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**Aesthetic Risk: an artist’s perspective.**

The values of art clearly have much to do with our aesthetic experience of it, although some of you might be curious about the relation between risk, aesthetic experience and artistic creation. My life over the past year throughout my artist’s residency at King’s College London, has been coloured by these questions.

My engagement with the topic of aesthetic risk emerged from a paper I wrote titled *Compassion as Risk*, conceived of as a critique of a tendency in the current liberal and cosmopolitan order, to repress the riskiness of affective and emotional practices. These interests in risk were shaped by insights garnered from the post structural and philosophical traditions of aesthetics, but my thoughts on aesthetic risk are also inflected through my practice as an artist, as I have struggled to understand the relation between my painting practice, its’ possible supplements and its’ seemingly incomprehensible provocations.

My Leverhulme artist’s residency in the Department of War Studies focussed on the idea of productive risk, as a critique of the idea that all risk is negative. This collaborative project was prompted by the idea that risk management values and practices, although also necessary, are sometimes used as an excuse to limit our liberties or to install more regulation into our already over-regulated lives. In several collaborations with scholars and students in War Studies on topics as diverse as security risks and aesthetic risks, cybernetic risk and aesthetic free play, drones, ethics, aesthetics and risk, risk sexuality and politics, I mapped out some of the productive possibilities of aesthetic risk. I did so as something of a ‘bridge’ between myself and these social science and political theory collaborators, in the interests of understanding what might be at stake in the beholder’s experience of aesthetic risk in art and for articulating what creative and social risks I take in my painting practice.

In this regard I have made the case that the practice of aesthetic free play is creatively risky for those who interpret or experience art, and make it. Such risky ‘free play’ is aesthetically valuable insofar as we enter into its disruptive, performative and non-instrumental protocols for no other purpose than to open ourselves up to free play, although what happens to us if we do so, is far from simple or predictable. Furthermore, I understand that the ethical value of this practice resides in its capacity to produce us as individually reflexive subjects across our differences. And this practice has political value, insofar as it is a site in which certain interests might be promoted or displaced. For example, the production of the individual reflexive subject is itself political, not to mention all the interests wrapped up in the modalities in which aesthetic free play is articulated.

I have for some time turned to philosophy to find a language to understand and articulate these aesthetic, ethical and political possibilities. Kant’s association of the aesthetic experience of beauty with the cognitive free play of imagination and understanding; and Schiller’s conception of aesthetic free play as an educative possibility, where the play-drive integrates the active and passive forces of emotion and reason, enabled me to approach the idea of aesthetic free play. Via Deleuze and Ranciere, I was able to understand that aesthetic engagement does not only operate in the service of the binary opposition between sense and cognition, or emotion and reason, but is a performative, multiple, traversing and attuning process, itself disruptively political.

Following, but also embellishing on these philosophical perspectives, throughout this residency I made the case that aesthetic experience in art is constituted by a reflexive matrix which mobilises our multiple cognitive, emotional, affective, perceptual and sensual capacities, our desires, and our cultural expectations, memories and unconsciously constructed assumptions. Such multiplicity is shaped by the language or method of each particular artwork and filtered through the presumptions and prejudices of each individual spectator.

This matrix applies to all aesthetic experience in art, but is of course delivered along a spectrum which ranges between low and high risk, complexity. Although, at both ends of this risk spectrum, aesthetic experience in art involves traversal between oppositions, for example, between the differences of what we understand and what we feel in an encounter with an artwork. Yet, such movement between cognition and emotion is merely one set of oppositions that structure this experience, and as this risk spectrum gets more complex, there is no limit to which oscillations between oppositions and which ‘lines of flight’ apply.

We may well try to manage such risky multiplicity by attuning to the particularities that are thrown up in this process. For example we might attune to our sense perceptions of the work, or our emotional or cognitive responses, only to switch back into those connective and mobile traversals that weave between those multiple components of this experience. Such unspeakable and disruptive ‘free play’ delivers both political and ethical opportunities to the aesthetic experience of the viewer, as indeed do the multiplicities of artistic creation.

