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Professional Risk

by

Russell Perkins

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts, Studio Art, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

2018

Thesis Sponsor:

5/20/2018

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Andrea Blum

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The 1960 *Ocean's Eleven* ends with a surprise cremation. Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis Jr. have stashed their money inside the coffin of their friend and co-conspirator Tony Bergdorf, who unhelpfully died of a heart attack halfway through the group's Las Vegas casino heist. In the middle of the funeral chapel service, they hear a low, grinding sound.

'What's that noise?

'The deceased is being cremated.'

"Verily, verily, the lord giveth and the lord taketh away. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust..." the chaplain drawls while the cremator drones away and the protagonists realize the cruel hand they've been dealt.

The sound of Bergdorf's body being burnt to ashes together with the stolen money delivers the film's comedic punch line: crime doesn't pay. But if this moralistic turn feels somewhat disingenuous for a film that so wholeheartedly enjoins us to identify with and root for its cheerful team of gamblers, its equation of gambling and the administration of bodily remains, the casino and the crematorium, only radicalizes the structuring logic of the heist itself.

The protagonists of *Ocean's Eleven* are war veterans who have struggled to assimilate to the demands of peacetime work. They are not so much unable to get jobs as they are incapable of finding fulfillment in the unadventurous routines of the white collar office. Much like Las Vegas, the heist promises a reprieve from these mundane obligations, and moreover a chance to reenact the thrilling risk that is remembered to have characterized the military experience.

At the same time, however, the heist offers an implicit critique of gambling as an escape from ordinary employment. The thieves assume disguises as the workers who keep the casino running—the electrician, the security guard, the entertainer, the garbage man. (Perhaps not surprisingly, the only person of color in the film's cast is given the role of sanitation worker).

Their plan is to short-circuit the Vegas power grid at midnight on New Years Eve, steal the casino's money, and stow it in the trash so that Davis Jr. can discreetly drive it out of town the next day in his garbage truck.

If the thieves outsmart the casino by literally throwing away its money in a pantomime of revenge by its support staff, the implication is that gambling—through which financial gain is won unearned and just as frivolously lost—already reduces money to the status of trash. Yet the heist is also a gamble, and the narrative turns the tables on the team when the ‘electrician’ Bergdorf’s nervous system short-circuits alongside the city’s. Later, when he and the cash are both cremated, simultaneously reduced to undifferentiable carbon, it becomes clear that the gamble undermines not only the value of money but also the value of the working body, indeed erasing our ability to distinguish between the two.

As this erasure symbolically attests, games of chance stage a somewhat obscuring encounter between human agents and non-human material agency. This encounter, I will argue, is difficult to talk about. So much so, in fact, that it strains the very language of agency—in a game of chance it is hard to say who or what is acting, how, and of what that action consists.

This strain on language, in turn, makes it difficult to account for speculation as a kind of work. Indeed, speculation has traditionally been understood as an alternative to work, an escape from work or a repudiation of work; yet it is also a dominant requirement of contemporary labor. This requirement can be seen in the historic shift, over at least the past thirty years in the United States, in which the privatizing of welfare and social security “download” risk from state institutions onto individual citizens.<sup>1</sup> The management by individuals of their exposure to risk—more and more necessary to secure an adequate wage and reasonable prospects for a comfortable

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Baker, and Jonathan Simon. *Embracing Risk: The Changing Culture of Insurance and Responsibility*. The University of Chicago Press, 2002, pp. 104.

retirement—just means engaging in calculated speculation. Corresponding to these changes is an expansion of finance as a portion of the economy, in the proliferation of speculative markets and ever more complex financial instruments. As James Cosgrave writes, “the consequence of the transference of risks from the state to the individual is not only greater exposure of individuals to risk, but more speculative market activity, and more gambling behavior in markets.”<sup>2</sup>

One might say that these trends describe a greater freedom to take risks for some people and a greater exposure to risk for others. Certainly, misregulated speculative practices are in part responsible for producing precarious labor conditions; at the same time, however, precarity can itself be framed as the unceasing obligation to speculate—on one’s prospects for future earnings, on one’s likelihood of getting sick or of being injured. If privilege is largely a matter of who can afford to take risks, it is also the case that current economic imperatives compel all of us to actively participate in risk-taking behaviors.

This essay suggests a speculative reading of a few very well known mid-century texts about art, in which notions of chance and risk are mobilized to account for artistic production; in each case, I argue that this rhetoric mischaracterizes the relation between artist and material, thereby confusing the character of the labor involved in taking chances. Thinking against these examples, maybe art could also be a place where we come to see this labor more clearly.

