

Faculty of Design

2015

## Kapsula

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# **RISK 2/2**

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# HI I AM HERE

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## PROLOGUE

# PROLOGUE

## hashtag *crisis* (revisited)

Since the widely accepted “crisis” in criticism over the past decade or so, there have been numerous attempts made toward understanding the climate for contemporary art writing. Critics have made ongoing effort to write not only about the art, but their medium, contrasting certain types of writing against others and stating opinions about which provides the greatest potential for criticism’s revival. Positions are drastically varied in this area, and there seems to be little consensus around the future of art criticism: do we describe more, or less of the artwork? Is academia our enemy, or our ally? To what extent should historical precedent interfere with the immediacy of experience? Without agreement on where the genre should go, perhaps the one thing we can all agree on is that methods for writing, receiving, and circulating criticism have shifted dramatically in the online sphere. Regardless of how the critic should choose to engage an artwork, what principles should guide criticism’s

content, once any text is written it gets released to an entirely different audience than it would have prior to the age of mass technology. Indeed, we’re racing to catch up with the new platforms, publications, and other forums for critique and discourse that have developed since the Internet—KAPSULA being but one example.

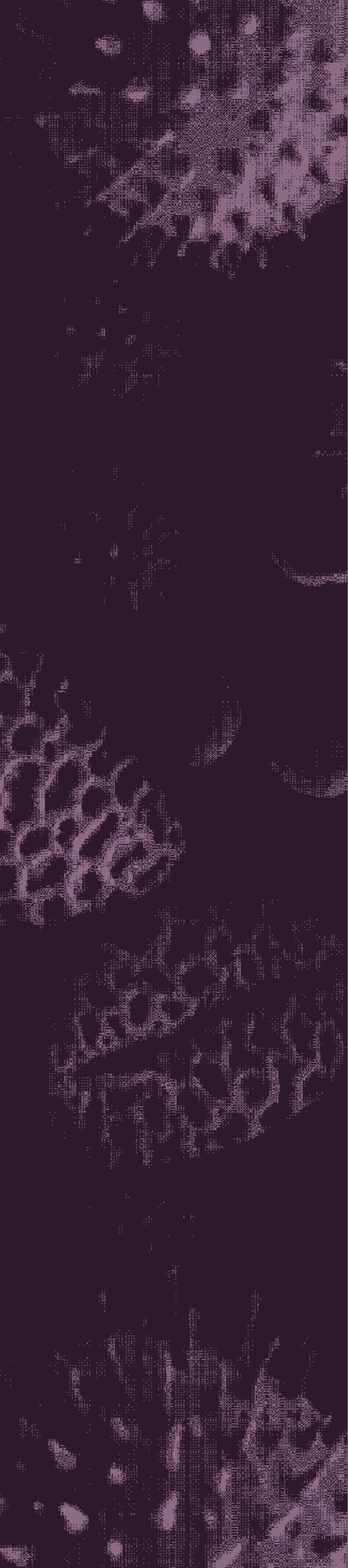
The first theme of KAPSULA Magazine was “crisis,” suitable because the magazine was born of this persisting conversation surrounding the status of contemporary criticism. Our current issue, published over two years later and falling under the theme of “risk,” nonetheless harkens back to the beginnings of the magazine. For the task of critics today seems less to do with defining their medium and the genre, but negotiating the role technology plays in its growth. In May of this year, for example, Walker Art Center in Minneapolis hosted the first ever *Superscript: Arts Journalism and Criticism in a Digital Age*—a

conference devoted to the particularities of writing criticism online. Prominent writers from international publications attended, all with the intention of working through what it means to evaluate art online. Today, the crisis is trending in more ways than one. When critical writing cowers under the influence of a hashtag, content undoubtedly adopts a certain vernacular to please the masses, and the ability to put out thoughtful, long-form criticism becomes more difficult. Each of the texts featured in this issue discuss the renewed expectations of arts writers in the Internet age. Moving forward, whether as an independent writer, a publication, or otherwise, technological supports for criticism will not disappear from the landscape; so, we must embrace the change, move with the tide, and continue re-evaluating our relationship to the field accordingly.

