

ON
SOMETHING
NOT YET
CERTAIN

Mathilde Renault

From economics, to architecture, to art, my background is not what could be called a linear path. What may seem to be random choices are, in fact, carefully made decisions. My approach to explore possibilities, which sometimes implies to take some risks, results from the conviction that potential is everywhere. The potential of being intellectually stimulated is something, I suppose, we all seek for. The mechanisms of economics and applied art are interesting processes, but rather unforgiving to the human tendency of making mistakes. Though I believe, to grow up is to understand the potential of mistakes as a way of learning. To engage with a process of working at the opposite of what I knew, represented at the same time a risk to fail and a chance to increase my knowledge. I wanted to combine the technicality of my previous background with the sensitive approach of fine arts. Seen as a playground for experiments, art was a way to distance myself from pre-convinced ideas on how things work and a way to get genuinely close to my own interest : the relation between people, space and objects of emotions. Despite not knowing what the outcome would be, opting for fine art studies was an opportunity I felt I had to pursue, for I could change, grow and evolve.

Now is the time to reflect upon the extend of the new landscape I have been exploring at last, as this cycle is about to end. This thesis consists in a trail of thoughts articulated around the theme of potentiality, and other concepts that are interdependent to it. In my attempt to explore paradoxes, I research cases in which fragility is considered as a strength. The text focuses on the ephemeral character of things evolving around abstract notions I want to speculate about also within my artistic practice : antifragility and decay. These theories dealing with the inherent vulnerability of things and the unpredictability of future events present an optimistic point of view on possible damages and errors.

ON
POTEN-
TIALITY

'The only interesting thing about a baby is its future' ¹

Potentiality echoes within the above quote from biologist and author Midas Dekkers, referring to a state in which something is able to change, capable of being but not yet in existence. Something that, or someone who, has potential did not yet reach the achievement it could. Still, that achievement wants to be successful, since the probability of it to be fulfilled is rather in favour of change. It implies hidden capacities want to be seen and could be; yet in order for them to be revealed, they need to be crystallised in palpable ways. The materialisation of potential, as opposed to its actual state, is promising and uncertain.

According to cultural theorist Diedrich Diederichsen in his article 'People of Intensity, People of Power: The Nietzsche Economy', the promise of encountering something new is everywhere. As an example, he compares known situations with musical experiences. The probability of a potential to manifest itself within a familiar context is interpreted into classical music 'where the point is not what the next note will be, but rather how it arrives'. In an unfamiliar situation associated to free jazz, where short yet excessive notes are being played, potentiality appears to be seen in a more aggressive way. A potential can therefore be expressed in different manners: subtly or intensely. The intensity of an experience varies in the way potentiality is revealed, that is to say depending on the context in which it is set.

Diederichsen continues his thoughts on potentiality, and engages with the time-lapse between a potential and its achievement. As it may or may not materialise in the future, the feeling provoked by a potential is more important than its fulfilment at the moment potentiality is perceived. In other words, the thought that anything is possible prevails over a possible happening.

A potential is therefore a thought projected upon something or someone, like a subjective trigger of emotions and intellectual stimuli.

Potential being everywhere, everything is a catalyst for potential; people, contexts, objects, spaces, time, etc., by extension all intricate elements an artist has to deal with while creating a work. To state the obvious: art is fundamentally based on the search for potential, by providing space for emotions and through the different ways of looking at things. Potential implies an object is not what it is but rather what it could become. Its potential depends on how it is contextualised; placing an object

in different spaces or situations changes its interpretation. For a work to be set in its potentially best context – one needs to take into account every element's potential as if part of a musical composition. Looking for the tone a work is asking for, at a given time and place, is a game I find incredibly stimulating. For now placed in limbo, a potential may unfold in the future. If its materialisation is uncertain, it is fulfilling to think that the future is an open door on other potentials. The unknown, which characterises the future, is consequentially full of potential to be explored.

1. Midas Dekkers, *The way of all Flesh : a celebration of decay* (Panther, 2001).
2. Diedrich Diederichsen, *People of Intensity, People of Power : the Nietzsche Economy*. (e-flux journal : Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art. Sternberg Press, 2011).