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Around the time that *Ocean’s Eleven* was released, casinos were more likely to be understood as places for lively action than as spaces of death. In Erving Goffman’s classic sociological account, the casino was an arena that gave gamblers the opportunity, through

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<sup>2</sup> James Cosgrave. “Gambling, Risk, and Late Capitalism” in *The Sociology of Risk and Gambling Reader*, Routledge, 2006, pp. 7.

willing self-exposure to risk, to participate in public demonstrations of character.<sup>3</sup> Sociable games like poker, roulette, and blackjack were for Goffman paradigmatic forms of what he called ‘action’, understood as “activities that are consequential, problematic, and undertaken for what is felt to be their own sake.”<sup>4</sup> Consequential, because money, reputation, or some other object of concern is staked; problematic, in that a previously undeterminable outcome is determined through the act itself.<sup>5</sup>

Goffman’s account of ‘action’ replicates Harold Rosenberg’s account of ‘action painting’ from over a decade prior.<sup>6</sup> For Rosenberg, the “vanguard” post-war American painters, like his friends Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, approached the canvas “as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined.” “What was to go on the canvas,” he wrote famously in *ARTnews*, “was not a picture but an event.”<sup>7</sup> In order for a painting to qualify as “a genuine act” according to Rosenberg, the painter had to willingly take a risk in front of the canvas in which his own subjective self-constitution was at stake; in other words, his activity had to be consequential, problematic, and undertaken for its own sake.

There is something counterintuitive about the way both Goffman and Rosenberg position gambling as central to an account of (prototypically male) action, since to gamble is to commit to an outcome that can’t be anticipated or controlled—in other words, acting without knowing exactly what you’re doing. It seems that for both writers, an action only qualifies *as* an action if it is irreducible to any intentions that preceded it. Goffman argues that conventional work,

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<sup>3</sup> Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction By Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*. Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 62.

<sup>4</sup> Erving Goffman. “Where the Action Is,” in *Interaction Ritual*. Pantheon Books, 1967, pp. 246.

<sup>5</sup> Goffman 227.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benn Michaels. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*. University of California Press, 1987, pp. 231.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Rosenberg. “The American Action Painters,” in *ARTnews*, December 1952, pp. 22.

however real its consequences may be, is lacking in ‘action’ in most professional contexts because “nothing important happens that is unexpected and unprepared for.”<sup>8</sup> Or as Rosenberg puts it, a painting must be a “surprise” to the artist who makes it, because “there is no point in an act if you already know what it contains.”<sup>9</sup> But why should this quality of having been underdetermined by prior intentions give ‘action’ its value?

The process of betting implied but unacknowledged in both Goffman and Rosenberg might be sketched out as follows. In placing their bet, the gambler makes an as-yet unverifiable claim about the material world (‘the coin is going to land on tails’) that simultaneously binds them to the material world. So a bet is an act of dependency posing as an assertion of will. Winning converts that dependency into mastery, eliding the modal shift from proposing the possible to affirming the actual. Once the bet becomes a true statement about the world, it can be retrospectively recast as an intention that, having been realized, reveals its content to everyone including the gambler—and can then be imaginatively projected backwards onto the original scene of the gamble.

The difference, perhaps, between the action painter and the gambler is that the painter must physically engage with their material—paint, canvas, their body—in order for the identity of their act to be revealed, whereas the gambler delegates that engagement to what Goffman calls the ‘decision machines’ of dice, cards, or the roulette wheel. (Following Walter Benn Michaels, however, we might also think of the Abstract Expressionist’s paint and brush together as a kind of ‘machine’ that functions to introduce a material interference crucial to preserving the incalculability of the act of painting.)<sup>10</sup> Both painter and gambler, in any case, commit themselves to a chanceful materiality—the play of forces governing how the dice or paint drop

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<sup>8</sup> Goffman 233.

<sup>9</sup> Rosenberg 22.

<sup>10</sup> Benn Michaels 231.

will fall—whose obscure behavior resists predictive calculation or control. This entails a commitment to be *acted on* by that material, even to let it dictate what material they’re made of as men—whether they’re winners or losers.

