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From Rust: Growth, Decay and the Unknown in the Prints of Petr Herel

When we think of the terms ‘mistake’, ‘error’, and ‘accident’, it is usually in the sense of their conventional dictionary definitions—such descriptions evoke the image of something wrong, of something misguided, of something related to delusion or an inappropriate action. And yet, these terms can also be considered not just as static terms but as larger theoretical concepts related to ideas of knowing and not knowing, which in turn open up the notion of error and its economy into a new and productive way to think about creative practice. Indeed, examining the work of Czech-born Australian artist Petr Herel (1943-) demonstrates the interpretive possibilities of focusing upon ideas of mistake, error, accident, and chance. With two prints from Herel’s *Borges Sequel* (1982) and *Tardieu Sequel* (2009) series as case study, this paper will use the presence of rust as an entry point to demonstrate that ideas of error and chance play a large role in Herel’s creative process—from the fateful development of concepts, to the material and techniques effecting the printed image, to the artist’s interest in Surrealism and choice of exquisite corpse subject matter, and finally the artist’s use of automatic letterforms throughout his compositions. In addition, in embracing the role that mistake, chance, known and unknown have had in Herel’s process, we too as interpreters can make these ideas central to our own process of interpretation. As Herel comments that the “question/topic of ‘Error’, or as I’ll say ‘...deliberate error/chance’ ...was always important in my work” (2019), so must analysis of Herel’s prints be informed by the incidental.

The use of Petr Herel’s work as case study throughout this paper is justified by the artist’s seminal presence in Australian and international printmaking, not only through his practice of making prints and artists’ books but also through his teaching. Under the directorship of Udo Sellbach (1927–2006), Herel was founding head of the Graphic Investigation Workshop at the Canberra School of Art from 1979 to 1998 (Grishin, 1999: 50). The Workshop was created in response to a developing attitude of drawing as an autonomous activity, celebrating the technique’s ambiguity (Gilmour, 1988: 7). From this, students experimented with response to literary inspiration, and developed an “outstanding record for the production of artists’ books” (Gilmour, 1988: 7), leading the Workshop to become an internationally

recognised endeavour (Grishin, 1999: 50). Herel actively encouraged students to extend drawing beyond conventional illustration, using it to instead engage with larger metaphysical issues of being (Gilmour, 1988: 7). By avoiding the literal nature of illustration, students were able to experiment, indeed investigate, affective experience, and therefore the incidental (Gilmour, 1988: 9). The book form was appropriately temporal, experiential, and personal—a format ripe for subjective, accidental occurrences through individual responses to literary inspiration and a simultaneous engagement with the literary and the visual. The artist comments that through his teaching he was deliberately suggesting to students a creative process that not only related to technical skill but also focussed on “seeking in chance another world of [the] unexpected” (2019). Acknowledging Herel’s seminal presence in Australian printmaking, as well as his dedicated interest in chance, justifies the use of his work as exemplary case study when examining ideas of mistake, error and the incidental in creative practice and art historical interpretation.

First, a brief discussion of knowing and not knowing in the context of error, mistake, accident, and chance. With roots in classical philosophy, the use of knowing and not knowing as a framework to write art history is gaining momentum. To engage with not knowing is to engage with processes out of one’s control, often dancing with chance, mistake and drawing from the incidental. This play with the unknown acts in the face of conventional teleological thought, focused on the final result from the very beginning, thus stripping away any opportunity for unexpected interventions—it sees progress as a “one-way passage, the move from what is known to the goal of knowing, more and more” (Cocker, 2013: 127). Emma Cocker writes of not knowing as “an experience easily squandered, for it is hard to override those habits which usher uncertainty into the indeterminate scene” (2013: 128). Yet, once this conventional, linear way of approaching knowledge is overcome, the possibilities when engaging with the unknown—that is error, chance, and accident—are refreshingly endless. Hence unknowingness, and in turn ideas of accident, error, and chance, should be framed in the positive, an exciting space in which conventional comprehension is stalled to allow for new interpretation. Cocker again writes: “Stalling thought disturbs its habitual rhythm, creating the spacing of a missed beat within which to consider things differently to what they already are” (2013: 128). It is within this missed beat, this reframing of thought and interpretation, that this paper will examine Herel’s practice, unknowingness at the forefront to discuss the ways in which the artist’s work overtly and more subtly plays with accident and chance.