Understood then as a performative practice, aesthetic free play in art, is not bound by the fixities of representation, even as representation might figure as a component of these processes. Indeed, for some, representation is a bulwark for those who resist the risky rollercoaster ride opened up by this multiplicity. Here representation and conceptual clarity might be something of a life raft, which services the production of knowledge, identity and fixity. Whereas for those viewers and artists open to the full range of aesthetic risk, representation is merely one component of this practice whose aim, at the high risk, or romantic end of the spectrum, is the disaggregation of fixity, and the mobilisation of unspeakable experience.

One of the few theorists of aesthetic risk, Scott Lash, in his paper titled *Risk Culture,* makes the case that the aesthetic, indeterminate and reflexive experience of the sublime involves a type of risk that puts the unity of the subject under pressure. And following from this, the sublime is not only an agonistic and affective aesthetic category that disperses and disorganises the relations which produce a sense of the self, but also constitutes a new kind of community, one based on sects and cultural practices which “deal with risk, with identity risks, with ecological risks, not so much through rational calculation but through symbolic practices and symbolic innovation”.(Adam *et al* 2000: 60)

I am much taken with Lash’s account of the subversive and constitutive effects of sublime risk. Yet it seems to me that there is much more at stake for our understanding of the productive possibilities of aesthetic risk, for it is a practice that does not only pertain to the category of the sublime.

For I understand the practice of aesthetic free play to be a broad church with a wide risk spectrum. Aesthetic risk applies to other categories: e.g. there is always the risk of disorder in the beautiful, which, according to Kant is a moral category. For some, the ambiguities of the poetic are a valued and risky vehicle for the production of tolerance in difference within liberal cultures. The riskiness of ugliness and of the abject might have cathartic value for those who have been traumatised. Indeed aesthetic free play is often promoted as the remedy for trauma.

Throughout this residency I approached the idea of aesthetic risk from the perspective of the ordinary spectator. From this perspective, the value of aesthetic free play, irrespective of how high or low the risk factor is, lies in its capacity to produce reflexive, emotionally attuned and thoughtfully critical individuals across race, class, ethnicity and gender. Such individuals might test the interface between their opinions and emotional responses, thereby educating themselves. They might delight in, or fear, the interplay of affect and emotion, or the lacunae that open up or close down their cultural assumptions and prejudices.

Such reflexivity is an opportunity to break down hierarchical cultural assumptions, where the value of art is determined by particular interests and by those who are able to control those interests. Seen in this way the practice of aesthetic free play is an agency producing and emancipatory opportunity, open to anyone prepared to take the risk of entering into it.

This democratising aspect of the practice of aesthetic free play has political significance, both locally and globally. Not only does it allow for critical, affective and emotional reflexivity for those who benefit from living in relatively free and tolerant cosmopolitan communities (like the UK), but it is likely to be smuggled into repressive communities (like China) under the guise of commodity art, and thereby secretly perhaps, do its critical, emancipatory and reflexive business.

This does not mean that the riskiness of the practice of aesthetic free play is universally welcomed. Indeed, aspects of the commodification of art exploit this valued practice. The industrialisation of culture could erode the subversive power of this risk practice and like the industrialisation and regulation of the academy, an army of managers, gate keepers, gallerists and curators run the institutions of art. They too are under the whip of productivity and instrumentality. On the other hand there are droves of gallery visitors or concert goers who do not want take aesthetic risks, who simply want entertainment, spectacle or cultural tourism. There are also plenty of artists who do not want to take social risks, but merely earn their crusts.