Of course the whole semantic function of the bet—as a compensatory performance of masculinity—is to deny this dependent receptiveness to chance and replace it with a fantasy of mastery. In Rosenberg, painting becomes an athletic contest, in which the “painter’s muscles” force a collision between the “material in his hand” and “that other piece of material in front of him.”<sup>11</sup> In the text’s most effusive moments, this confrontation is described by analogy to acts of violence like “the firing of a pistol” and “the explosion of shrapnel over No Man’s Land.”<sup>12</sup> Particularly curious is the way that haptic engagement with paint and canvas is understood to displace optical engagement: Rosenberg writes that “[t]he painter no longer approached his easel with an image in mind”; to the extent that an image is still produced at all, it will consist of a visible “tension” that records the physical struggle between body, paint and canvas.<sup>13</sup> But more than a picture, the painting is a disclosure, a verdict about the painter that we consult to find out what it “declare[s] him and his art to be.”<sup>14</sup>

In Goffman and Rosenberg, gambling (or painting that approaches the status of gambling) provides an antidote to a calculating rationality that apparently has made the world boring and bureaucratic. Rosenberg writes: “The American vanguard painter took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville’s Ishmael took to the sea.”<sup>15</sup> Of course, unlike Ishmael the gambler doesn’t actually put his body at risk to harm by nature, instead staking its extensions, property and reputation. (It would take a different kind of artist—Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* and Bas

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<sup>11</sup> Rosenberg 22.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenberg 50.

<sup>13</sup> Rosenberg 22-23.

<sup>14</sup> Rosenberg 48.

<sup>15</sup> Rosenberg 48.

Jan Ader's *Fall* works are exemplary instances—to actually put their bodies on the line in order to make chance visible.)

Not only isn't the gambler's body in danger—the outcome of the gamble doesn't depend on their body in any way. As Goffman acknowledges, although gambling is valorized as a performative test of vigor, courage, and perseverance, the closer a risky scenario lies to the 'pure' game of chance, the less will these capacities in fact play any role in determining its outcome. An inability to control the material procedure taking place outside the gambler's body corresponds to an increasing demand that the gambler exert control over their body, that they not panic, that they not relax their resolve. Gambling becomes a plausible paradigm for 'action' insofar as this disconnect is made invisible; or more precisely, insofar as an exercise of control brought to bear primarily in and on the gambler's body is imaginatively re-inscribed as a penetrating exercise of control over the outcome of the gamble itself.

Revisiting his *Chance-Imagery* after eight years in an "After-Note", George Brecht explains that when he wrote the article in 1957 he "had only recently met John Cage and had not yet seen clearly that the most important implications of chance lay in his work rather than in Pollock's".<sup>16</sup> Yet instead of rewriting the piece he decides to publish it in its original form, preserving the record of the Abstract Expressionist's central place in his early thinking about chance procedures, and leaving it to us to imagine what a comparison of the two artists' approaches to the subject might look like.

Brecht describes Pollock's painting method as "a single, integrated use of chance as a means of unlocking the deepest possible grasp of nature in its broadest sense."<sup>17</sup> By programmatically opening his paintings up to unpredictable accident, Pollock's drip technique

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<sup>16</sup> George Brecht. *Chance Imagery*, A Great Bear Pamphlet, Something Else Press, 1966, pp. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Brecht 10

does not depict natural forms but rather enacts the ‘natural’ dynamics of gravity, force, and the flow of liquid paint. As proof of chance at work in Pollock, Brecht cites the artist’s own account of being “not aware of what I’m doing” while painting, and his conviction, borrowed from the European Surrealists, that “the source of art” lies in “the unconscious”.<sup>18</sup> Because the forms in Pollock’s paintings do not correspond to intentions pre-conceived by the artist, Brecht reasons that they must correspond to the supervening intentionality of nature, which acts through the painter’s body.

Rosenberg echoes in all of this: the painting is not a representation but an event, and it is only by bypassing intentional design that a direct, physical engagement may be achieved. The difference in sensibility between the two writers is one of emphasis. Brecht seems less interested in the painter’s muscular triumph over nature (Rosenberg’s canvas as “the sea into which [the painter] dives”) than he is in a displacement of the artist by natural forces. Indeed, his term ‘chance-imagery’ is a semantic bid to equate the work of artists and the work of nature:

“Here I would like to introduce the general term “chance-imagery” to apply to our formation of images resulting from chance, wherever these occur in nature...One reason for doing this is to place the painter’s, musician’s, poet’s, dancer’s chance images in the same conceptual category as natural chance-images (the configuration of meadow grasses, the arrangement of stones on a brook bottom), and to get away from the idea that an artist makes something “special” and beyond the world of ordinary things.”<sup>19</sup>

This shift of emphasis from human to an imagined natural agency is even more evident in Cage’s own writing from the same period. In “Experimental Music” (1958), he argues that composers of new music use “chance operations” as “means to remove themselves from the activities of the sounds they make”, thereby transforming “nature’s manner of operation into art.”<sup>20</sup> Against those who remain attached to the Western musical tradition and can only “approximate” nature

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<sup>18</sup> Brecht 11.

