

Looking for Serendip, Feeling Zembla

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“... by indistinct things the mind is stimulated to new inventions.” – Leonardo da Vinci

1. INTRODUCTION

We theorise the practical uses of serendipity, towards a model of culture in which failure and confusion are acknowledged catalysts for learning and discovery. As a metaphor, we look at how (1) gallery art, (2) street art, and (3) observations on a *dérive* are apprehended. Our analysis suggests a surprising conclusion. Just as enlightenment disappears in a culture unattuned to meditative values, serendipitous learning cannot arise unless error, failure, and disappointment enter the equation.

2. A JOURNEY THROUGH MARSEILLE

The first author recently visited Marseille after *discovering* a €5 flight ticket. He took these photographs on his wanderings and visit to the “Par Hasard” exhibition at the Friche Belle de Mai gallery.



Figure 1: *Châssis et chiffon mauve*, Antoni Tàpies (1968). “Here the artist’s tool, the rag, keeps a record of his actions and the accidents that structure his works.”



Figure 2. Untitled work, unknown artist. Wallpaper and paint.



Figure 3. *An Artist at Work*. Thomas Baruzzi (2020). Digital photograph.

3. ANALYSIS

1. In Marseille, we saw chance, decay, and obscurity exploited in various ways: glorified in the gallery, palpable in other ways on the street.
2. 'Serendipity' is invited in each circumstance as a resonance between the observer and external factors, engaging a kind of 6th sense rooted in 'faithfulness ... to the anomalies of history' (Silver, 2015).
3. Serendipity may be rejected in discourses rooted in myths of exceptional skill, or employed cynically to erase networks and relationships (Copeland, 2017; Guise-Richardson, 2010).
4. We nevertheless expect serendipity to figure, explicitly or implicitly, in theories of cognition and experience, as an integrating 'click'.

CONCLUSION

The question becomes, how do we create a more serendipitous society, which helps us move beyond experiences of anomie towards meaning? Discovery may in fact be secondary in serendipity, which has more to do with how we approach all-too-predictable experiences of failure, error, and isolation.

REFERENCES

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