# REFLECTIONS ON THE RISK OF ONLINE CRITICISM



CAOIMHE MORGAN-FEIR  
FRANCISCO-FERNANDO GRANADOS  
KATHERINE DENNIS



I spend a good portion of my time writing: curatorial essays, exhibition proposals, programming descriptions, and business reports. Infrequently I write for online and print publications, but criticism is not my genre of choice. There is, however, an expectation of a curator to publish criticism. In choosing to do so only occasionally, the risk begins with stepping into a space where others have more carefully honed their skill and credibility as a critic. Without the polish (and name recognition) that comes from dedicated practice of the medium, each piece of criticism feels more vulnerable and weighty than if it were part of a larger body of work. In contrast to print publications, which become harder to find over time, online archives and Google searches mean that even years later someone can find every image, text, and misstep in the digital realm.


In the world of online art criticism, the way readers perform intensifies the risk. The response to one's writing is—good or bad—both immediate and public. People opine, share, like and hate with fervor. Indeed, in the extreme, online shaming can be hostile, highly personal and impulsive. Professional writers are not afforded the same anonymity as those who post comments at the end of an online article or tweet via handles. The ownership of ideas and words is incredibly important to stimulate informed, open dialogue and yet, also inherently risky (for a far more detailed explanation of online risk, read *“Going Viral: Losing Control and Losing Your Job”* by Esther Honig, Pelican Bomb— thanks to art critic Ben Davis for flagging this article in his *must-read essays last month*).

So where does that leave me, as a writer and reluctant critic? Cautious. Thoughtful. Measure twice, cut once. And of course, ever indebted to excellent editors.

+++++ KATHERINE DENNIS







If the medium is the message, the risk of online art criticism is that the speed and ease of electronic platforms cannot optimally hold the slowness and heavily contoured nature of critical work. For the writer, the shift is structural: from words to characters, in the transformation of the syntax of headlines, and the rise of top ten lists over points of view. This is not an argument against emerging forms of digital media and their possibilities, or the facts of how they operate (we are happy to read and write in this publication, for example), but rather a way to question how criticality may be transformed in the age of shortened attention spans. It's not too hard to see how the potential for dialogue in art that accommodates a wider range of voices might quickly become an empty race towards accumulating 'likes' and 'shares.' The current state gives rise to curious phenomena, like our (my?) embarrassing fascination with artist news as celebrity gossip, or puzzling instances where (usually privileged, upwardly mobile) university-educated folks dismiss work that resists spectacle for being too academic. And yet these likes and shares are exactly what people interested in working critically 'cannot not want.' Critique needs to remain public if it is to have any structural use. In a broader sense, the risk of online art criticism might be that it signals the diminishing dimensions of the public sphere.

FRANCISCO-FERNANDO GRANADOS

# *Selected Topics in the Phenomenon of Risk*

*Natasha Chaykowski*

*i* I've always destroyed my old journals. Pages, filled with unintelligible inky scrawls and cringe-worthy sentimentality (often rendered in bad grammar) are unceremoniously ripped into pieces, thrown into a fire or recycled. Late-night notes scribbled on scraps of paper in bouts of manic insomnia are always condemned to the garbage in morning's harsh, rational light. The entire corpus of my undergraduate writing was swiftly allocated to the digital bin, erased with a click and the satisfying, artificial factory-setting sound of paper crumpling. This is problematic, or at least perplexing, behaviour for someone who feels compelled to publish her writing. Is there a name for this destructive urge? An iconoclasm of texts?

I've been writing in a public forum, mostly about art, for almost three years. Some pieces coalesce with little stress or tribulation, while others are laboured over, sometimes abandoned—which describes the experience of many writers, I imagine. Yet, for me, the process is not the hardest part about writing—or any kind of creative production that enters a public realm. Rather, it's the endurance and public-ness of these things produced that compels a strange, pointed

distress in me. The trouble with publishing is that erasure becomes (nearly) impossible. And so, one has to live with what she's written, things that endure in the ether of the Internet and on the smooth pages of magazines. For me, this is uncomfortable. Publishing a piece of writing always feels like a risk.

