rational necessity, and introduces a new kind of precarity into our dealings with the present and the future. It reveals that we are 'worked' from inside and out by anonymous materials. In this respect a thinking of contingency can be understood as one of the tasks remaining if we are to have done with certain optimistic delusions of modernity. But to take this thinking as a *positive* task means to refuse simply being trapped in a (postmodern) state of mourning for lost certainties.

Moreover, the contemporary urgency should be obvious, to include in our account of the world events that just *strike*, that *befall* us, from outside any pre-registered set of possibilities. Even if thought had not arrived at this urgency out of internal necessity, the economic situation, the technological situation, the political situation, the ecological situation, and so on, in an increasingly interconnected, shrinking world, cannot but bring forcibly to our attention the corrosion of the illusions of autonomy, sovereignty, control and planning, and make more urgent the call for the new modes of thought that are needed once we attempt to think events outside any pre-determined matrix of possibility or probability;

and once we accept that we ourselves, our culture and our common sense, are the products of a contingent history.

At the same time as these figures of contingency challenge our self-image and promise to transform the figure of philosophical reason, they also signal the impossibility of a certain conception of the work of art: the work as a block of matter ordered and organised to present an autonomous, intentional, controlled experience. Artists were at one time able to maintain the illusion of confining the audience's attention entirely *within* the representative space of the work; subsequently, they became, let us say, painfully aware of the contingent nature of the material supports of painting and sculpture, thematised these traditional supports and exhibited to us their limited lifespan. At the dawn of contemporary art, the recognition that these formats were historical artefacts, contingent factors, finally caused the work to explode beyond them, or rather, to acknowledge its always already having been complicit with what fell outside of them. The work opened up explicitly and radically to new materials, new processes, new forms, and new temporalities.

But abandoning the idealism of autonomy, and acknowledging the contingencies that run through the work—this question of developing a thought and a practice that opens to contingency—cannot be assumed to be achieved. Indeed, what *would* be an effective solution to the problem of how to exhibit, within the work, its own contingent nature? How can the work deal with the fact that the artist operates within a practice founded not on necessity and autonomy, but on contingent conditions—not only those of the material support, but also historical, discursive, economic conditions, and the various contentions over the nature of the 'work of art' itself?

In various ways, many of the artists featured in *New York to London and Back*, the exhibition that provided the occasion and context for the discussion below, involve themselves in such inquiries: Blake Rayne's work strives to make the 'field of plasticity' that falls under the sign 'painting' the subject of painting itself; in Liz Deschenes's work, photography arrests the image at formal moments of infinite possibility, refusing the photograph's depictive role, confusing image and medium, and dramatizing the search for content; Sam Lewitt's work charts the uneven exchange-relations between the space of writing and the media of production and display of language; R.H.Quaytman has sought to expose

within the work the relation between its entire lifespan as object inserted into various networks and all the variables that affect our experience of it; Scott Lyall's arbitrage between information and representation highlights the demand for visibility that the work must answer to, so that the works themselves portray the contingency of their own market conditions.

The conceptual rigour, in some cases austerity, of these artists' work, signals a recognition that contingency cannot be thought through neo-romantic concepts of openness, chance, and process: it demands instead a special sort of discipline. As Reza Negarestani argues below, in parallel with the *theoretical* clarification of the meaning of contingency, this *practice* must dissolve certain clichés that have crystallised around the artistic engagement with contingency. We always risk relapsing onto models that fail before contingency: models that return us to the metaphysics of chance and calculation; or which re-affirm the privilege of meaning-making over material contingencies. Negarestani, who subtitles his book *Cyclonopedia* 'Complicity with Anonymous Materials',² asks what sort of rigorous conceptual preparation is necessary in order to make one's work—or oneself—a 'good meal' for these anonymous materials.

When Tobias Huber and I set ourselves the task of planning a discussion event to accompany Miguel Abreu's show, his itinerant title struck us as raising the question of the relation between art capital, financial capital, and intellectual capital. It evokes the speculative figure of the 'centre' of the art world, shifting from capital to capital, along lines prescribed by the circuits of international finance. None of us is unaware that the most powerful instance of the contingent networks in which the work of art is caught is that of the market.

The work of Elie Ayache, who has spent many years dealing first-hand with the complexities of the speculative options and futures markets, presents us with a new thinking of the market, as the primary manifestation in the world of a radical contingency. He proposes that we must think the market outside the terms of probability and prediction. The mathematical instruments used to value exotic financial derivatives have generally been understood as operating over a complex, calculated field of possibilities or probabilities about future events—their use, in this sense, implies a certain metaphysics. Ayache argues that we must rethink our image of the market by understanding that, in practice, traders do

2. R. Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2008).

not calculate price on the basis of probabilistic tools, but directly and effectively *write* price as the contingent reality of the market, *now*. The market is therefore not a set of probabilities, but the very *medium of contingency*. It is a regime of events whose vicissitudes we cannot better grasp by addressing our failure to deal with highly improbable events (Nassim Taleb's 'Black Swan').³ Its events are effective without prevision or reason—*The Blank Swan*.⁴

We no longer need much imagination to grasp how powerful the derivatives market is today. So, what if the image of the market that circulates amongst those who daily recreate it, is based on a frail philosophy of probability that fails to capture its most characteristic operation? In his book, Ayache even suggests that it is this *philosophical* default that is at the root of the present financial crisis.

