

Sean Raspet: "Marte Eknæs and Sean Raspet – Calculus of Negligence at Room East"

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Sean Raspet. *Layer Adjustment (Accident Probability Adjustment)*, 2015; alterations made to the physical location to increase the probability of an accident while remaining within the scope of existing insurance coverage (May 5 June 21, 2015). Courtesy of Room East.

True catastrophes cannot be foreseen... True catastrophes are new information. They are, by definition, surprising adventures.—Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 1985
With the exception of a small community of daredevils, most people try to avoid disasters. There are, of course, various degrees of risk associated with everything we do that drive our precautions as well as the insurance industry. In general, the act of experiencing art has a very low physical risk factor; insurance

companies do not cover the potential emotional or psychological risks of art viewing. In *Calculus of Negligence* at Room East, Sean Raspet negates the safety of art through a carefully constructed environment with an elevated level of potential risk, which Marte Eknæs then counteracts by implementing safety measures. The two artists' collaboration creates a scenario that challenges the ways people—and insurance policies—respond to situations with unusual and unpredictable variables.

There is not much to see in the upper and lower rooms and connecting stairwell that contain the exhibition. Or, rather, there is not much we are able to see. *Calculus of Negligence* features fourteen works by the two artists: eleven objects and three works that are, for all intents and purposes, imperceptible. The objects provided by Eknæs include a ventilation system connecting the two rooms, nylon-brush safety strips, anti-slip tape, and a motion-activated trashcan. Raspet's contributions include four tanks of commercial-grade compressed air, exposed wires, and an insurance policy bought by the gallery specifically for the exhibition. Raspet transforms the space with the contents of the tanks, which contain Praxair ExtendaPak EX 49 (used to preserve fruits and vegetables in packaging and storage), MediPure Air USP (medical-grade breathable air), Zero Air (used for the standard calibration of testing equipment and Environmental Protection Agency compliance), and Oxygen-18 Isotope (a breathable air used for tracking cellular and body metabolism in medical diagnostics and scientific research). The tanks release their contents into the gallery at predetermined flow rates throughout the exhibition. Through his modification of the gallery's air supply, Raspet calls attention to the many ways in which the chemical industry affects something as essential and banal as the air we breathe. Eknæs both emphasizes and negates Raspet's intervention with her works *Ventilation I* and *Ventilation II* (both 2015), for which the

gallery installed a ventilation shaft between the two rooms to disperse the gasses released by Raspet's tanks. To further complicate the assumption of safety, or lack thereof, Eknæs installed *Ventilation IV* (2015), a ceiling-mounted ventilation screen that doesn't connect to anything.

The tanks also pose the risk of physical harm, as demonstrated in the upper room by Raspet's *Adjustment Residue (Accident Impact Trace)* (2015), which consists of a hexagonal dent in the wall that is the result of a metal nut accidentally flying off of one of the gas tanks. What would be a headache for most other artists was a welcome, serendipitous occurrence for Raspet. He required the gallery to buy an additional insurance policy to cover his slight variations of the "calculus of negligence," which is the phrase used by the insurance company to determine the probability of accident and liability based on the probability of accident (P), the burden of precautions (B), the gravity of loss (L), and the economically efficient outcome (c.).^[1] Through his minor alterations, Raspet highlights the seemingly absurd nuances of the legal contracts that control so much of our lives. While challenging the limits of the insurance policy, he considered: How much more does it cost to leave an electrical cabinet door open? When can an accident be deemed an act of god?

The radical unknowability of the future makes many people uncomfortable, so we try to be as prepared as possible. But through these preparations, we create restrictions on what can be discovered. An early definition of the word *catastrophe* is a "reversal of what is expected"; from the Greek *katastrophē*, "an overturning, a sudden end," the term *catastrophe* was not associated with disaster until the mid-1800s.^[2] Continuing the line of thought drawn by the critic and theorist Vilém Flusser—that catastrophes cannot be foreseen—catastrophes also cannot be intentionally created. Despite this limitation, it is possible to design a system from which a catastrophe might erupt. Together, Eknæs and Raspet produced a potentially catastrophic situation: an environment that denies expectations and encompasses visitors with invisible interferences. As a result, the heightened unpredictability of *Calculus of Negligence* forces visitors out of their expectations of the future—which are assumptions based on the past—and into a true experience of the miraculous present.