At its fundamental core, Herel’s broader ethos is one that weaves deliberate intention with an open-mindedness to embrace and adapt to accidental occurrences. As Gary Peters writes: “What does knowingness know? It knows of its own unknowingness” (2009: 1). Herel’s ongoing preoccupation with the concepts of ‘Growth’ and ‘Decay’ is undeniably related to an engagement with the unexpected and unplanned (April 2017). In writing about his practice, the artist repeatedly and deliberately capitalises these terms, promoting their presence as central concerns in both his conceptualisation and technical execution of projects. Growth and Decay—both terms evoke organic processes that cannot be entirely tamed or controlled by the

human hand. These terms are inextricably linked to happenstance—they are processes that depend on individual contexts and circumstances, of which the result can be hypothesised but is ultimately in the hands of nature. These are both terms of the unknown. It is important to note that Herel treats these terms as a pair—he is interested in the generative possibilities of Growth, but equally interested in the degenerative possibilities of Decay. Like some might think of mistakes and errors as wrongs, they may also assume Decay to be a negative phenomenon, a breakdown or rotting of matter. Yet for Herel, in his embrace of chance, Decay is a fruitful site for creation and contemplation. Decay is not an ending but a beginning, a beginning equal to Growth. Both Growth and Decay directly inform Herel's quest for "seeking in chance another world of [the] unexpected" (2019), and the art historian can use these terms to focus interpretation of the artist's work and process. An example of the interpretation to result from this kind of focussed attention upon chance, Growth and Decay is examining the artist's conscious re-use of plates to encourage unexpected results.

A concrete reference to Growth and Decay, and therefore chance and the incidental, in Herel's broader practice can be found in his continued use of the one plate throughout a work. This repetition engages with memory as the relationship between past, present, and future prints is emphasised through particularly subtle changes that happen intentionally and unintentionally over time. This reuse establishes a sense of movement throughout Herel's artists' books and print series, and create a sense of specific space. The repeated prints engage with time to slow down the pace of viewing, "asking [the] reader to go back and to think about the particular order of images, their transformations..." (April 2017). The reprinting of the same plate gives each print a sense of individual life—the subtle development of the imagery over time mimics organic growth, and in some cases incorporates unavoidable and unintentional changes to the physical surface of the plate as it is repeatedly used over time. Herel articulates the 'Time' emphasised by this repetition is not related to dynamic animation, like turning the changing pages of a flip-book, but instead a 'Time' that touches on 'Growth' and 'Decay' (April 2017). Rather than creating a fast-paced movement throughout the work, the repetitive imagery makes the viewer aware of the subtle development of the compositions at the turn of each page. Herel's choice of plate repetition reflects the nostalgia the artist feels for a slower paced interaction (2015), and clearly marks the artist's invitation to the viewer to consider the impact of time and change upon the printed image and the printing plate. Herel's works can be considered living creatures, evoking a sense that these compositions evolve in an individual way not entirely controlled by the artist's hand—this sense of chance and the unknown is encouraged by the artist's repeated use of the gradually wearing plate. This process is especially influential upon the creation of *Borges Sequel* and *Tardieu Sequel*, as an explanation of the circumstances of their creation will demonstrate—the deterioration of the artist's plates in this circumstance was extraordinary.