<sup>19</sup> Brecht 11-12.

<sup>20</sup> John Cage. “Experimental Music,” in *Silence*. Wesleyan University Press, 1961, pp. 10.

through calculating means, for Cage the composer must “turn in the direction of those [sounds] he does not intend” to gain access “to the world of nature.”<sup>21</sup>

If chance is here yet again invoked as a means to access nature by circumventing conscious intention, the ethics of engagement that Cage proposes might be read as a direct rebuttal to Rosenberg’s frontier mythics of the vanguard. Whereas Rosenberg enjoins the artist to prove himself by conquering his material, Cage notoriously urges us to “give up the desire to control sound” and “let sounds be themselves.”<sup>22</sup>

One way to describe this contrast might be to say that if chance is a game, Rosenberg is deeply invested in it but Cage opts out. For Rosenberg every genuine painting is a high-stakes gamble; for Cage there is no possibility of losing so long as one genuinely submits to chance. But what might it mean to ‘submit’ to chance?

If we actually consult Cage’s composition practice, we are confronted instead by an impressive range of intervening techniques for orchestrating chance scenarios—from those lifted out of the *I Ching* to “the tables of random numbers used also by physicists in research”—techniques for staging and manipulating chance events so as to render them translatable into audible formats.<sup>23</sup> As Benjamin Piekut points out, Cage “was attuned to the ways that the environment could change the composer, but he was less attentive to the ways that the composer changed the environment, to the impossibility of liberating ‘raw’ sounds outside the entanglement of man-made systems.”<sup>24</sup> By positioning chance as the form by which sounds reveal their own agency to “control a human being, the performer”, Cage suggests that music

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<sup>21</sup> Cage 8.

<sup>22</sup> Cage 10.

<sup>23</sup> Cage 10.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Piekut. “Chance and Certainty: John Cage’s Politics of Nature,” in *Cultural Critique*, Vol 84, Spring 2013, pp. 151.

composition might provide an opening to some unmediated access to the natural.<sup>25</sup> This ideal, of course, can only be accomplished so long as the composer's mediating role is ignored or erased.

Thus Rosenberg's fantasy of mastery and Cage's fantasy of submission meet at their common mischaracterization of the artist's role within the network of chanceful materiality that collectively produces their work. One overstates his role while the other is oblivious to his. We might write both of these off as just two commonplace varieties of anthropocentric thinking—which is more irksome?—except that they helpfully illustrate pitfalls that are pervasive to the language of chance.

Why, then, is chance so hard to talk about? In the vocabulary of real or possible action, the word 'chance' stands in for whatever we're unable to account for adequately. The dictionary is instructive here, defining chance as the "absence of design or assignable cause, fortuity; often itself spoken of as the cause or determiner of events, which appear to happen without the intervention of law, ordinary causation, or providence."<sup>26</sup> So: chance names the absence of an assignable cause, but also plays the semantic role of the cause that cannot be assigned. This explains why invocations of chance often slip between epistemic and ontic registers. When we emphasize the relation of an event to our inadequate knowledge of it, we say that it 'seemed to occur by chance' or occurred 'as if by chance'. When instead we want to assert that an event actually did lack a cause, we say that it 'was pure chance' or 'mere chance'. Phrases like 'it could only have occurred by chance', somewhat incoherently jam these registers together, as though we might identify a cause that precludes our ability to explain it. In such cases, chance names the projection into the world of a suspended relation to knowledge.

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<sup>25</sup> Cage, "Indeterminacy" in *Silence*, 36.

<sup>26</sup> "chance, n., adj., and adv.". OED Online. March 2018. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/30418?rskey=wgR21D&result=1> (accessed April 27, 2018).

