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issue number 6

"I am not a number"

the numbers issue

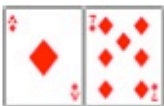
Alternative Risk Transfer

In poker, risk taking through betting combines with individual skill and chance. In contemporary art practice, risk taking strategies are frequently privileged whilst there is continuing discussion over the role of skill and chance in the creative process. Whilst developing a curatorial proposition for an exhibition that will occur through the medium of gambling, London based artist Eugene Perera and Stimulus Respond's Christopher Thomas play a high stakes game of Texas Holdem No Limit poker and discuss the ways in which the matrix of skill, risk and chance operate within the contexts of both art and gambling. Can betting games help us to understand art practice in new ways?

EUGENE IS DEALT:



CHRISTOPHER IS DEALT:



These are the 'hole' cards and are secret to each player. The blinds are forced bets to get the action going.

EUGENE: Small Blind 50p.

CHRISTOPHER: Big Blind £1.

CT: People often complain in poker that they're having a bad run of cards and that they're 'unlucky'. Of course we know that whilst there might be dramatic differences in the quality of cards being dealt in the short term, over the long term everybody gets the same chance opportunities. How does this democratic situation compare to the terrain of art practice?

EP: Over the long term, there is no such democracy of opportunity as each successive situation for the artist opens up a multiplicity of further connected possibilities unlike poker where each hand is a fresh start. Early choices such (even down to art schools and so on) determine our future positioning and the contextual nuances of each situation affect the development of our practice and so it goes on. Development in art practice is probably more like an extended single hand of poker rather than a tournament where there are hundreds of hands played. The interesting point for me is trying to understand just how chance and decision-making intersect in different types of unfolding art practice and perhaps the methodologies of poker hand analysis might provide some ways into this.

EUGENE: Raises £5 - a large raise indicating strength though he has weak hole cards. A random ruse as he should fold. CHRISTOPHER: Calls for £5 as he has good hole cards for a two player 'heads up'.

THERE IS £10 IN THE POT.

CT: Deleuze & Guattari understand chance as more of an individualised event where there is an opportunity

to create a unique 'assemblage' of relations. Is this a more useful way of understanding chance?

EP: I am more interested in each 'chance opportunity' where the throw of the dice creates wholly new and temporary combinations. The formulation of a consistent winning strategy that works over the long term may well be the Holy Grail in poker but it probably represents the end of creative practice in art. It is the randomness of chance that is interesting since this is where the most interesting structures can be divined. I think it is a fallacy to equate randomness with a lack of pattern and as a kind of white noise. Instead I prefer, similarly to the poker player who analyzes the 'texture' of a flop, to find structures. I think there is a fleeting chance for artists to find structure within every random event and poker may provide insight into how these intuitive leaps materialize.

THE FLOP



EUGENE: Checks, having flopped three of a kind to induce Christopher to bet in a representation of weakness.

CHRISTOPHER: Bets £10 having improved to two pair

EUGENE: Raises to £30, having got Christopher to bet out.

CHRISTOPHER: Calls for £30, confident he is ahead but suspicious of Eugene's raise.

THERE IS £70 IN THE POT.

CT: The interaction of skill and chance is fundamental to poker where players control the betting but have no say over the cards they are dealt. Is there a skill-chance continuum where a higher degree of skill tends to diminish the role of chance and allow for practice to become less risky?

EP: In Texas Holdem poker, it's often suggested there is a skill-chance continuum where, as skill increases, there is proportionately less room for chance. I'm not sure if this is subtle enough as, however skillful the player is in placing bets, they don't control the cards and the novice has the same opportunities as the poker pro. So I'd like to suggest instead that there is a fixed element of chance and a continuum of skill where experienced players are able to observe subtle behavioural manifestations or 'tells' and make complex predictions based on the odds to get an edge on the next guy. In art, the situation is more complex since there are as many practices as artists. However I wonder whether we could understand each practice as a performative game where there are certain rules and conventions and where there are very particular ways in which skill and chance interact? I also wonder whether some artists deliberately seek to 'derisk' practice through the development of an extensive skillset in the same way a professional poker player accesses an armory of skills to predict likely outcomes and make the right decisions? Might such a derisking strategy limit creative practice through removing the chance of the accidental?

CT: Sure, but conversely an abundance of skill could create possibilities. In the context of painting, for example, we could think of particular artists (say Glen Brown or Nigel Cooke, for example) who use skill or craftsmanship not for painterly ends but as part of a wider conceptual strategy in which painting is simply the medium as opposed to the discipline. Here, skill and effort become perhaps the content of the work and are employed for representationally regressive purposes. Speaking of which, in poker, players often represent hands that they do not hold and this bluffing technique is called 'representation'. I guess the upside of this strategy becoming almost an

"The interesting point for me is trying to understand just how chance and decision-making intersect in different types of unfolding art practice"

art medium in itself since the 90's is that notions of sincerity and integrity are now up for negotiation.

“Artists seem to be the only people in the world that know how to do branding”

EP: Last night I discussed this with a friend within the wider context of marketing trends. Nowadays when a commercial brand sponsors an event, it aims to create a desirable association between the brand and the event which is far removed from the crude ‘badging’ strategies that used to be carried out. Artists have to be similarly circumspect in the way they represent themselves and the strategies of YBAs in the 90's now seem heavy handed. I was amused to recently see a music festival logo written in the same typography as the Rizla logo - this struck me as a clever piece of ‘cloaking’ and I see it everywhere in artists’ promotional strategies. This has great relevance to poker where the most effective representation is often the semi or double bluff. Can we learn anything I wonder from the complex representational strategies of poker players?