Some past projects are more benign than others—art reviews written in embarrassingly lavish language or articles that in hindsight seem messy or poorly structured, for example—while others are more menacing. Most writers who have published an opinion piece or a text about a contentious topic will be all too familiar with the risk of eliciting harsh comments or criticism. Criticism and challenges to opinion must always be possible; they are a necessary and critical component of discourse. Yet, when something I've written stands in this kind of spotlight, I always feel exceptionally vulnerable, especially in contexts where a response or discussion is not easily facilitated. I'm often left with a lump in my throat, my stomach plummeting into some cavernous void.

And things that I've written and published in the past always seem stagnant, out-dated—riddled with opinions

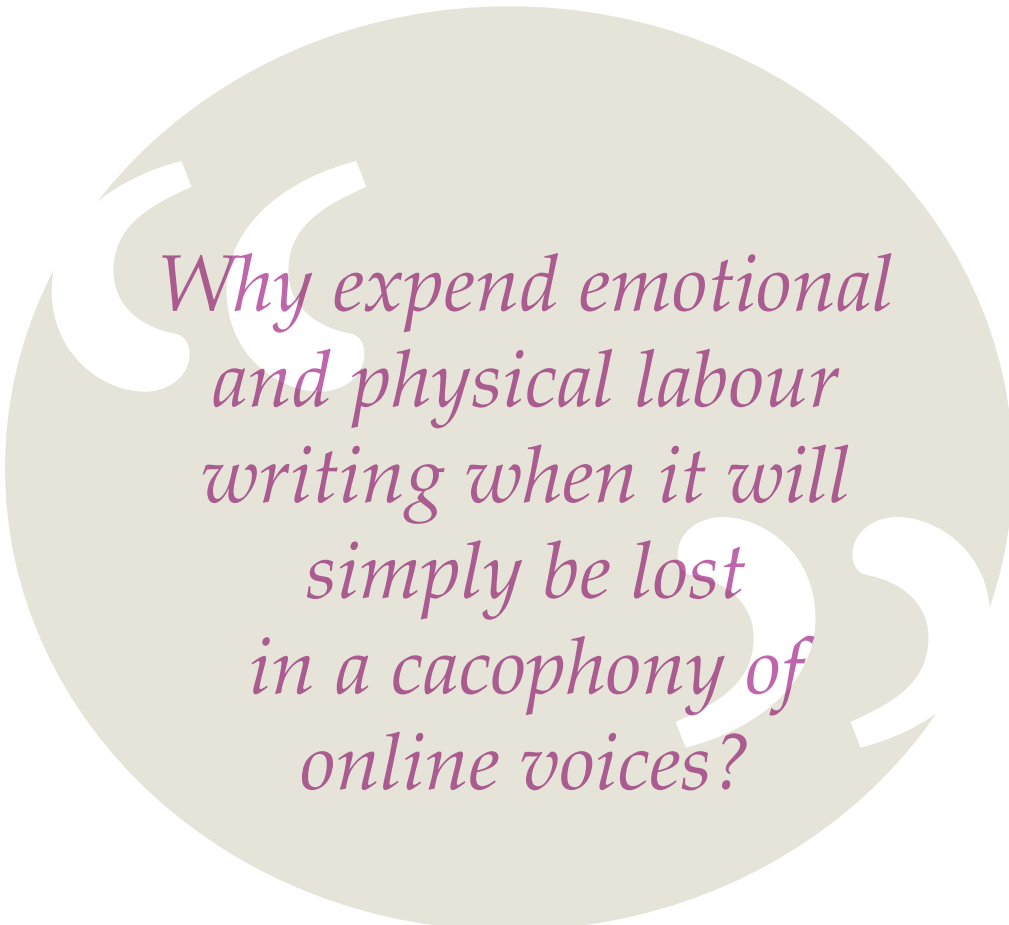
I no longer hold or ideas that I have revised or developed since then. I recently published an article about some things I had been thinking about for a number of years that was met with many comments, yet the ones that fazed me were those that were outwardly derisive. I was hurt, and annoyed by my blighted feelings. I agonized over what my friends and colleagues thought. This, for me, is a risk of writing. As I'm sure you can imagine, generous reader, writing this right now feels like a risk, knowing that these words will continue to exist in some capacity but will ultimately become other to me.

