She Will Encounter Some Kind of an Accident

by Alison Hearst

In 2009, in a tiny room tucked behind a commercial street in Beijing—a room part ramshackle apartment bedroom, part covert fortunetelling studio—Liz Rodda was told that in the future she will encounter an accident. The fortuneteller's prophecy, captured in Rodda's film *Triple Possibility*, was authoritative yet oblique. Taking this ominous forecast as her cue, *The Future is Not What I Used to Think*—a large, sprawling handwritten flowchart on paper—is a stream-of-consciousness musing that maps out various potential life paths Rodda might incur after the accident. The chart begins on the left-hand side with the phrase "she will encounter some kind of an accident," and forks off into two directions: "it happens right away" and "it takes time for the prediction to materialize." These two options forge off into further meanderings; some chains end in Rodda's immediate death, while others veer off into fanciful vignettes featuring the artist walking across the United States, becoming pregnant, or writing an acclaimed cult classic novel, for example. In so doing, Rodda obsessively attempts to define the indefinite through an imaginative series of hypothetical events and what-if scenarios. Yet while she strives to author her yet-to-be-determined self-narrative, the work's multiplicity of outcomes elucidates that "lack of control over the future and limitations of our understanding"[i] ultimately subsist despite one's insistence on planning ahead. With the drawing's abundance of life paths that are causal in nature, Rodda also partly recalls existentialism and freewill, or the belief that the human condition is subjective and determined through an individual's actions towards given situations. Moreover, Rodda points to the impossibility of an entirely planned or predictable fate, and instead stresses that unforeseen accidents, chance, and causality are the forces guiding existence.

In her remarkable multi-part exhibition, *Tomorrows* (2011), Rodda accentuates that control is an illusion, and that chance, freewill, and causality altogether factor into life's narrative. In Rodda's *Triple Possibility*, three filmed segments display different fortunetellers that she consulted in Beijing; each one is seen interpreting her dreams from the night before in order to

shed light on her destined career path, health, and love life. What results are three divergent, yet sometimes overlapping portraits of Rodda that are driven, to skeptics, by speculation. Fortunetelling is intrinsic to Chinese culture and originates in the classic Chinese text, the *I Ching*, which provides a system of hexagrams used to predict one's future. As Carl Jung states in his foreword to the text, "An incalculable amount of human effort is directed to combating and restricting the nuisance or danger represented by chance. . . .The matter of interest [in the *I Ching*] seems to be the configuration formed by chance events in the moment of observation. . ."[ii] However, by seeking multiple oracles for second and third opinions, *Triple Possibility* offsets the notion that a sole configuration—to be deduced through premonition—exists. Instead, the work metaphorically conjures a dice roll, emphasizing how life can offer multiple outcomes and the future is, therefore, shrouded in probabilities. Furthermore, contrary to *The Future is Not What I Used to Think*, Rodda relinquishes much control in the piece itself; the fortunetellers are unscripted, and the work's outcome is purely dictated by the structure Rodda presents by visiting fortunetellers with her dreams.

The concept that chance and chaos are the fundamental forces of life is something philosophers and artists have investigated for centuries. Most famously using chance as an artistic strategy, John Cage began composing music in the 1950s by asking the *I Ching* certain questions and "imitating nature in its manner of operation;"[iii] thus, Cage gave up personal control to let chance dictate his musical arrangements. Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969) also placed the artist and artwork at the mercy of the random strangers he diligently pursued. A more recent example of this is Francis Alÿs' *The Collector* (1991—92), in which he pulled a magnetic child's toy around Mexico City to collect random objects he happened across. The projects by Acconci and Alÿs also operate outside of the confines of the studio to further blur the line between art and everyday life.

Although experimental in nature, the aforementioned examples primarily only allow chance to arise within specific given parameters set by the artists. However, Rodda's *Tomorrows* operates differently in that it establishes chance and causality as strategies and subjects within larger,

ambiguous structures: personal fate, the future, and the passing of time. Closely related to how chance intersects causality in *Tomorrows* is Gilles Deleuze's text, *The Dice Throw* (1962), which discusses Friedrich Nietzsche's existential ideas on chance and destiny: "What Nietzsche called necessity (destiny) is thus never the abolition but rather the combination of chance itself. . . . The bad player counts on several throws of the dice, on a great number of throws. In this way he makes use of causality and probability to produce a combination that he sees as desirable."[iv] Operating alongside this idea is Rodda's *Plan For Victory*—a black-jade icosahedron that is scaled and modeled after the 20-sided die used in role-playing games, such as Dungeons and Dragons, and in the Magic 8 Ball toys of our childhood. Like any die-based game, each roll determines the next step for the player and is based on chance. Here, however, the dice is rendered in smooth black jade and is devoid of numbers, thus eliminating the potential to advance, fail, or succeed in the game. *Plan For Victory* ultimately emphasizes that the outcome is unwritten, yet its open-ended nature nonetheless leaves room for us to envisage playing the bad player and to, thus, at least hope to have a crack at producing a desirable combination.

As control over the future is rendered illusory in *Tomorrows*, so, too, is the notion of time. In *2010/2011*, Rodda present twin photographs of the night sky taken a second before and after midnight on New Year's Eve. Although the work technically depicts two years, because the photographs are nearly identical and precariously hinge on their title, Rodda highlights that time is merely a mental construct used to organize our perceptions. Moreover, *2010/2011* would lose its meaning if untitled or framed within a different time zone or calendar, such as the Chinese lunisolar calendar. Also noteworthy is that the photographs also depict the Taurus constellation, which is Rodda's astrological sign. By laying emphasis on her zodiac sign, Rodda attempts to locate something personal within the vastness of the universe—or the micro within the macro.

What can be perceived as *Tomorrow*'s poignant endnote is *Curtains*—a continually looping video picturing red-velvet stage curtains that tremble with backstage activity. The behind-the-scenes movement is never revealed and it is unclear whether or not there is a performance

about to commence, or where the video begins and ends. We are, nevertheless, left waiting. *Curtains* mimics the anticipatory moments peppered throughout the human experience—instants that feel especially drawn out when waiting for our imagined plans to materialize. Yet while the fortunetellers and Rodda attempt to unveil or plan these futures, *Tomorrows* ultimately dismisses the human need or proclivity to anticipate such expectations. Moreover, *Tomorrows* embraces the uncontrolled spontaneities and unknowns that comprise the future, time, and life itself and renders them with eloquence.

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[i] Liz Rodda in conversation with the author, March 3, 2011.

[ii] C. G. Jung, foreword to *The I Ching; or, Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and rendered into English by Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), xxii- xxiii.

[iii] James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 97.

[iv] Gilles Deleuze, extract from *Nietzsche et la Philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962); trans. Hugh Tomlinson, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); reprinted edition (London: Continuum, 2006), 24—5.