CT: My friend Fraser said something brilliant when we were talking about art and advertising. He said that artists seem to be the only people in the world that know how to do branding. Advertising people make such heavy weather of it but constructing a coherent brand is what artists do all the time. Fraser doesn't do art - he does spectacles - but he's often spot-on. Anyway, in poker, long-term players that make money will lose far more individual hands than win through limiting losses and maximising profits. Is ‘winning’ important in art?

EP: Well we all know certain artists that are obsessed with winning in a way closely akin to the poker player but for others the criteria for success are rather more complex and obscure. Perhaps most interesting are artists who deliberately set out to fail.

THE TURN CARD



EUGENE: Checks, feigning weakness, hoping Christopher will bet again.

CHRISTOPHER: Checks, feeling enough has been committed on this hand.

THERE IS £70 IN THE POT

CT: In poker, players exercise control over the action through betting and different betting behaviours such as being ‘loose’ or ‘tight’ represent differing risk tolerances. How does risk tolerance change through art practice?

EP: I think that the rise of the art market over the last 20 years and its commodification of everything it encounters has led to a reduction in risk taking as art practice dovetails into

business practice. In the commercial sphere, risk assessment is a fundamental part of the decision making matrix and a low risk profile is nearly always good. Artists that have opted to operate within the commercial art market usually have to become 'derisked' before collectors buy and here provenance comes to the fore. Not surprisingly, this encourages many artists to become risk averse and to carry on making the same kind of work in a similar way to the poker player that has become 'pot committed' and fears the financial loss resulting from folding a hand. The current economic crisis is having an interesting effect on creative practice as younger artists realise that for now there is no great financial reward to be had and therefore they can take on more creative risk as there's nothing to lose. Hopefully this will see an increased emphasis on criticality as a primary attribution of value rather than the simply financial.

"The current economic crisis is having an interesting effect on creative practice as younger artists realise that for now there is no great financial reward to be had"

CT: Fundamental to risk taking is risk assessment through comparison of the potential loss to potential reward in a given course of action - the risk/reward ratio. Do artists embrace 'perverse' risk-reward ratios?

EP: This is where it gets really interesting...I am sure that all artists in some way think about this. Clearly, few systematically calculate the risk outcomes involved in a particular strategy whereas in poker, players look at odds and are able to mathematically calculate the likelihood of particular events occurring. Artists no doubt will look at what is staked when undertaking a particular project in terms of things such as an intellectual position being risked, the effect on reputation through critical reception, possible financial repercussions and many other factors. Sometimes artists will deliberately increase the stakes through strategies that impose limitations on themselves but usually this is done in order to realise a potentially greater critical or other reward. The most interesting thing for me though is the artist that risks everything to gain nothing and follows a perverse risk-reward strategy. This is a little like the poker player that goes 'all in' betting everything to win just the blinds.

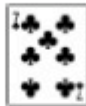
CT: In finance there are sophisticated strategies for risk exchange and transfer? Do you think there's an economy of risk transfer within the art sphere?

EP: I think risk transfer strategies are particularly prevalent within the art marketplace and are become increasingly sophisticated as the financial stakes are raised. Established artists are able to employ a vast range of strategies to mitigate risk by involving others. This has the effect of derisking larger projects through the transfer of risk to third parties. These third party operatives in turn devolve risk to other parties and in this way an artist is able to SPREAD risk amongst a large group of financially involved professionals. This is sounding rather like what caused the current economic crisis with the parcelling up of debt spreading the liability over a large number of third parties. Unfortunately this ability to pass on risk encouraged financial institutions to make ever greater bets through a false perception that risk had been reduced. The risk management proved to be faulty though and the system entered a state of crisis as borrowers defaulted in large numbers. The implications for this are interesting for the art market since at the top level a high degree of

devolved risk potentially allows for larger scale projects (or bets) whilst in the middle market, where there is less opportunity to insure against risk, there is potentially less risk tolerance. It also begs the question as to whether a large scale catastrophic event might occur within the art sphere since it is never possible to factor out all risk. If this is the case, what might this catastrophe be? Might it be a total voiding of critical content where art conflates with entertainment rather than a financial collapse?

CT: Has this already happened? And isn't this beautifully relevant to our plans to make a group show through the medium of gambling?

THE RIVER CARD & SHOWDOWN



EUGENE: Checks again hoping Christopher will bet,
CHRISTOPHER: Bets £20 thinking that Eugene hasn't really got anything and hoping to steal the pot in the expectation Eugene will fold,

CT: So how should our art casino work?

EUGENE: Raises again to £50,
CHRISTOPHER: Calls nervously for £50 feeling pot committed.

EP: I've been thinking about devising a method for the show where artists and other interested art 'players' (in the literal sense) take risks to position themselves through the show. Here of course position must necessarily be more complex than the simple financial objectives of poker so it will be a challenge to devise a method that is both simple to play yet will allow us to engage with some of the issues that we have been discussing. I think the game will have to deal with variables such as risk-reward ratios, positioning, representation, risk profiling, skillsets and different kinds of chance opportunities to explore the nature of what is staked. I'm imagining at the moment that the game might in some way resemble poker but that's all totally up for discussion.

Eugene shows his cards – three of a kind and Christopher folds without showing as he has two pair.

EUGENE WINS POT OF £170

CT: Can it be called "Eugene's Palace". Where the house always wins.

To continue the discussion, please contact

Alternative Risk Transfer via
eugene@eugeneperera.net

Christopher Thomas will be exhibiting at the Main Yard Gallery in October and at Bloomberg New Contemporaries with Kristel Raesaar in September and November.