The prints from the *Borges Sequel* and *Tardieu Sequel* series relate to chance, error and the incidental from their very conception, to their technical qualities, and to the subject matter and letterforms that inhabit the compositions. In aiming to

demonstrate the extent to which analysis using a paradigm of chance generates a fruitful interpretive angle, it is logical to begin with an outline of how these prints came to be. In 1980, the avant-garde French poet and dramatist Jean Tardieu (1903–1995) published a text in the literary magazine *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. This text was part of an ongoing series of “art transpositions” written by Tardieu and was titled *La Vérité sur les Monstres (Lettre a un Graveur Visionnaire)* [The Truth about Monsters (Letter to a Visionary Engraver)] (Martin-Scherrer, 1993). Written in letter form and addressed to the hand that made them, Tardieu expressed his admiration for a particular group of etchings. Indeed, so enamoured was the writer with the prints that he spent an extended amount of time looking at both the images and the plates from which they were printed, taking notes (Martin-Scherrer, 1993). In his published text, Tardieu wrote: “Breathless and marvelling, I feel a pernicious pleasure as I study your inimitable vision...” (Martin-Scherrer, 1993). The writer was evidently very taken with the works, which he found surprising and graceful (Martin-Scherrer, 1993).

While readers had become used to Tardieu’s regular feature, *La vérité sur les monstres (lettre a un graveur visionnaire)* was particularly intriguing as the identity of the artist about whom Tardieu spoke so compellingly was never revealed (Martin-Scherrer, 1993). As academic and Tardieu specialist Frédérique Martin-Scherrer comments:

...in this case there was a total mystery; and the ‘Letter to a visionary engraver’ left the identity of its addressee undivulged. Not only does the reader not know who he is but the author himself states that he doesn’t know either: ‘You whom I do not know,’ he says, ‘but whose surprising images I admire, set down with a cruel and accurate burin.’ (1993)

It was not until 1991, 11 years after Tardieu’s piece was published, that Martin-Scherrer undertook dedicated research to reveal the artist responsible for the engravings: Petr Herel (Martin-Scherrer, 1993). All this time, Herel had not read Tardieu’s piece, and so had no idea it was indeed written about his work—which the writer had come across, before forgetting Herel’s name, during plans for a collaborative project that fell through when Herel had suddenly moved to Australia (Martin-Scherrer, 1993). And so these prints marked a mysterious and fateful connection, one seemingly guided by fate and shaped by the unexpected, in which a connection was formed between Tardieu and Herel, that spanned both continents, individual consciousnesses, and time.

After Herel’s move to Australia, he had published the prints in question through dealer Rudy Komon under the title *Borges Sequel* (they had been inspired by a reading of Borges’ *Ficciones*, originally published in 1944, see Figs. 1a and 1b for the print used as example throughout this article). In linking Tardieu and Herel together through her research, Martin-Scherrer suggested a project that would eventuate in the *Tardieu Sequel* prints: she asked Herel if he was interested in re-printing the *Borges Sequel* plates so that they may be reunited with, and compared to, Tardieu’s text describing his fascination with them (Martin-Scherrer, 2004). In their discussions, Martin-Scherrer and Herel developed a variety of responses to the unification of the prints and Tardieu’s text, however for the purpose of this paper only the

Tardieu Sequel prints will be the focus. Upon re-printing the *Borges Sequel* plates, Herel found them to have unexpectedly and accidentally rusted, thus transforming the images in a way that was out of the artist's control and of direct consequence to their appearance (see Figs. 2a and 3a for the print used as example throughout this article). Herel, rather than seeing this rusting as a technical error, pushed on with the printing and embraced the changes in the plates. Just as the plates had transformed from known to unknown entities, so had a simple re-printing of the *Borges Sequel* prints transformed into another respective work, the aptly titled *Tardieu Sequel*. To tell the story of how both these series came about is to tell a story undeniably characterised by chance, accident, and the unknown.

The unintentional presence of rust in the *Tardieu* prints is an exemplary entry point for examining the complexities of Herel's play with chance and the unknown through its explicit visual impact. The artist is clear that the rusting process was out of his control: "the rusting was not a conscious decision, it just happened because of the humidity under the house where [the] plates were stored..." (2019). Upon retrieving the plates to re-print at Martin-Scherrer's request, Herel found value in the changes the rust made to the printed image, in both physical and philosophical ways: "I was surprised not only [by] how [the] rust printed like the finest aquatint but also by the strange way...[the] plates rusted somewhere and somewhere not—and all this just 'by themselves'" (2019).