Ayache compares the act of writing options contracts with literary creation, as a material inscription of difference directly in the real, creating a future that is in principle unforeseeable. We can also compare it to the work of artists who, as Miguel Abreu has noted, have issued works as promissory notes (Sam Lewitt), devoted them to 'the symbolic understanding that works of art are in progress: the real show is still coming' (Scott Lyall), and arrested the image at the formal moment when 'everything is still possible' (Liz Deschenes). These works are written in the hope and knowledge that the interaction of their anticipations will create *in the now* the reality of an exchange of art and thought. They can thus be considered, in Ayache's words, 'technologies of the future [...] but only insofar as we wish that the difference they will make in the future may make a difference today'.⁵

In the context of our discussion, Ayache's characterization of the market as the site of radical contingency will also be read alongside another claim: that contemporary art's coming to terms with its own implication in various forms of exchange can be read as a synecdoche for fundamental sociopolitical changes wrought by neoliberal capitalism. It is within this process of adjustment that Matthew Poole's work locates the figure of the curator.

Liberal economics enabled us, as an article of faith, to distinguish between our inalienable, sovereign self, and our 'labour capital', that part of ourselves exposed

3. N. Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007).

4. E. Ayache, *The Blank Swan: The End of Probability* (Chichester: Wiley, 2010).

5. *Ibid.*, xix–xx.

to the contingencies of the market, to trading and speculation. In neoliberal capital, the distinction is being eroded, as the changing nature of work sees the performance of the self entirely integrated into Capitalist production—the notion of ‘human capital’, the monetization of social networks, the obligation to ‘curate’ and present the self, and the ‘experience economy’. Submitted to exchange value, human ‘assets’ have now become subject to speculation and trading, so that the once sovereign values of self, experience, and memory become subject to the contingencies of the market.

In strict parallel with these developments, art is also no longer vouchsafed an absolute, inalienable value, but is similarly exposed to market contingency. But if the value of art thus becomes radically contingent, the curator, existing in the midst of new intermeshings of social, intellectual, and commercial markets, can no longer maintain his traditional role. The curator can no longer presume to maintain, preserve, and care for the inalienable value in-itself of art through interpretation, ordering, and conservation. Nevertheless, the curator continues to be one agent among many—in fact, a key player who *grants access* to the market. As a kind of gatekeeper, or market-maker, the curator participates in setting the conditions according to which works *can be* exchanged. The role of curator therefore concentrates the whole question of developing new modes of thought and new practices that take the question of contingency seriously. How does one operate with the awareness that, with every work one offers for exchange, one participates in writing the contingent reality of the market *and* puts oneself at its incalculable mercy? In contrast to the notion that an artwork will be subject to authoritative judgment at some indefinite point in the future, the only possible measure of artworks as ‘technologies of the future’ may lie in their action, their contemporary effect.

In the following presentations and the subsequent discussion our contributors elaborate on this rich seam of questions that the concept of contingency poses; and explore the complex relations between the problems that appear crucial to contemporary philosophy, our still incomplete comprehension of the global reality of capital, and the challenges facing those who make and curate art and writing today.

In considering the different ramifications of contingency I have outlined above, we could speak of 'contingency in three figures', figures that intersect at different points with the projects of our three contributors:

1. The chronic menace of contingency, as seen in the 'War on Terror', in the insurgents' warning to coalition forces: 'You might have all the watches but we have all the time.' Equally in our relation to capital and its ongoing crises, and to Bauman's 'liquid modernity' in which 'the individual must act, plan actions and calculate the likely gains and losses of acting (or failing to act) under conditions of endemic uncertainty'.⁶ We may have the watches—the devices and concepts for measuring and planning, whether military, economic or philosophical—but time is always on the side of contingency.

2. The existential anxiety and suspense of contingency, which turns everyday life into a kind of horror plot where, even in silent, uneventful moments, the mundane communicates with the unthinkable depths of contingent materials and their interaction. (Thus Negarestani in *Cyclonopedia*: 'Anything can happen for some weird reason; yet also, without any reason, nothing at all can happen.') A part of the enterprise of thinking contingency might also be to examine moments at which, or ways in which, we might *feel* it.

3. Complicity with contingency, in writing or making art: in the words of author Sutter Cane in John Carpenter's 1994 film *The Mouth of Madness*: 'For years I thought I was making all this up, but they were telling me what to write.' Or inversely, in the words of Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, whose pompous claim to make words mean whatever he wants them to satirizes those imperious presumptions that contingency corrodes: 'The question is, which is to be master—that's all.' We need to think contingency because we know very well what unexpected and humiliating events may come to shatter such pretensions.

6. Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).