ON
ANTI-
FRAGILITY

*'It is like going off the unknown unknowns, things we didn't know we didn't know.'*¹

Artist Julien Prévieux, whose video essay *Patterns of Life* won the Marcel Duchamp Prize in 2014, explores the notion of control through choreography. From the photographs visualising human motion in the late 19th century to the 'activity-based intelligence' of the US National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, dancers from the Opera de Paris interpret key experiments of scientific protocols in the measurement and analysis of movement.

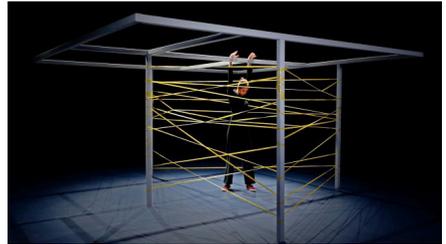
As the video starts, a link between what we call grace and capitalism is established, judging that both notions ground into the control of repetitive and symmetrical movements. In line with the idea that 'time is money', unnecessary motion is lost money. Computer models are created in order to increase efficiency; movements are therefore studied and rationalised, making them predictable. However, despite the logic of this thought, Prévieux reports cases of unexpected behaviours dealing with the limit of motion control. To rely on computer models, and therefore on predictability, paradoxically allows unpredictability to rise.

The first case deals with the use of a tracking bracelet, which appears to fail when Paul Ceglia, who was charged with fraud and put into house arrest, escapes and disappears before trial. 'While conducting a sweep of the house, officers discovered a hand-made mechanism connected to the ceiling from which Ceglia's GPS bracelet was hanging. He created a design with the purpose of keeping the device in motion, with a stick connected to a motor that would rotate the bracelet continuously.' This example shows that a device programmed to detect one specific action does not take other possible factors influencing this action into account. In the second case, the viewer is confronted with an alarming image.

A virtual belt was developed for cows in order to influence them on a neurological level, using electrical signals. The belt controls their motion by creating a very loud sound as they get close to the fence.

At the end of the video, the example of George Joaquim, who disappeared in the Columbian ice field in 2009, shows that the computer model used to establish search parameters does not integrate rare events. As a snowstorm escalated quickly, the search headquarters expected him to behave in a certain way, based on collected data from similar lost person cases. 'When they had expected him to move, he stayed put. When they had expected him to wait out storms, he had been traveling in them. It was way outside the parameters of how people normally behave in this kind of terrain.' Eventually, Joaquim arrives at the climbers parking lot only to find out that his car got towed.

The lack of recognition for human logic within technology points out the inaccuracy of pre-established patterns. To emphasise that statement, the constant visual reference to domestic animals throughout the video acts as a representation of human behaviour: both obedience and primitive instincts are at the heart of this metaphor. Despite its radical nature, the duality between control and chaos is poetically treated throughout the video. Finally, the symbolic choice for portraying a situation dealing with survival at the end, appears as an open critique of our contemporary society: we overestimate what we know and underestimate what we don't know. Aside from the technological angle, this work investigates the notion of unpredictability in relation to systems. It also conveys a historical evolution of failed systems. A parallel can be drawn between this work and a recently developed theory that focuses on the benefits of using randomness within artificial systems.



Wind extinguishes a candle and energises fire. Likewise with randomness, uncertainty, chaos : you want to use them, not hide from them. You want to be the fire and wish for wind.

Some things benefit from shocks ; they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, randomness and stressors, and love adventure, risk and uncertainty. Yet, in spite of the ubiquity of the phenomenon, there is no word for the exact opposite of fragile. Let us call it antifragile.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb is the author of the book Antifragile. He defines this concept as not only gaining from loss but as evolving from weakness. Throughout the book, he explores a wide range of examples distinct in three categories: fragile, robust and antifragile. The fragile breaks under shocks, stressors and randomness. The robust stays the same. The Antifragile gets better. Thus making antifragility the opposite of fragility.