If power, alienation and instrumentality contaminate cultural life can the aesthetic risks we take do anything to mitigate that loss? I suspect that the Leverhulme Trust awarded us this grant against that question. My social science and political theory colleagues have been curious and critical about these questions. Indeed, as this conference demonstrates, this expanding research field promises to deliver new insights on the interface between artistic production and reception and cultural and political life.

Indeed it seems to me that there is much to be opened up around the value of the risky practice of aesthetic free play, as a response to the increasing alienation and lack of agency for certain sectors of society. Many art institutions do take this problem seriously. But it seems to me that they can be taken even more seriously. What if artists were supported for taking up the social responsibility of practicing aesthetic free play? What if socially alienated, or at risk communities, were encouraged to enter into its agency producing possibilities. What if art educators were liberated from some of the risk management techniques that regulate and exhaust them?

Exhibiting in Somerset House, as I have twice done in this past year, has shown me how keen ordinary viewers are to take up this practice. Across the social spectrum, many viewers reveal the depth and width and competence of their engagement with ‘free play’. And no two responses are ever the same!

However, as an artist, even as I greatly value these social, ethical, educational and political possibilities, I find myself pummelled by, and open to, the risks and energies of a painting practice that is not easily translated nor can I pin it down as unambiguously socially useful.

***Between Here and There 2007***. In his catalogue essay, titled *A Delicate Balance*, written for my *Taking Risks* Exhibition in Somerset House at the beginning of the residency in October 2014, Jeremy Theophilus writes

“Lola Frost is an artist .... for whom contemporary issues of gender, ethics and the sublime are all urgent and meaningful, and have their place in these images. Their awe-ful pose, their looming presence, their familiar corporeal references: these all speak to us clearly in a world that is increasingly unsettled, unnatural and unhappy.... Mondrian sought to find both a working process and a philosophy that would unite the world he contemplated. His solution was a paring down of visual perception.” (Theophilus, 2014. p 5).

Like Mondrian’s, my paintings are all about line, but unlike his work, my paintings fold visual perception into some kind of unspeakable and excessive drive. The effects are sometimes shockingly visceral, delicately beautiful and sublime. As such they escape conceptualisation, even as I constantly try and fail, to anchor this mercurial practice in some sort of supplement. I have some glimmers of understanding about how my practice mobilises the riskiness of aesthetic free play, and also some clarity about the rules and methods of this practice, although it is a struggle to translate a subversive and multiply structured visual, embodied and painterly practice, into words.

The most significant rule, perhaps, of my practice might be that it produces what I call a dilating gaze. Primarily structured by the folding of perception into psychic or libidinal drive, and visa versa, and by the incessant duplication and alteration of this conflict to, produce little motifs and forms, these essentially linear events produce a meandering, heaving, shimmering and dilating gaze that cannot settle. These motifs and forms in turn morph into both figures and grounds.

Indeed sometimes the ground is the figure, which leads me to perhaps another significant rule: the proliferation of oscillating oppositions. For example, the production of form by infecting it with libidinal drive, involves occupying an edge between two irreducible aesthetic capacities: the perceptual ability to judge the accumulations of fractals as three dimensional and seemingly mobile form, via the traditional protocols of tone colour and line in painting on the one hand; whilst at the same time, drawing on blind, rhythmic and bodily energies as the hand and brush do their own delicate and tactile business, on the other. These oppositions in turn feed on and contribute to other sets of mutually exchangeable oppositions: inside as outside; self as not self; figuration and abstraction, part and whole, traversal and attunement. This uncontainable and infinitely proliferating sets of oppositions, opens up an unspeakable and mezmersising experience, we might call sublime.

***Coming Alive*** 2010 Creative risk for me as an artist involves the mobilisation of such rules, indeed there are no doubt more rules which apply, but which I do not have names for. I make this point against any idea that aesthetic free play is simply arbitrary. This is serious ‘play’, which involves my bodily affects, discursively embedded knowledge, perceptual judgement, unconscious drives and memories. All of which are set in and against one another, in the interests of making the painting ‘come alive’. Unless I am prepared to take the creative risk of mobilising the whole gamut of this aesthetically risky template, and activating it via the rules that I serve my practice, nothing valuable would materialise. Most artists would probably agree, even if their methods for doing so might differ.