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Simply existing in a post-Internet era has rapidly ushered in torrents of risks heretofore non-existent: online bullying that too-often results in lives ruined; pervasive social media exhaustion, anxiety, and depression; insidious violations of privacy initiated by companies that data mine; risks posed to vulnerable bodies in feeding the unquenchable thirst of the porn industry; the wholesale ruination of lives through online tsunamis of shame generated from IRL mistakes made; and the necessary amnesia that ensues the frenzied pace of the production and consumption of information, to name only a small few in a long list.

How do we reckon with and negotiate this dizzying and sometimes dangerous digital landscape? It's been my experience, especially in the context of contemporary art writing, that the risks imposed by virtue of living in a post-Internet climate constitute two sides of a proverbial coin. The first side: the wholesale depletion of attention spans, exhaustion in the face of the sublime and accelerated quantity of information produced, and the reality of feeling insignificant within this context (where any piece of writing is a drop of water in the ocean, so to speak). As I write this, David Balzer's think piece, "*TL;DR: No One Reads Art Reviews Anymore*," an astute account of the art review as an unsustainable (possibly obsolete) yet culturally important form, is being widely read and shared on social media. A friend of mine said of the article: "I laughed out loud reading this piece. It just feels good to admit it, like standing





*Why expend emotional  
and physical labour  
writing when it will  
simply be lost  
in a cacophony of  
online voices?*

on a mountain top yelling ‘NO ONE FUCKING READS THESE!!! YOU HEAR ME WORLD!?!?’” For her, the admittance that art reviews are not being read was a pointed relief—an affirmation of something she might have long suspected. For others however, Balzer’s stated concern will surely hit harder—why expend emotional and physical labour writing when it will simply be lost in a cacophony of online voices?

The second side of this coin, that in combination with the first forges a truly profound conundrum for me (as an already anxious writer), constitutes my aforementioned deep unease about the perpetuity of things written, now stored in giant servers, potentially accessible unflaggingly. Leaving a trail of readily available information about oneself, whether with purpose (as is the case in publishing something online) or inadvertently through the now-wide-spread use of cookies and malicious tracking software, is a risk precisely because once this information is cast out into the murky depths of the web, seldom are we able to maintain control over how it continues to exist, behave,

and be consumed. Never before have our public lives been so utterly indelible. Uncontrollable.

This ties into the vulnerability of having a presence, a life, online. Perhaps my annoyance with the blighted feelings, my vulnerability mentioned above, stems from an academic impulse to be distanced in writing—writerly depersonalization. Sometimes it feels as though it’s requisite to be impervious to criticism or even derision. Yet, as Richard Meyer aptly points out in his article “Artists sometimes have feelings,” we have to wonder: what are the boundaries, or rather what should they be, when we create something that is to be ushered into a public realm and subsequently negotiated in our real or digital presence? Surely there is a contract inherent in putting something out there; one agrees to risk becoming subject to criticism. Meyer asks, though: how do feelings (or more specifically, the fear of hurting feelings) mitigate our ability to be critical? His partial and personally grounded answer is that when confronting work by a living artist, a humane concern for their feelings eclipsed his intent, as an art historian, to be critical.

Now, however, under the veil of anonymity or distance provided by the Internet, replete with its innumerable trolls, these reservations are no longer necessarily at work. As such, new economies of criticism and online aggression have emerged, uninhibited by a possible assuaging consideration of feelings. To be sure, Meyer is troubled by his consideration of an artist’s feelings—he isn’t necessarily advocating for a feeling-centric formulation of criticism that tiptoes around critical issues for the sake of sparing said feelings. But he does remind us that whatever we choose to criticize is often made by a living, feeling being. With these new economies of exchange proffered by the Internet, it can be easy to forget this. As a writer, I have absolutely been too fast and loose criticizing without consideration of the human that made the object of my criticism, committing the very thing that makes writing feel so risky for me. But as writers, as artists, *as whoever*, we remain tied to the things we produce. Artists sometimes have feelings. Writers sometimes have them too.

