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Doctoral School

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Taking Risks and Pushing Boundaries: Extreme Sports and Experimental Contemporary Art

Doctoral thesis
in the field of art in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation

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Wrocław 2024

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Abstract

The primary goal of my doctoral research is to identify common characteristics of the concept of risk present in both experimental contemporary art and extreme sports.

A long-standing interest in extreme sports and years of analysing contemporary art in theory and practice have led me to recognise the similarities between these seemingly distant fields. They are united by risk and the satisfaction derived from taking it. Drawing on my own experiences in both sport and art, I explore how risk becomes a tool for exploration, courage, and creativity, leading to discovering new possibilities and pushing boundaries.

The following theoretical research aims to understand the analogies between risk in these two spheres, demonstrating that it serves as a means to achieve control and innovation. This research includes introspection on my practice, interviews with extreme athletes, and analyses of the relationship between risk and progress in sport and contemporary art, aiming to deepen the understanding of the role of risk in creativity and artistic experimentation.

Risk is the potential for adverse events resulting from uncertainty about future outcomes that affect essential values. Its definition varies by field, and the understanding of this concept has evolved over centuries.

Contemporary art is characterised by diversity and a lack of need for uniform style. Experimentation and risk are vital sources of innovation, allowing artists to transcend traditional boundaries and redefine artistic concepts. Fear, though less visible than in sports, influences creators, who often forgo innovative solutions in favour of safer aesthetics. As a result, financial and market pressures frequently stifle artistic development and experimentation.

Examples of artists who take risks in their work include Marcel Duchamp—who revolutionised art by introducing concepts such as the ready-made; Bruce Nauman—who explored the boundaries of perception and artistic identity; and David Hammons, whose work addressed issues of racism and power. The risks they took manifested in their formal decisions, relationships with their audience, and attitudes toward the art world. Experimental works that reject traditional elements that enable more accessible reception often face misunderstanding, marginalisation, and a lack of commercial success. Despite financial and social difficulties, all three artists continued their creative experiments, significantly pushing the boundaries of contemporary art today, albeit often at the cost of personal and professional hardships.

Extreme sports have gained immense popularity, redefining traditional notions of sport and attracting a growing number of participants. The example of Alex Honnold, who achieved the groundbreaking feat of climbing El Capitan without ropes, illustrates that risk in extreme

sports is not about bravado but rather intelligent, meticulously calculated action. Experts like Eric Brymer emphasise that the key to success lies in a deep understanding of the task, environment, and one's abilities, enabling the safe pushing of human limits.

In interviews I conducted with professional climbers, Wojciech *Dozent* Wajda emphasised that while free solo climbing was once standard in the community, it primarily represented a source of freedom for him. Taking risks in extreme sports, such as climbing without protection, required him to *turn off reflective awareness*—he did not think about the consequences of falling, allowing him to act intuitively. Krystian Macieja, on the other hand, highlights the psychological aspect of this type of climbing, where complete focus and the calming of emotions during the climb lead to a sense of *catharsis*.

An analysis of the various stages of my creative process precedes the description of my artistic work related to the doctorate. In the final chapter, I describe my artistic language, developed with artificial intelligence, which I offer as an alternative to conservative and populist tendencies in art.

1. Introduction: Risk, Experimental Contemporary Art, Extreme Sports

The urge to face danger is deeply ingrained in human nature and has been a significant driving force in the evolution of our species for centuries. Taking risks involves exploring unknown territory and embracing the possibility of being misunderstood. We can compare the risks taken in experimenting with art and participating in extreme sports when looking at the artist Marcel Duchamp and the athlete Alex Honnold. Both pioneers in their respective fields—Duchamp in contemporary art and Honnold as a free solo climber—pushed the boundaries to the extreme through their unwavering pursuit of their vision. Duchamp devoted his life to his artistic vision, moulding it into a work of art, just as extreme athletes dedicate every aspect of their daily lives to discipline, often sacrificing life stability.