***Streaming*** 2015. Returning to the analogy with Mondrian, whose linear disciplines bear the impact of rationality and classical balance, my practice registers all the mad excess of female pulsation and inwardness, also perhaps born of a puritan context, but simultaneously at war with, and in the grip of repression. Like Mondrian’s, my practice struggles to keep these warring components in ‘a delicate balance’. Perhaps I also seek transformation in the practice of art making, through a Mobian strip, or a Merleau-Pontian chiasm, which enfolds distinctions like inside and outside, figure and ground, self and not self, thereby allowing me to take the risk of opening up a portal to my, and perhaps our, collective unconscious.

***Sonoma*** 2009. So far, I have sketched something of the riskiness of creative free play, but other risks also pertain to my production of these paintings. These risks might be grouped under the heading of ‘cultural expectation’ both mine and that of those who view my paintings. I return to the business of that dilating gaze, if I can call it that.

This gaze, I propose, subverts certain gendered assumptions of the western/northern tradition of romantic sublime landscape painting. The infinitely fluttering and proliferating dilations of these paintings, folded as they are between the production of distorted form and libidinal drive, could be read as a feminist intervention into that discourse, by unsettling the distinctions between man and nature; inside and outside; self and other; subversions which speak to both women and men. Acknowledging this libidinal subversion has been personally risky for me, signifying of course, how culturally marked and risky gender subversions are.

***Ruckenfigure*** 2013. There are also always cultural and political risks associated with the politics of style. The subversive style of my painting practice, figured through a dilating gaze, invites both celebration and censure. In images like this *Ruckenfigure*, I am of course referencing the tradition of sublime landscape painting via the trope of the Ruckenfigure, or substitute self, often found in the paintings of C.D. Friedrich or Anselm Keifer. In this case however, the gaze of this defiant, vulnerable older woman is uncompromisingly inward. Such romantic, visceral inwardness runs all sorts of risks for, and censure by, those who cannot approach visceral embodiment or dilating provocation.

***Going South*** 2015. In reaction perhaps to the visceral shock and ‘nakedness’ of my *Coming Alive* and *Takings Risks* exhibitions in 2013 and 2014, my most recent exhibition titled *Going South*, on show until the 30th June in Somerset House, King’s College London, is easier, playful, more beautiful, radiant even. This exhibition subverts the stereotype in which the term ‘going south’ signifies failure, sexual misadventure or financial loss and invites us all to take the productive, if transgressive, risk of ‘going south’ to the nether regions of the world.

So much then, for the creative and social risks I take as an artist.

***Taking Risks*** 2014. I end with some thoughts about the tensions between the work and the supplement. My argument here has been that aesthetic risk is necessarily part of the aesthetic experience of the viewer and also of the creative and social interventions that artists make. There is however a distinction to be made between such risky engagements and the written or spoken supplement.

As sketched above, in my painting practice, artistic creation involves a unique, but rule bound performance across the whole spectrum of my cognitive, perceptual, emotional, affective and artistic capacities, all of which extend to my social construction and capacity for subversion. So too, your aesthetic experience of these paintings is a risky ride through your intellectual, emotional, embodied and culturally inflected capacities and commitments.

The supplement, on the other hand, presumes some sort of specialist knowledge, access to words and an understanding of the hierarchies that inform the context of the work. Supplements, like the one I have produced here, might be clear and informative, carefully crafted, hedged by emotion and affect (i.e. have an aesthetic dimension themselves). But they are not risky across the whole affective and aesthetic spectrum. *Indeed they tend to fall into the category of managing the riskiness of the aesthetic free play that my production and your experience of the artwork invite*.