‘Antifragility allows to deal with the unknown; any situation in which there is randomness, unpredictability or incomplete understanding of things’¹. While so-called random events are naturally present in the biological environment, we fail to understand the necessity to embrace it in the synthetic one. Since both environments coexist, the very idea of controlling risk is proof that their mimetism is only partial. As it is easier to detect fragility than to predict future events that may harm it, fragility can be detected, measured and, more importantly, be transformed, for artificial systems to get stronger. Using the economic market as his terrain, Taleb urges us to focus on the positive effects of weakness in artificial systems; their vulnerability to unpredictable events and errors represents an opportunity to improve it. Thus, randomness and mistakes² are not only necessary for man-made systems, they are also potentially

beneficial to the evolution of these. Like a game of chess, the goal is to revise one's strategy at every step, that is to say, based on new information. Considering mistakes are information, the only way to lose is by misunderstanding which information was not adjusted. To learn, and better yet, to improve, is to embrace fragility by looking at it as an ephemeral state and reverse the tendency by using it. After all, do things not get better with time?

Unpredictability and randomness are abstract notions I sometimes find challenging, as it implies letting go of a certain amount of control. On the other hand, Antifragility is a philosophy I believe to be anchored in the artistic process. As a matter of fact, since the emergence of conceptual art, unpredictability, randomness and chance have arguably become an intrinsic part of artistic production. Therefore I believe the vulnerability of a work of art (to contingent occurrences) constitutes its language and potential, to an extent its history. In other words, the vulnerability of an artwork represents its essence, its sensitivity, and somehow its humanity; an interest that artists and art institutions share.

1. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile : Things that Gain from Disorder* (Penguin Books, 2012).
2. Mistake (thesaurus definition) : from mis- (*wrongly*) + take (*to get into one's hands, possession or control by force or artifice*).

ON
DECAY

*A landscape is not a natural element of the environment but a synthetic space, an artificial system of superposed spaces at the surface of the earth, working, evolving to serve a community (...) a space created with the aim of accelerating or slowing down the natural process.*¹

Artworks are fragile. They suffer from time, volatility as well as shocks such as political and historical events or climate conditions. Rotting, fading, crumbling... they decay to the point of disappearance. To quote art historian Gary Schwartz, 'Art perishes, if not now, then later. More art is lost than saved in every generation. Destruction, not survival, is the norm.' As a matter of fact, 99% of art is lost throughout centuries, leaving only hope that the last per cent remaining is the best representation of the culture. Preservation then appears to be the solution to the conservation of our heritage.

However, conservation is preventing the natural phenomenon of decay by means of controlling the uncertainty of the future. Present in every museum, the thermo-hygrograph is one example of the many devices used to disregard variability, that is to say randomness and unpredictability. It is an object measuring the atmosphere of a room so museums can avoid variations of temperature and humidity throughout the hours, days and weeks. Now imagine from a human perspective, the hygrograph corresponds to a heart-monitoring device for which a straight line is rather bad news. More aggressively put, conserved artworks are living objects frozen in time. As the finality of life is death, its substance is to age. Yet the fear of ageing is the result of a misunderstood process; ageing is the opposite of dying. It is growing up, hence increasing gradually, becoming greater or larger.

In other words, to age is to expand. So despite the definition of decay as 'loosing strength', it is important to spotlight a cyclical shift one may tend to forget: a lost strength is replaced by a new one, with time. By extension, to conserve a piece is to deny its possibility to become. If the vulnerability of art is time, the best way for it to be antifragile is to be used rather than controlled. Since conservation serves to prevent future damages, this method is an example of how fragility shifts to robustness.

'Old and new lived not only above and bellow each other but alongside each other (...) they both face the unknown'.²

Restoration and preservation, on the other hand, inhabit the concept of antifragility. Because restoration consists of 'bringing back to a former state',³ the most important requirement is the final appearance of the object to be restored. In preservation, this is no longer the prime factor, but rather retaining the maximum amount of building fabric. 'Repairs must be done with minimum or no changes to the original production'.⁴ In other words, preservation dictates the reproduction of the exact same method as the 'author' of an artwork; same technique, same materials, same gesture, same sameness... The last requirement, fundamental and common to both acts, is the principle of reversibility. As the treatments operated on a piece should not permanently affect its original condition, restorers are given space for possible errors, as well as the ability to keep on repairing as the object evolves through time.

