

notes towards an ecology of risk

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Al Gore's Academy Award-winning lecture-film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) undoubtedly triggered something of a tipping point with regard to the profile of so-called 'environmental issues' in the media landscape. In the current changing climate we are witnessing the increasing mobilisation of novel forms and practices organised in response to a corresponding prevalence of a dynamic of risk. Today catastrophic environmental degradation is risk's chief protagonist. Risk cuts across social, political and economic fields – yet it is chiefly its artistic and ecological resonances that we are going to consider here. (We will thereby inevitably undersell the full potency of a discourse which, as economist John Quiggin has described, may come to define our time just as globalisation did in the 1990s.)¹ Furthermore, what might an ecology of risk bring of salience to a discussion of so-called 'public art'? Or how might it invite an articulation of 'public-ness'? We will map out where answers to such questions might be found through some pre-eminent strategies of risk taking: speculation and rhetoric.

The Risk Society

Let us first rewind a little. In 1992 sociologist Ulrich Beck first described 'the risk society' as characteristic of our immersion in the adverse affects of the successes of modernity.² Society's anxiety about the future, he argued, follows from the observation that the processes and practices of modernisation – such as industrialisation and urbanisation – have induced unprecedented manmade hazards ('manufactured risks') with potentially self-annihilating consequences. Concerns over risks that are the products of human activity, whether concerning pollution or food production, transportation or building safety, terrorism or finance have of course been present throughout modern civilisation – if not quite so precisely counted-out as in the Stern Review's analysis of the probability of environmental

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- 1 John Quiggin, 'The Risk Society: Social Democracy in an Uncertain World', Centre for Policy Development occasional paper No. 2, July 2007. http://cpd.org.au/sites/cpd/files/u2/JohnQuiggin_The_Risk_Society_CPD_July07.pdf
 - 2 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, 1992

collapse, for example.³ Yet, fuelled by the pervasive force of globalisation, a fundamental realignment of societal systems in response to risk and its manipulation is, it seems, the peculiar attribute of recent times. Beck extends his analysis with two particular emphases: the consequences of a risk society's prevalence of mistrust (of government, of expertise, of science, etc.) and 'reflexive' strategies such as sustainability that attempt to alleviate or head-off future risks. How might such mistrust and such reflexive practices emerge in artistic practice and in the public realm?

The Playground Analogy

Tim Gill has thoughtfully analysed the spread of over-zealous risk aversion with respect to childhood and children's playgrounds in the UK.⁴ Echoing Beck, Gill links the tendency toward the benignly safe (or closed down) playground not to phenomena of the same order of magnitude – i.e. the rise of a compensation culture – but to a prior breakdown in societal trust and a lack of self-efficacy (a lack of a sense of being in control of one's own future and agency). British artist Nils Norman's contribution to a book that we edited, *Land, Art: A Cultural Ecology Handbook* was a photographic tour of 'Some Playgrounds in and around Tokyo, Japan'⁵. In his experience, an improved understanding of risk facilitated a much richer learning experience for children, and perhaps not coincidentally supported sustainable and ecological activities in the play communities.

Amy Balkin's project *Public Smog* consists of another type of public playground, only Balkin's free park is in the atmosphere, and it fluctuates in location and scale. One zone is located above the Coastal Zone of California's South Coast Air Quality Management District, the other is above the European Union.

*The park is built through the economic mechanism of carbon trading. Carbon offsets are purchased in emissions trading markets and retired, making them inaccessible to polluting industries. The park exists as a construct occurring in the unfixed public airspace above the region where offsets are purchased and withheld from use. The park's size varies, reflecting the amount of emissions allowances purchased, properties of the atmospheric chemicals purchased, and the length of contract, compounded by seasonal fluctuations in air quality.*⁶

3 'Stern Review Report on the Economics of Climate Change', http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/stern_review_economics_climate_change/stern_review_report.cfm

4 Tim Gill, 'Playing it too safe', *RSA Journal*, April 2007. <http://www.rsa.org.uk/journal/article.asp?articleID=1006>

5 *Land, Art: A Cultural Ecology Handbook*, ed. Max Andrews, Royal Society of Arts/Arts Council England, 2006

6 <http://www.publicsmog.org>



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Balkin's action picks up and exploits carbon trading's place as a neo-liberal 'solution' to the enormous risks of climate change, subverting the abstract mechanisms of its turbo-capitalist market transactions *pro bono publico*. Carbon trading would seem to be part of a general trend in transferring exposure and responsibility for risk away from government and business towards the (consuming) individual or household.