The supplement, or parergon as Derrida calls it, arranges information, stabilises uncertainty and confers authority. Supplements might condition or manipulate the viewer or reader’s experience. Indeed they produce hierarchies, some of which are useful, others which degrade the artwork and its’ call to risky aesthetic free play.

The supplement is thus political. I would be the first to admit that my supplement here, as an embellishment to this body of work, is not the definitive interpretation. My desire for supplementarity is an indicator, not only of the particularly risky, or sublime, terrain I traverse through and work with, but a condition, I suggest that that all artists and viewers struggle with. Furthermore, I am beginning to understand that the necessarily frictional relation between the work and the supplement might also be part of that generative set of oppositions that inform the grammar of my painting practice.

On the other hand viewers and readers often give over to the supplement, presuming that their individual and risky aesthetic experience is irrelevant or incorrect, or that the friction between the work and the supplement is just too difficult. I have been struck in my engagements with scholars and students and members of the public during this residency, how prevalent such risk averse attitudes to the experience of art are. Perhaps particularly so in the academy, many people seem to prefer the safety of the supplement, of the talk, or the written text. Indeed when this process is too demanding or risky many viewers give up on the struggle, attending mostly to those words which frame their aesthetic experiences and deferring to those who can persuasively write or talk about it.

This certainly is not always the case, and many viewers and lovers of art would eschew the supplement. But this tendency toward supplementarity does indicate that risk management methods and values also pervade contemporary attitudes to the experience of art.

***Wild Being***. 2015. In conclusion: I suggest that much of the value an artwork resides in its capacity to open us up to the risky practice of aesthetic free play. We might take or refuse that invitation. If we take this risk, we are tested across the spectrum of our cognitive, perceptual, emotional, affective and cultural capacities. As creators and viewers of art, we might hold out for the riskiness of artistic production and aesthetic experience, even as we might join the throng toward supplementarity and safety. We all probably do a bit of both.

Usually this relation is presented as oppositional, but I have suggested the riskiness of aesthetic free play has a relation to that powerful instrument of cognitive control, the written supplement. Such supplementarity , can be both generative and oppressive. In my case, as an artist, the various supplements I have written, or read, also impact on the production of these paintings. In the case of the viewer, such supplements might have enhanced his or her aesthetic engagement with this body of work.

But supplementarity can also feed into those risk averse, managerial, hierarchical values and practices that service the interests the art market, art institutions and governments. Such risk averse attitudes may benefit the smooth operations of the industrial machine, in all its manifestations: in the academy, in art institutions, in civil society. But they also serve to reduce individual agency and creativity and to thereby contribute to a general suspicion about the value of productive risk practices.

One of the values of art, I suggest, is that it participates in a field of productive risk taking, and sustains the possibility of unspeakable excess, of contamination and transformation, of undecidability and critical reflection. These are of course not new insights, but what is new I think, is to revisit these insights through the idea of productive risk and its relation to the prevalent idea that all risks are negative and in need of management. Some risks certainly do need to be managed: the risks of Ebola, of war, of financial meltdown. But some risk practices are to be welcomed and taken. Indeed, also the riskiness of aesthetic free play, where the risks we take are for themselves, even as we might be educated, emotionally moved, aesthetically delighted or bemused by them.

I embarked on this project, struggling to build a conceptual bridge between myself and the social scientists and political theorists I was collaborating with, assuming perhaps, like Kant and Schiller that the risky practice of aesthetic free play was, in some sense educationally, and hence socially, valuable. And it is. But after writing this paper, I have come to understand that as an artist, working at the high end of the aesthetic risk spectrum, that even if such aesthetic education services the production of more ethically attuned and individually reflexive subjects, that aesthetic risk is not confined to such social value. And by this I mean that no matter how we try to harness the mercurial nature of the practice of aesthetic free play, that at some level, it remains excessive, uncapturable by, although always attached to, political interests and ethical values.

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