Not only had the accidental rusting process changed the aesthetic of the prints, but the erratic and seemingly random places in which the rusting effected the plate was further left to nature. The background of the prints was transformed from a clear expanse of negative space to one filled with dark, cloudy masses that threatened to consume the exquisite corpses inhabiting the compositions. Martin-Scherrer saw these changed prints as having the potential to make viewers contemplate the passing of time when displayed together in the exhibition, commenting "the random hand of matter itself had reworked the plate..." (Martin-Scherrer, 2004: 25). The plates' decomposition was also relevant to Tardieu's writing, his preoccupation with "the universal law of devouring" (Martin-Scherrer, 2004). The re-printed proofs conjured, and continue to conjure, a sense of the ripe richness of Decay. Here, accident transformed a simple re-printing into a new work in itself, and a new extension of Herel's metaphysical questioning of chance, the unknown, and the uncontrollable. The rust also invites both the art historian and general viewer to do the same, explicitly evoking the generative possibilities of the incidental.

In comparing the two prints made from the same plate in *Borges Sequel* and *Tardieu Sequel*, the impact of the rust upon the composition is immediately obvious. The rusted areas transform what was once a clean composition with an abundance of negative space into one that is overwhelmed by pooling darkness. The darkened background of the *Tardieu Sequel* print is nearly all-consuming, and threatens to envelop all of Herel's consciously depicted forms. This case study is particularly valuable as the viewer is able to see the original print alongside the result of Herel's later embrace of the accidental. In this sense, one is given insight into Herel's process, given a clear idea of just how much the rust has impacted the *Tardieu Sequel* print. The rusted background both eliminates parts of the composition and highlights

untouched areas, as well as transforming some patches into new entities as they sit in a liminal space affected by the rust but not consumed by it. For example, at the bottom of the composition rests an island of mottled lines created by the rust, not present in the first *Borges Sequel* print. This is similar to several areas along the right side of the print, in which the rust-affected areas create a pooling aesthetic that resembles the ripples of a stone thrown into water or a line drawn in the sand. The impact of the rust gives the print an additional organic quality, a chanceful quality, and a feeling of randomness. This, along with the exquisite corpses and unreadable text included in the compositions, acts as a doorway into analysing the impact of Surrealism upon Herel's practice, emphasising the artist's intentional play with the unintentional and its aesthetic and interpretive possibilities.

In examining the *Borges Sequel* and *Tardieu Sequel* prints, rust acts as portal into an investigation of Herel's work in relation to error, chance and the unknown not only terms of the immediate visual impact of embracing chance but also its relevance to larger influences upon Herel's practice. That is, the influence of Surrealism upon his compositions, and how Surrealist approaches to the exquisite corpse and automatic response tie into ideas of the incidental in Herel's *oeuvre*. As the artist himself identifies the significant influence of Surrealism upon his work, an examination of the *Borges* and *Tardieu* prints in relation to the movement is relevant and fruitful.

The Surrealist concepts referred to throughout this paper should not be considered a uniquely French preoccupation; Surrealism was also the passionate interest of a group of Czech artists in the 1930s, who under the initiation of poet Vítězslav Nezval (1900–1958) formed the Surrealist Group of Czechoslovakia in March 1934 (Bydžovská, 2005: 1). Like their French counterparts, with whom the group undertook creative exchange through collaboration, visits, and publications, the Czech Surrealists were interested in exploring ideas of eroticism, the dream state, and ideas of beauty in their art (Bydžovská, 2005: 3–4). Due to this largely shared attitude towards creative practice, interpretation and experimentation, the fortuitous Surrealist concepts used to discuss Herel's work in this paper should be considered foundational ideas that relate to both French and Czech contexts—such ideas were clearly not restricted by borders, and Herel's time spent in both France and the now Czech Republic allows for a larger, inclusive application of the Surrealist paradigm to his work. Analysing the artist's work in relation to chance and accident through the lens of Surrealism is an approach that dynamically crosses borders and moves through time.