In the case of an oil painting, antifragility holds in a varnish beneath the restored surface. A bridge between the times, it allows old and new to co-exist again. Traces of the past are intact since the original picture is left untouched, at the same time a superposed

layer improves its condition, from its visual to its monetary value. A painting's weakness not only increases the state of artificiality within a restored piece, but it also allows for a better understanding of an artist and a period of time along with its cultural values. The fragility of the singular becomes the strength of the collective. These acquired knowledges surely constitute a base for future improvements.

'There's a national and political coding in the landscape gaze. The nation mainly exists in its construction both imaginary and material, which give to it a perceptible appearance to the eyes of its members'.⁵

From the visual to the physical sphere, restoration can take many forms. Although architecture is a powerful instrument for mankind's appropriation of landscapes and results in having the most direct impact on shaping it, it is fragile.

Because architecture surrounds us from the hospital where we are born, to the graveyard where we are buried, we may tend to think we will die before it does. Fortunately, it is sometimes possible to notice architecture's decay. Yet strangely enough, at that moment, the ruin before us overwhelms our own presence, as if suddenly we are the ones turning into dust.

Cluny abbey is one of the most magnificent and striking buildings I have encountered to this day. It was considered the world's largest church until the 17th century, together with St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Yet, despite the impressive abilities of its craftsmen to reach out for the sky, the abbey was sacked and largely destroyed during the French Revolution in 1790. Since then, the remaining carcass represents only 10% of what it once was. Nonetheless, its scale is tremendous and undeniable, honestly

surreal. Because Cluny's abbey reconstruction would consist of an endless economical abyss, the ruin is preserved as it is. Instead of erasing what constitutes its essence; the traces of its past and its story, therefore what makes the abbey what it is in the present time, a contemporary solution is used in order to restore the image of its glorious past. In between pillars – no longer supporting the ceiling vaults – and the missing walls revealing the depth of an old landscape, a few screens placed in strategic places offer a 360 degree virtual immersion into the original architecture. Such an answer to the continuous ephemerality of things, allows both imaginary and material representation of the landscape.

Art is antifragile if we know how to react to vulnerability. In the case of restoration and preservation; the one focuses on repairing damages from the past and the other deliberately accepts these as part of the artefact's history. In other words, to restore and preserve the fragility of works of art engages a sensitive dialogue, a conversation between an object and its viewer or a resonance in time and space. The potential of fragility to become strength also varies according to the way it is contextualised; the restoration of a painting is a subtle example of antifragility while the restoration of Cluny's abbey is an example of intense antifragility.

1. Jean Marc Besse, *Le Goût du Monde : exercice de paysage* (Broche, 2009).
2. Midas Dekkers, *The way of all Flesh : a celebration of decay* (Panther, 2001).
3. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary definition of Restoration (1975).
4. Bart Bjorneberg, *Renovation, Preservation, Restoration, Conservation* (Conservation & Design International, publication of DPR art rescue, 2016).
5. Jean Marc Besse, *Le Goût du Monde : exercice de paysage* (Broche, 2009).



Along my research, I finally understood something I have been considering as a philosophy of life for a long time, even though I was unable to put a name to it at the time. Fragility is inherent to many things but the ephemerality of time is a constant. Time is potential, a potential to open doors to other potentials to be revealed and sometimes materialised. Yet, there is a time for understanding that possible damages and errors, as a result of fragility, have the potential to benefit not only oneself but others as well. Things change and evolve, with time. In an attempt to retrace my own path, investigating the vulnerability of economic systems and the decay of architecture and art, I realised fragility is the beginning of a process of becoming. Hence fragility also needs time to become a strength. Antifragility is not something one can predict, but it is a state of mind that requires distance and adaptability. As it allows us to deal with the unknown, antifragility presents an optimistic point of view on future unpredictable events to come. It is therefore - along with some mistakes, some doubts and coincidences - a surprising and fulfilling process to evolve hand in hand with my artistic practice.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

Afterthoughts on how a text deals with the notions it contains ; potential, antifragility and unpredictability. The comments gathered throughout the development of this thesis reveal the readers' expectations when it comes to understanding. The fragility of the previous versions left the following traces in order to improve the final text.