At the same time, chance always implies a set of possibilities of which an event is a member. That set may be infinite or only conjectured (the possible shapes a pane of glass might take when it shatters) or finite and nameable (heads versus tails). The prospect of that set suggests questions of likelihood, and invites us to relate to the chance event as a game—in a word, to speculate. As Brecht writes, “it is often useful to keep in mind this ‘universe of possible results,’ even when that universe is hypothetical, for this clarifies for us the nature of our chance event as a selection from a limited universe...There is no absolute chance or random event, for chance and randomness are aspects of the way in which we structure our universe.”<sup>27</sup> It is not a coincidence that the mathematical calculation of probabilities, and ultimately the disciplinary technologies of statistics and game theory, originate in the scenario of the game of chance.<sup>28</sup>

But betting enlists the chance event in a very specific way—to produce language. If the word ‘chance’ marks a lapse in our ability to adequately name, in speculation the chance event is itself used precisely to do the work of naming. As Johan Huizinga explains, when ‘something is at stake’ in a game of chance, “this ‘something ‘ is not the material result of the play, not the mere fact that the ball is in the hole, but the ideal fact that the game is a success or has been successfully concluded.”<sup>29</sup> From the perspective of the gambler, the material fact that the coin lands on heads *matters* because it names a winner and a loser. Games of chance, to repeat Goffman’s phrase, are decision machines that work by enlisting matter outside the human body to achieve an act in language, the nominative act of choosing from a set of alternatives. But this machine can of course only function so long as the material process involved remains at least

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<sup>27</sup> Brecht 5.

<sup>28</sup> Rüdiger Campe, *The Game of Probability: Literature and Calculation from Pascal to Kleist*, Trans. Ellwood Wiggins, Jr. Stanford University Press, 2012, pp. 118.

<sup>29</sup> Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens*. The Beacon Press, 1950, pp. 49.

partially obscure. In other words, in games of chance matter participates in language on the condition of its inscrutability.

No wonder, then, that all the accounts we have been considering repeatedly invoke but never define ‘nature’ as an abstract source of agency. No wonder, too, that trouble arises when we try to account for the roles we play in our engagements with chance, why accounts of gambling tend to vacillate from ascriptions of total compulsion to total control, gambling ‘addiction’ to what Eve Sedgwick calls “hypostatized, pure voluntariness.”<sup>30</sup>

Chance, from *cadere*, derives from the gesture of letting dice fall from one’s hand.<sup>31</sup> More curiously, the Latin *aléa*, meaning ‘risk’ or ‘uncertainty’, comes originally from the words for ‘pivot- or joint-bone’, since such bones were used as early dice. I like to imagine this etymological pivot-bone as the repurposed knuckle of some other hand. How might we think of the distribution of agency from our joints to dice joints, across the coordinated movements of the hand as it transfers force to another body that resembles and extends it?

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<sup>30</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. “Epidemics of the Will,” in *Incorporations*. Ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter. Zone, 1992, pp. 586.

<sup>31</sup> Margaret Iverson. “Introduction” in *Chance*, Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2010, pp. 17.

*After-Note: Hunter College MFA Thesis Project*

I began investigating ideas of chance, risk, and gambling fourteen months ago by considering the legacy of chance operations in recent art. I have included two pieces in the Hunter MFA thesis show. The first is a scent diffuser that emits an ambient odor sold by a scent marketing firm to clients in the casino industry. (Research has shown that, used in concentrations that are barely noticeable, such targeted scents can increase gambling activity by up to forty percent.<sup>32</sup>) The second is a two-channel video that records a poker tournament I hosted in the Hunter MFA building with male-identified professional and semi-professional online poker players. It simulates an omniscient, 360 degree view of the game, a perspective that however proves partial and incomplete.

If the casino is an iconic image of extreme speculation under contemporary capitalism, it is also an institution designed to sell chance as a consumer commodity. These works reproduce the casino's vertiginous ambience, and function to map its architecture onto the architecture of the exhibition space. We might understand the poker game as a mechanism for organizing space in which visibility is strategically deployed and withheld; likewise the video suspends the poker players in the gallery so that their spatial relationships to one another and to the viewer remain unstable. These projects don't tackle their subject so much as trace the architecture that holds it. I see them as introductory engagements, scale models or maquettes for future work.

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<sup>32</sup> Alan Hirsch. "Effects of Ambient Odors on Slot Machine Usage in a Las Vegas Casino" *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 12 (7), October 1995, pp. 585-594.

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## IMAGE LIST

### *1) Card Players*

two-channel video, 18:46

A group of professional and semi-professional online poker players were invited to play in a live poker tournament at the Hunter MFA studios.

### *2) Untitled*

Rzaroma scent diffuser, Air-Aroma scented oil

Scent diffuser with proprietary ambient odor, sold by a scent marketing firm to clients in the casino industry.