In their embrace of automatism and subversion of previous academic approaches to creativity, the Surrealists came to invent a game called *cadavre exquis* ('exquisite cadaver' or 'exquisite corpse') (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2016). Examining the game's parameters, effect upon players, and links to chance, accident and error demonstrates the value of interpreting *Borges Sequel* and *Tardieu Sequel* in relation to the exquisite corpse. Exquisite corpse was a parlour game in which players would each draw a part of an image in secret, fold the paper to hide most of this image from the other participants, and hand it on to the next for their contribution (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2016). The result was an often

confusing, illogical composite figure or phrase. The term was coined following an early game that resulted in the phrase: *le cadaver exquis boira le vin nouveau* ('the exquisite corpse will drink the new wine') (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2016). It was nonsensical, and embodied surreal goals of disruption and destabilisation. Collaboration was key, as the creation of the final composite required different minds (Kahmen, 1972: 66). Louis Aragon's writing describes the exquisite corpse using phrases such as "an extraordinary displacement" and "a surprising disproportion", referencing the small-scale revolution being played out upon a single piece of paper (Kahmen, 1972: 66).

The exquisite corpse influenced those creating the discombobulated figure as well as those interpreting it. It was uncanny, uncomfortable, and unsettling. By creating an exquisite corpse, players were further opening themselves to the possibility of the subverted object, of incorporating chance into the act of creation in such a manner that the creator(s) were not in complete control of the finished product. An exquisite corpse visually represented the disruption of preconceived ideas of the image, especially the idea that an image need be carefully planned or considered by its creator before being made (Balakian, 1972: 193). The exquisite corpse challenged viewers and interpreters to associate forms they previously would not have naturally combined, thus giving themselves over to the creative possibilities of incorporating accident and the incidental into making art. Martin-Scherrer comments specifically upon this in relation to Herel and Tardieu's monsters: "Since Descartes, it has been a commonplace to say that monsters in art are the result of an unfamiliar combination of familiar elements and that the painter does not really invent so much as he deconstructs to reconstruct differently" (1993). This malleability generates a new freedom of association and understanding—one that is infinite. One small parlour game became a metaphor for the Surrealist way of life and creative process, with ongoing ramifications in contemporary art practice (Breton, 1972: 44). By interpreting the exquisite corpse, by simply being exposed to it, both the artist and the viewer are required to challenge preconceived ideas of order, form and meaning. They need to embrace the possibilities thrown up by an embrace of chance and the unknown.

The exquisite corpses inhabiting the sheets from *Borges* and *Tardieu Sequel* immediately evoke the feeling of wrongness. These characters are nonsensical, composed of limbs and recognisable human features stitched together in seemingly random, illogical ways. These are demented, venerable beings. By looking at them, the viewer worships the aberrant. At the upper right of the composition rests a figure almost entirely composed of feet, enclosed within a fine line that acts as a kind of cage. Only two of this figure's feet rest firmly on the ground, the other six arranged in a bouquet of ankles, soles and toes pointing upwards. This creature defies logic, it is surely erroneous in its impracticality. Below this many-footed creature stands a sagging, hairy being, its naked corporeal and dermatological features emphasised by the practical pair of shoes on its feet. This creature is similarly random, a fateful combination of features composed in Herel's mind with no logical foundation in reality. This exquisite corpse references Growth and Decay explicitly—its head is composed of a stretching skull, yet the fine hairs on its legs appear to be growing and

shedding onto the floor around it. The creature's sagging torso evokes aging flaps of skin, parts usually covered. This creature is unreservedly and unapologetically wrong, its textured body parts evoking an uncomfortable corporeal response in the viewer. Finally, to the left of the composition dances a form that combines bird, leg and vulva that strengthens the overwhelming atmosphere of unpredictability and chance. The viewer is left unsure of whether the eyes that are tucked in across this body are, in fact, eyes or vulvas. With their seemingly direct eye contact, these features make the viewer disconcertingly aware of their voyeuristic gaze upon a form so illogical, simultaneously erotic and repulsive.