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Risk comes in many shapes and forms. But what, precisely, is it? In starting some meandering research for this article, I took out every book in my small local library pertaining to risk. Needless to say, it was a disparate assortment: *High Risk Behaviour* (an artist project by Don Ross that pertains to HIV stigmatization in queer communities), *Organizing Events: Avoiding Risk and Promoting Safety*, *Grand Canyon: River at Risk*, *Beyond Risk: Conversations with Climbers*, *Life on the Edge: Memoires of Everest and Beyond*, and aptly, *Managing the Library Fire Risk* to name a few. I was lost in a sea of seemingly-unrelated information surrounding risk.

Philosophically, the contours of risk can be outlined through rigid technical definitions of the phenomenon. In this sense, risk is by turns an unwanted event (cancer is a risk to those who eat a lot of bacon), the cause of an unwanted event (eating bacon is a health risk), or the probability of the occurrence of an unwanted event (the risk that a bacon-eater's health will suffer negative effects is 18% higher than non-bacon eaters). What threads these technical definitions, which are often unmoored from the messy contingencies of life, is the presence or threat of something unwanted.

One particularly critical facet of the philosophy of risk pertains to its division into two categories: risks that are actively chosen versus risks that are not. What remains seldom discussed in philosophical considerations of risk is the psychology of chosen risks: why take a chance when an unwanted event looms ever-present in its context? Why use the Internet? Why write? The easy answer to these questions is that there is something to be gained in taking a risk, despite the possibility of experiencing

something unwanted. Living in precarious, post-Intern conditions holds inherent risks, which often fail to outweigh the benefits and lure of the seemingly infinite possibilities afforded by the Internet. Part of the reason I continue to write in the face of my idiosyncratic perception of its riskiness is, in part, because you're reading this now. Because it feels like the possibilities for critical and meaningful discussions are more enticing than the feelings of anxiety or inadequacy that loom on the horizon.

But what about the risks that aren't chosen? They constitute a critical component of structures of privilege that predispose some to particular conditions of existence that, in their precarity, far outweigh the riskiness others reckon with. In this vein, there are people who by virtue of circumstances not chosen by them, live with implicit, inevitable risks. In Canada, Indigenous people are three times more likely to experience violence for example. For women in particular, this ratio is exacerbated (as most blatantly evinced by the more than 1000 missing and murdered Aboriginal women). Those who live on reserves are likewise at greater risk of developing cancerous diseases from, among other things, unsafe drinking water. One does not have the choice to drink water or not, thus these risks are not made by choice but rather by violent colonial circumstance. For people of colour, navigating public spaces is also a risk, one that is all too often deadly at the hands of broken, racist institutions. It is risky for a woman to walk home late at night by herself. Let's be clear: not all risks are the same. The lack of choice in risk speaks to deeply embedded systemic violence. It's fucked up that we live in a world wherein society writ large values some human lives far more than others, exposing many to risks they have no choice in. So, every time we choose to take a risk—whether it be adventurous in nature, an investment, or publishing a piece of writing—we should be indescribably grateful in being afforded the choice.



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is a Montreal-based writer, researcher and curator. Her writing has been published in *Carbon Paper*, *esse: arts + opinions*, *Canadian Art*, and the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, and she has contributed to catalogues produced by Gallery 44 and Art Mûr.



Special  
Project

# WRITER'S ROULETTE

On September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015 KAPSULA hosted its first-ever arts writing workshop with cultural partners *Carbon Paper* and *Gallery 44*. The prophetically titled WRITER'S ROULETTE invited emerging to mid-career writers to ruminate on the subject of risk in contemporary art as well as enact degrees of risk and vulnerability in both the writing and editing processes.

Participants were asked to come prepared with a paragraph or writerly “zygote” which would evolve through the exercises of the workshop. The subject of risk aligned with KAPSULA’s Summer 2015 call for submissions and echoed a palpable aire of uncertainty surrounding the future of the arts in Canada (as the nation headed into its longest federal election).

Facilitated by Toronto-based artist, writer and former editor of *FUSE*, Gina Badger, the workshop proved a lively and engaged two hours of critical conversation, free writing periods and targeted peer-review. Afterward, participants worked with KAPSULA editor, Lindsay LeBlanc, to hone the raw material they’d forged in the workshop. The results of this risky confluence are published below.

