



CALCULATED RISK

The Ritual - The Installation - The Story



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INTERVIEW

THE BOTTOMLESSNESS OF THINGS

Marc De Kesel with a cultural-philosophical perspective on Calculated Risk

During his labyrinthine ordeal searching for the creation of Calculated Risk, performer Kasper Vandenberghe met with many field specialists, who each offered him a different perspective on his heroic venture: making himself fall from a pre-calculated height, making him jeopardise his self-preservation though securing his safety nevertheless. His traumatologist, project developer, and psychotherapist helped him along the process. A hypnotist helped him overcome his fear of heights. A circus performer taught him the technical ropes of falling safely. Additionally, Vandenberghe asked an insurer whether he could protect himself financially during this calculated fall and – metaphorically speaking – from a potentially traumatising experience of loss. Lastly, Vandenberghe queried philosopher Marc de Kesel, whose work focuses on the question of what it means to be modern, about the cultural-philosophical meaning of this calculated risk in light of modernity, which we live in today. A fragment of De Kesel's exposé:

“Modernity begins in the 17th Century. From this turning point on, mankind starts to understand oneself as free, radically free, and also free and irrespective of reality. Before the 17th Century, humans understood themselves through their bond, their connectedness with reality. They know reality – including oneself – as ‘granted,’ ‘bestowed,’ by a ‘giving’ body that they call God. That God connected man and world, as well as the people amongst themselves. However, due to religious wars (16th Century), mankind becomes the pawn in a scorching battle that destroys all. During this time, people started to relate themselves freely to God. That is to say, in relation to what ties them to reality, towards their foundational ground. Nonetheless, the question remains: if we relate ourselves freely to our foundations, what does that ground then still consist of? Where does that make us stand? Any problem we face in modernity finds its origin here: we are fundamentally free, but that does not mean that we know how to deal with this freedom. It is wonderful that we are free, but how free can we be if we are consequently liberated from any guidance – if, in other words, there is no guidance left? We are forced to find our own coordinates that we can hold on to and through which we can find our bearings.

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That is why the fall – a recurrent theme in the work of performance artist Bas Jan Ader [an important inspiration to Calculated Risk, MV] – is very important: ‘fall’ and ‘falling’ articulate the core of modernity. Isaac Newton, as a thought experiment, concluded that the movement of a falling apple matches the movement of the moon in the sky. This modern physicist no longer argues from one God or a central body that holds everything. If everything is linked, it is because everything ‘falls.’ But, in contrast to earlier times, Newton does not ask himself what makes something fall, or what something that falls actually is (in essence). He no longer wonders what it is, and why it falls down. Consequently, by no longer asking these kinds of



questions, science became modern. Science had decided to merely – i.e. purely empirically – observe what happens. She does not perceive spirit in things; she only sees matter that ‘falls,’ in the beginning much slower than at the end. Herein lies a mathematical science: see here Newton’s Law. And this Law defines everything that is; the whole universe. Apply this to ourselves: we believe we are standing upright, though truth be told that we, just like the whole universe, are ‘falling.’

This is when, in fact, we fall back into a pre-modern consciousness. That is what we moderns often do. Whenever we fall back into crisis and wonder where we are heading, we propose the likelihood of something or someone like a God must be holding us. And, apart from the fact that we suddenly believe in God again, there are artists who start playing with this ‘falling,’ who are starting to jump from scaffolds and take calculated risks. They fall, and actually, they want to grasp this notion of falling for a while, they want to comprehend it. They want to go all the way to try and freeze this moment of falling and scrutinise its essence.

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The fact that our culture is still built around this notion proves that we, opposed to what we might think, still live in rather mythical times. Was there ever a time when image and imagination were this omnipresent? We ‘breathe’ and ‘devour’ images, incessantly. Why? This is related to our freedom, to the fact that we imagine ourselves free, even from reality (including our own reality). We imagine ourselves free, even from ourselves. Fundamentally, we do not know who we are, which is why we must mirror ourselves constantly to images that provide us with the answer. We are free, from ourselves as well, so we must create an identity, which can only occur through identification with others. Furthermore, this is also how we must create our own reality. And that reality, then, must also constantly show that it is us who create her, even though it is actually the other way around: the mirroring reality full of images and screens creates us. In other words, we must constantly give this groundlessness that we live in foundation in an image that tells us that we are our own foundation.

Every popular culture of image comes back to this. Think about Hollywood movies. Do you remember stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, Jean-Claude Van Damme? Or the James Bond-movies? These kinds of movies portray a stereotype that, mutatis mutandis, still applies today: everything gets destroyed, evil flourishes, politicians and police are corrupt, but the hero takes matter into their own hands and fights evil single-handedly. Against the evil, unreliable world is the self. Why do we continue gawping at these movies? Because they give us a sense of self. Not our realistic self, but the self that we dream ourselves to be, the self that stands freely from reality and imagines itself as foundation of itself. No wonder, then, that at the end of these movies, evil is overcome and the self rises again as a tower of strength. The spectator has perceived their own imagined self; they have fed upon the modern myth. We, moderns, are dependent of these kinds of myths. And the calculated risk, then, is related to this: you play with the notion of not having a foundation anymore. On the one hand, you want to claim: ‘We have no foundation left because everything is falling.’ But on the other hand, you are saying: ‘It is true that we are falling, but I remain on my feet during this fall.’

Similar to antiquity and the Middle Ages, we no longer have an endlessness through which we know how to behave. That is, in a nutshell, the realisation on which our modernity centres. Now, it is up to us, which we are aware of, to carry the limitlessness – i.e. to control it. This



way, in that moment that we are about to fail controlling it, we truly encounter ourselves. Our technical capabilities essentially know no boundaries... until we have become so powerful and we can intervene so efficiently in the micro-structure of a uranium atom that we, by pressing one single button, could sling our whole planet (including ourselves) back into the Stone Age. Our power over nature is endless, but where do we truly find ourselves? Where nature has been polluted to such a degree that we threaten to ruin our own lives together with it.

“It seems that our omnipotence itself escapes our omnipotence.”

Yes, it does seem like it is our omnipotence that escapes our omnipotence. This is visible in, as I said before, the nuclear issue that the 20th Century has struggled with (and the 21st Century will struggle with as well). Or in the environmental problem that has taken planetary dimensions today. The same goes for capitalism: free trade, in principle, is meant to make everyone better worldwide, though before one realises, it oppresses whole continents. Our indifferent attitude towards this is inexcusable.

In *Calculated Risk* the tragic ground structure of the modern myth is exposed, celebrated. That is, after all, all an artist can do, I believe. In my opinion, artists are better off being humble. After all, they have no other choice but to fail in their attempt to not let the calculation, seemingly the omnipotence of mankind, take precedence over the risk. In the failure of that attempt, the limit of all calculations that we live in is laid bare. It is a frail, because purely aesthetic, moment that barely survives its self-dissatisfaction. From Gustave Courbet's realism onwards, visual arts live in continuous discord with themselves. They want to be realistic, allow reality to take precedence over appearance – especially the appearance of 'Fine Arts' – but they must admit time and again to have failed in that endeavour. Art wants to show the world as it is, though keeps relying this on 'showing.' She remains aesthetic, hence does not achieve reality. And yet, this is exactly where her reality values lie. For it is true that no one ever reaches reality. We are after all free; free from reality as well. Visual arts certainly have a moment of truth, no matter how fragile.”