It is valuable to compare viewing these creatures, these visual manifestations of error and chance, between the untarnished *Borges Sequel* and rusted *Tardieu Sequel* prints. Each context, clean and rusted, has its own impact on the presentation of Herel's exquisite corpses—the clean plate results in an image in which the creatures are unapologetically bold, with no rest for the viewer's eye from the monstrous forms. In viewing the clean composition first, one might assume the rusted plate and its darkened areas will provide some visual respite from these creatures. Yet this is not the case—the accidentally rusted background instead creates an appropriately sinister environment for these creatures to inhabit, and the areas in which the rust has started to eat away at the characters only further serves the overwhelming feeling of uncertainty and decay. The viewer is left to complete these forms themselves, invited to contribute their own extensions to the exquisite corpse form. The sense of accident and chance in these compositions is not just limited to Herel's process, but bleeds into the viewer's subjective interpretation of the prints, making one concrete understanding of the works wonderfully impossible.

Littered throughout the prints of the *Borges* and *Tardieu Sequel* are letterforms that are undeniably the result of Herel's adoption of chance and accident through automatic response. These letterforms produce a kind of self-created language that emphasises conventional preoccupation with positive knowledge and the limits it presents, as these letters are unreadable—unknowable. In their sense of error, in being unreadable, they represent a ripe site for wide-reaching and subjective interpretation. With his starry letterforms that dynamically move across the page, Herel's language and use of incomprehensible automatic text proposes a visual reading. These text forms arguably have their foundation in Herel's early art education, which encouraged developing forms instinctively. Herel comments:

There was an important lesson given to us by our professor Svolinsky: "never to use rubber" but to alter, to develop or to take drawing in the other direction...But there is another strategy altogether: to make on a bigger plate deliberately little drawings, doodles on the margins of an "intended image"—if you look carefully at [the] *Borges* images – in the centre there is [the] "intended image" which was "preprepared" in [a] little sketch; but around on the margins, there are all [kinds of] improvised doodles...(2019)

These letterforms, or 'doodles' as Herel calls them, reflect the artist's ongoing interest in automatic response; the development of his own language, his own iconography. Sasha Grishin writes of Herel's dancing, nonsensical letterforms as having "the appearance of a graphic language, a mystical calligraphy which is not

immediately decipherable to the uninitiated eye" (1999: 5). Here, Grishin's "uninitiated eye" is one that does not consider the aesthetic impact of Herel's semantically ambiguous language; its conceptual engagement with unknowingness and the infinite possibilities of error and accident.

Herel's constructed language acts in the face of concrete, semantic understanding. Umberto Eco writes: "the informal sign does not mark the death of form in the visual arts, but proposes instead [...] a field of possibilities. The gestural marks and spatters [...] stimulate the viewer to make their own connections with the work" (Crown, 2010: 52). The letterforms in the *Borges* and *Tardieu Sequel* prints not only stimulate subjective connections, but by maintaining familiar formats of standard text also allow for reflection upon the act of reading itself. In his letter to the visionary engraver, Tardieu writes of Herel's use of a highly personal language: "I envy [...] the inventor of forms who has your power to imagine, for instance, an expressive sign that exists in no alphabet, a character with a meaning and a key known to none but you [...]" (Martin-Scherrer, 2004). Herel interrogates what it means to communicate and understand, and his language is not simply a message but a direct outcome of his personal exploration of meaning, his power to create expressive signs that exist autonomously, outside of conventional understanding. There is a sense of both immediacy and intimacy achieved by Herel sharing with the viewer a self-created visual text that is open to infinite interpretations. The viewer is explicitly invited to engage with Herel's other world of the "unexpected" (2019).