Be more specific.

What is the relation between potentiality and the antifragile. Specify and introduce a transition.

Introduce the quote. Explain why the quote is relevant to the research.

Explain what this means within the theoretical scope of the research.

I believe so far your thoughts led me to think about the artistic process. A process is on itself potentiality per se. Without it, it only rests the struggle. Maybe this is the artistic process you are aiming for... a new language, a closer access to your mind and concepts.

Contingence.

Definition.

We ; assumption.

Are we anything other than the potential of what we can become?

"No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener." - Walter Benjamin, Illuminations: Essays and Reflections.

Potentiality comes together with desire.

Is there a 'right' tone for a work?

Does that mean that after materialisation the potential stops to exist? Or is it an ongoing process or side effect of interpretation? Or could we even argue that by looking at the potentiality of an object we are projecting it in an uncertain future?

What I think the potential chapter could do in this thesis, is to put forward some questions. You don't have to answer these questions but they can be the tool to navigate the rest of the chapters. The great thing about writing a chapter like this is that I will start reading the text after it with a curiosity that will help me as a reader to look for or recognise the connections you make between these ideas. Or more poetically put 'it will open up the potential interpretation of your text.'

What is this? Another section? If so, you need to introduce the subject.

Introduce and contextualise the quote.

Is this part of the video?

Reshape sentence don't start with 'Tested on cows'.

Last sentence? Did the guy make it out and he was only concerned with his car?

Deserves an image.

This is interesting, keep it!

You should provide a mini conclusion of this section. You can do it affirmatively rather than with questions.

This is good but it would be better if you would join the examples, compare them and then after a conclusion leading to the antifragile notion.

There should be a short intro that links what you are about to say with what has just been exposed.

Nice!

Economics.

Good!

Art that is being made is antifragile?

Are you answering these questions?

Great. Short. Simple. <3

<3

<3

This page is great, simple and honest. I feel there is something important to you and to us happening here!

chaos /// potential + choices + failure = process =

Knowledge.

This is interesting and could be the basis for your conclusion. Unpack, specify and link together the several elements.

Is it not a reproduction in a digital form?

This has to be developed a little bit more. Too little to get the hole idea.

“The self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities” - Gilles Deleuze, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia

I do not understand this sentence.

You tell too much or too little. Develop only if you think it's important.

<3

Perfectionism comes to place here!

... is the overcome of the walls once built in our mind.

We accept the predictable because we think it allows us to know the future. Randomness is associated with chaos which for most is negative. Chaos is where potentiality is at its maximum. In chaos we must dive to change us, becoming-chaos, to reshape our foundations.

‘As western seekers of melancholia’ That is maybe

something to develop : we have a fear of ageing but a seek for old things. Interesting point.

Interesting point of view of a young artist.

Add a concrete example of an artwork having a different potential in a different context.

See the open call of the Rijksmuseum! Their photo archive is public and they made an open call for artists to create new works out of these old ones.

Potentiality is intimately connected with time and time, conceptually is not exactly explored. Why? What is time for you?

<3

Becoming here and in all the moments you use the concept, opens the door for me to think within Deleuzian concepts. Becoming is changing, is deterritorializing yourself, to further open up to a process of construction of a new composition with new elements. Ageing, to me, is becoming the 'becoming'. Is to, through the years, become what once was only potentiality, and within that, you close the circle. You become above becoming, you are deterritorialized in its pure form, and you don't aim for foundations or constructions. Becoming is movement, a mental construction with repercussions in the 'material'.

You are becoming-writing, you are becoming-language.

Is this collective mind a meta-construction above all connecting and allowing knowledge to be shared? We are connected, our minds are connected, there is no original, only copy, only meta-variations of the same. We are within this sameness trying to reproduce the other.

Your thoughts.

Becoming-virtual. Restoration to me is changing the reality of an object to a rather virtual state. Not current, nor past, in a limbo of a temporal reality.

Do you intend to explore resonance?

Good!

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