Extraordinary Rendition

In spring 2007, we curated the group exhibition *Extraordinary Rendition* at Galería NoguerasBlanchard in Barcelona, which began our own exploration of risk triggered by works by nine artists across a range of media and modes of address.⁷ Broadly speaking, the backdrop of *Extraordinary Rendition* was this notion of the hazardous immaterial marketplace, itself within the decidedly asymmetrical market of the commercial art world. In Natascha Sadr Haghighian's video *Embargo Embargo* (2003) two women browse and defy the small print of Adobe Photoshop that prohibits downloads in countries prohibited under US trade legislation. Roman Ondák installed bus emergency hammers next to each window, almost imperceptibly altering the implied risk of entering the gallery. The contribution of Gardar Eide Einarsson (*We'll Make The World You Live*, 2005) was based on his analysis of the streets of

7 *Extraordinary Rendition*, 22 March–19 May 2007, NoguerasBlanchard, Barcelona. Mariana Castillo Deball, Gardar Eide Einarsson, Rainer Ganahl, Carsten Höller, Christopher Knowles, Josephine Meckseper, Roman Ondák, Wilfredo Prieto and Natascha Sadr Haghighian. <http://www.lttts.org/projects/previous/noguerasblanchard/noguerasblanchard.html>

1 *Extraordinary Rendition*, Installation view, 22 March–19 May 2007, Galería NoguerasBlanchard, Barcelona
Photo: Robert Justamente

Istanbul in the wake of the November 2003 Al-Qaeda truck bombings. His series of uneventful black-and-white photographs record otherwise utterly banal improvised structures in the urban fabric – bricked-up windows, temporary barriers, and so on. Removed from the service of the spectacularized, existential threat of the ‘war on terror’, the image-aftermaths are defiantly unremarkable. Christopher Knowles’s *Untitled (Alert Paintings)*, 2004, a play on the US Department of Homeland Security’s Threat Advisory System, continued to remind how risk is often actively manufactured and managed by those in power. On this scale there is tellingly no longer any possibility for the absence of future terror risk – ‘low’ is the best it can ever get.

Public Domain: Air

4 April 2007; 35 years ago

Adjacent to monstrous cranes and beneath desert sky behind the Expo Center, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, a team of dedicated technicians are putting the final touches to a strange (perhaps suicidal) structure. A scaffolding framework has been wrapped in transparent polythene sheeting to form a low-roofed 60-metre-sided tent. 100 rental cars surround it, their exhausts all connected by pipes to the structure’s interior. This is Gustav Metzger’s *Project Stockholm, June (Phase 1) 1972–2007*, originally proposed for the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment. In this first attempt to realise the work, the cars now pump fumes into the clear cube, and do so intermittently over the course of the first week of the 8th Sharjah Biennial. In phase 2, which will remain unrealised, the cars would enter the fume-filled interior, overheat, choke and ultimately self-combust or be detonated by explosives.⁸

Public Domain: Water

16 June 2007; 79 years ago

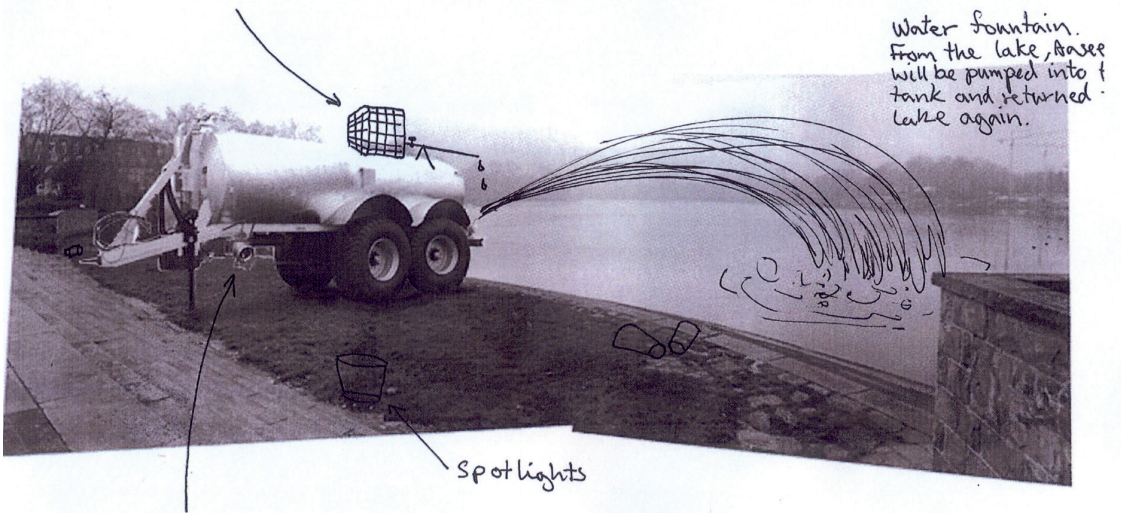
A squat shiny silver muck-spreader tanker faces the eastern shore of the city of Münster’s Aasee. In 1928 this artificial recreational lake was established and it is still fed by the small river Aa that crosses it from south to north, towards the city centre and beyond. A pump feeds the tanker water from the lake which is then spewed back in an side-to-side gush like an ornamental fountain. All this machinery produces a loud noise, and the action of the spreader-fountain shakes the tanker back and forth. We are at Skulptur Projekte Münster’s location number 22, a work entitled *Diffuse Entries* (2007) by Tue Greenfort. Through his research Greenfort discovered that the lake waters have a problem with blue-

⁸ KARBA, a more modest ‘exhaust’ piece with four cars was recently produced by Konsthall Lund, Sweden, in 2004.