Herel acknowledges that the inspiration for his letterforms comes from Max Ernst's book *Maximiliana or the Illegal Practice of Astronomy* (1964). Ernst's letterforms simultaneously appear as crude tribal markings, astrological symbols, alien text, and incomprehensible diagrams—his own composite language. They are a visible representation of the unknown other, and Herel's own forms quote these cosmic shapes. *Maximiliana* also features a typographical concept invented by publisher Iliazd (1894–1975), "*la construction en carré*" ("construction in squares"), by which each of the letterforms in the book falls into an invisible geometric grid running over the page (Greet, 1982: 10). This is relevant to Herel's work as the artist himself experiments with presenting his own language using typical textual conventions. Writing of Ernst's letterforms, Anne Hyde Greet articulates: "The invisible design [spreads]... across the page and beyond the sky as we see it and also [references]... the mystical ideas of a cosmic structure—[it is] arbitrary, secret, and divine" (Greet, 1982: 10).

The presentation of the unknowable in a deliberately conventional format creates an aberrant page as it feels so tantalisingly close to a semantic message, yet rests intentionally out of reach. Both Herel and Ernst present viewers with a finished product that keeps secrets. The presence of these semantically untranslatable texts emphasises the conventional need to understand. These texts, intended to suggest semantic significance by their marked presence on the page and close resemblance to alphabetical characters, are loudly secretive. The artists have deliberately included them and deliberately left them unknown.

The letterforms Herel has developed are partly a graphic manifestation of the sustained influence that Borges' writing has had upon the artist's practice (March



Petr Herel, [a print from] *Borges Sequel* (Sydney: Rudy Komon, 1982), private collection, Canberra, Australia.



Petr Herel, [a print from] *Tardieu Sequel* (Paris: Librairie Nicaise, 2004), private collection, Canberra, Australia.

2017). In the short story *The Immortal* (1947), the narrator observes a unique script he describes as the “letters in our dreams, [that] seem on the verge of being understood and then dissolve” (Borges, 1962: 142). He notes the letters do not appear to form a cohesive code (Borges, 1962: 142). Instead, these symbols embody individual character, and are wholly visual due to their immediate semantic inaccessibility. Herel’s forms reference this text as a visual response to reading this literary description, and magical text is a recurrent theme throughout Borges’ *oeuvre*. As Herel engages with his new textual forms, he challenges the conventional reality of the reader. Like the challenge Herel’s work presents for habitual reading, Borges too addresses the influence between text and feeling grounded or unstable, asserting: “a language is a tradition, a way of grasping reality, not an arbitrary assemblage of symbols” (Borges, 1979: 98). Herel’s own text, to be demonstrated by the analysis of the appropriately Borges-inspired *Borges Sequel* and *Tardieu Sequel*, presents a new reality and suggests a new way of grasping it. His letterforms are cosmological, hieroglyphic, alchemical, and ultimately alien forms. Herel’s personal code, an untranslatable language, interrogates ideas of communication, reception and understanding through a lens of chance, accident and error.

A formal, visual analysis of these letterforms demonstrates the ways in which their engagement with the unknowable, of the presumed erroneous, generates meaning. First, the un-rusted *Borges Sequel* composition. In this print, the viewer is presented with several areas of text. Rather than acting as focal point of the sheet, as one might expect when reading a page of conventional text, Herel has placed and scaled his textual forms around the exquisite corpse characters. Further instilling a sense of error is the artist’s ironic play with traditional literary formatting. At the top of the composition rests text seemingly in the place of a heading or title, yet it is composed of unreadable characters. To the upper left of the composition is a small block of text that is so cramped that the viewer, after straining to consider the word forms within it, is again presented with unfamiliar, unknowable letters. These letters create a sense of density as their unequal spacing creates darkened, knotted areas that become sparsely articulated before tangling amongst themselves once more. Finally, though conventionally composed along a guiding line as one might see in a notebook or journal, a line of text at the bottom of the sheet yet again presents illegible text. Upon closer consideration, these lines do not provide a resting point for the text, as Herel’s letterforms are pierced by the line, rather than resting on top of it. The line here is not to organise the text, instead dynamically becoming a part of the writing itself—this is not a line of elimination, rather a form the artist tempts to interact with the text surrounding it by shaking it from its traditional, literary function. Throughout this *Borges Sequel* print, across all three areas of text, Herel’s use of repetitive characters and symbols suggest a code or a pattern. They present as a language, yet are unknowable both literarily and literally. Herel presents the viewer with a language of visuals, a language that is conventionally erroneous and illogical through its illegibility, yet is a ripe site for interpretation.

In the *Tardieu Sequel* print, the effect of the rust upon the image has all but eaten away Herel’s text, leaving just the lines at the upper right of the image, thus demanding the viewer’s focus upon that area. This accidental impact of the rust invites

an interpretation of these letters framed by ideas of Growth and Decay. As the darkened rust areas pool around the edges of the text and begin to flow over and across its edges, so the letterforms are given a liveliness, their frantic, tightly knotted forms transformed into creatures desperate to escape impending elimination. The forms become frantic, their diagonal swooping lines extending to resemble limbs attempting to break free of their clumping together. Not only are they untranslatable, the textual forms of this rusted print adopt the qualities of a living creature, as the viewer is presented with a visual manifestation of a cycle between birth, growth and decay. Such interpretation would not be possible without the visual effects of the rust upon the print, not a deliberate decision by the artist but instead a demonstrably valuable embrace of the accidental.

Petr Herel's work engages with accident, chance, and the unknown from macrocosm to microcosm. As this paper has demonstrated, interpreting the artist's work with an emphasis on these concepts is particularly fruitful, as one must consider Herel's larger interactions with Surrealism, along with the exquisite corpse creatures and unknowable letterforms inhabiting his prints. Unpacking the economy of error in the artist's work, specifically using prints from the *Borges Sequel* and *Tardieu Sequel* plates as case study, not only highlights the ways in which the maker interacts with these ideas, but demonstrates that so too can the art historian. After all, the impetus to study these prints came from rust—both the artist's embrace of the incidental and uncontrollable in going on with his project, and this art historian's willingness to use as entry point what might superficially be considered an accident to delve into Herel's "world of the unexpected".

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Abstract

This paper explores the work of Czech-born Australian artist Petr Herel (1943-), and the ongoing focus in his practice upon, in his words, 'seeking in chance another world of the unexpected'. Specifically, it will examine the artist's decision to reprint proofs of his *Borges Sequel* (1982) portfolio twenty years later to create *Tardieu Sequel* (2004), despite the plates having rusted. This rusting was not a conscious decision, having occurred while the plates were stored in damp and humid conditions. For many, this rusting would be seen as a disappointing reality, an unintentional and unwelcome disruption of the original compositions. However, upon seeing if reprinting the rusted plates would be a physical possibility, Herel found himself surprised by the way the rust printed 'like the finest aquatint', and was fascinated by the erratic and irregular patterns formed by the organic process which had been entirely out of his control—'and all this just 'by themselves'. Suddenly, the exquisite corpse monsters that inhabited the compositions were situated within a new environment, an environment that complemented their aberrant grotesque forms but also threatened their very existence on the page.

Inspired by Herel's observation that the interplay between conscious decision making, error, and chance has always had a presence in his work, this paper draws upon Herel's decision to print the rusted plates as a portal to interrogate how the artist's embrace of chance and 'error' impacts the way viewers might interpret the imagery in question today. This paper reveals and explores the ripe space for new interpretation facilitated by Herel's printing of the damaged plates, specifically discussing the ways in the notion of 'error' can be used to re-frame examinations of the subject matter, composition and themes contained within the *Borges Sequel* and *Tardieu Sequel* prints. Herel's preoccupation with the concepts of 'Growth' and 'Decay' works in the face of the notion that printing plates should be a reliable source of repeatedly consistent imagery, instead engaging with the nebulous nature of unknowingness. Like the very biological process of rust itself, the artist's choice to print the rusted plates breaks down convention and creates new matter. This paper proves that, in the case of the *Borges Sequel* and *Tardieu Sequel* prints, there is a wealth of growth to be found in decay.

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