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Eisen (III)-Chlorid, 100 liter tank (firm Schütz, called Eco Bulk).
 This chemical solution will slowly drop into the water fountain.
 1 Liter per day. The solution is dissolved to a 0,1% solution from the
 normal 45%, which means that it is not harmful to humans.



Water fountain.
 From the lake, water
 will be pumped into the
 tank and returned to
 lake again.

Spotlights

Gülle tank (manure spreading machine)
 Modified with an electrical pump system so that it can function
 without a tractor

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2 [Stockholm Project, Part I](#), Gustav Metzger, 1972–2007,
 produced by the Sharjah Biennial 8, United Arab Emirates, 2007
 Courtesy of the artist and Sharjah Biennial 8.
 Photo: Courtesy Latitudes, Barcelona.

3 Collage and detailed sketch of installation [Diffuse Entries](#),
 Tue Greenfort, 2007, produced by SculptureProjects Münster
 Courtesy of the artist and Johann König Gallery, Berlin



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green algae due to the high residues of phosphates that run-off from the nearby agricultural heartland, especially as a result of the intensive EU-subsidised meat production of Münsterland. This biological phenomenon, known as eutrophication, is clogging the water with algae and destroying the fresh water ecosystem due to excessive levels of the chemical nutrients. After sucking in water from the lake, Greenfort's sculpture mixes it with a brown-coloured solution of Iron (III) Chloride before spraying it back into to the lake. This toxic substance is already added to the lake only in a far more discreet manner in order to chemically neutralise the algae, though it does not eliminate it. As the artist points out, 'it is a purely cosmetic solution'.

Public Domain: Land

14 July 2007; 58 years ago

In 1949 eight villages and a flour mill disappeared under water when another lake was created. In this case, a hydro-electric dam was built a huge volume of water inundated the land around the hill of Vassivière in central France. Today, Vassivière island hosts the Centre international d'art et du paysage de l'île de Vassivière, designed in the late 1980s by Aldo Rossi and Xavier Fabre. This seemingly natural and peaceful setting, achieved through a great deal of human violence, now hosts *Homes & Graves & Gardens*, an exhibition by Cyprien Gaillard, where the history of the site and its very nature are being questioned. Part of the façade of the art centre is hidden by a row of trees, cut down for the occasion, which not only block the entrance but hide the art centre building, merging it with the surrounding forest. The event coincides with today's French national festivities of Bastille Day, and the artist is hosting a free party in the forest with techno music and an indoor firework display that culminates with explosions bursting from Rossi's emblematic conical tower. Beyond the do-gooding rules of environmental preservation, the artist's progressive happening of destruction

4, 5 [Homes & Graves & Gardens](#), Cyprien Gaillard, 2007, Centre International d'Art et du Paysage de L'île de Vassivière. Courtesy of the artist, Cosmic Galerie, Paris and the Centre International d'Art et du Paysage de L'île de Vassivière

and mutilation brings back to memory the turbulence of this site's recent past, where the artificial lake drowned the ruins of rural housing. Gaillard's sensitivity towards ruins reactivates memories of Land Art and Robert Smithson's work around entropy, the irreversible condition of a system's tendency toward deterioration and breakdown.

In terms of public space, public domain, and public art, Beck's anxiety-generating modernity might best be equated with the adverse effects of over-determined planning. Human-induced risk-orientation here would encompass the bureaucracy around safety and standardisation, the trend towards the broad inclusion of stakeholders and the public in decision making, the orchestration of public space in order to exclude or discourage the presence of 'undesirable' sections of society, and the monumental or decorative exploitation of public art works in order to enhance prestige and accelerate investment.⁹ Or simply the direct encroachment on so-called public space by the private sphere.

Looking at this seemingly aleatory set of works by Metzger, Greenfort and Gaillard and others, it is clear that they each try and find a way out of the grip of a risk society's negative potentials in the public realm, through courting both the mistrust and reflexivity that it enacts. As with the playground analogy, striving for a zero-risk environment is a practical and a creative non-starter. From an ecological and artistic perspective too, there is no sense here that apparent 'accidents' are systemic failures, but instead are public opportunities for both individual and societal learning. How these projects encounter the entanglement of responsibility that a risk society enacts might now emerge as another question. Yet, in conclusion, in each of the three cases, it is worth pointing out that there are very deliberate and apparently contradictory incursions. In order to talk about air pollution and the petrol economy, Metzger himself creates pollution. Similarly Greenfort's sculpture, and Gaillard's gestures are not remedies in any usual sense. Metzger has elegantly described this situation in terms of homeopathy, describing his action as 'a homeopathic dose of pollution ... a creation, an attempt to show a visual experience that is unavailable except through destruction'.¹⁰ Perhaps it is in the terms of this symptomology of inoculation that we might best navigate a publicness of risk, and an artistic agency of ecological action?

9 Examples of public art works that have used humour to critique the monument include Olav Westphalen's *Extremely Site-Unspecific Sculpture* (2000) and Damián Ortega's *Obelisco Transportable* (2007), both produced by the Public Art Fund, New York.

10 'Protest and Survive', Gustav Metzger talks to Mark Godfrey, *Frieze*, Issue 108, June–August 2007, p. 196–203