Creating art involves various risks, both economic and psychological. Artists invest personally in their work and can experience mental health challenges if their art is misunderstood or if they suffer financial losses. The more innovative the work, the higher the risk of rejection from the public and art professionals.

In recent years, commercialisation has made the business aspect of art more significant. This has led art galleries to focus more on catering to popular tastes, as seen in art fairs and social media. Critics have also shifted their focus, publishing less critical reviews and more descriptions of exhibitions and social events to avoid upsetting advertisers.

The commercialisation of art prioritises sales over the quality of the work. This environment can stifle artists' willingness to take risks and push boundaries, as they may feel pressured to conform to market demands and the expectations of art institutions.

This pressure may lead artists to imitate past works or conform to current trends out of fear or a lack of knowledge and training. Uncertainty about how their work will be received can also be paralysing for artists. However, some artists have found that making slower changes to their work can help maintain their audience's interest.

The relationship between money, decision-making, and artistic creation is complex. While basic human needs, as outlined in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, can influence behaviour, they do not account for all situations. There are exceptions, such as the activities of Polish theatre during the German occupation, which contradict this hierarchy. Genetics, environment, personal choices, and external stimuli can also affect an individual's behaviour and decision-making.

1.1. What is Risk?

Figure 1. The author jumping off stairs on a skateboard in childhood

Risk is the potential for adverse events to occur, associated with uncertainty regarding the outcomes of actions that may impact essential values such as health, well-being, wealth, material property, or the natural environment. It primarily focuses on negative, undesirable consequences. Although there are many definitions of risk, the international, standardised definition aimed at unifying its understanding across different contexts is *the effect of uncertainty on objectives*.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the word *risk* first appeared in English in 1621 (spelt *risque* from French), while the current spelling *risk* was adopted in 1655. The third edition of the OED defines risk as *exposure to the possibility of loss, injury, or other adverse or unwelcome circumstances; a chance or situation involving such exposure.* Meanwhile, the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines risk as the possibility of an adverse event occurring. In the past, the word *risk* was often used synonymously with the older term *danger*.

Understanding risk, its assessment and management methods, and descriptions and definitions of risk vary depending on the field (business, economics, environment, finance, information technology, health, insurance, safety, or security). I will identify specific risks while creating experimental contemporary art in the following chapters.

Figure 2. The author jumping off a rock into water in childhood

1.2. Experimental Contemporary Art

To discuss the second key issue of my research, it is helpful to divide it into two main elements: contemporary art and experimentation.

Contemporary art refers to creative work from the second half of the 20th century to the present. Artists working during this period operate in a global, culturally diverse, and technologically advanced world. Their works are characterised by a dynamic blend of materials, methods, concepts, and themes, continuing the tradition of questioning boundaries that began in the 20th century. Contemporary art is distinguished by the absence of a unified ideology or dominant style, making it diverse and eclectic.

Sociologist Nathalie Heinich differentiates between modern and contemporary art, treating them as two distinct paradigms that partially overlap historically. According to her, while *modern art* challenges the conventions of representation, *contemporary art* questions the very concept of the artwork itself. Heinich considers Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, created in 1917, the starting point of contemporary art, which gained momentum after World War II.

Experimentation in contemporary art is a creative process in which artists seek new forms of expression, materials, techniques, and ideas, often pushing beyond traditional artistic boundaries and norms. Such experimentation may involve combining different media, interactivity, incorporating technology, or deconstructing conventional notions of art. Experimentation aims to generate new aesthetic and intellectual experiences, provoke reflection, and explore previously unknown artistic realms. It is also a means of discovering and redefining the very nature of art.

1.3. Author's Commentary

The topic of my doctoral research emerged from a long-standing fascination with extreme sports and their connection to contemporary art, which I have been engaged with for over 19 years. At first glance, these two fields may seem to have little in common. However, upon deeper analysis, I have noticed that they share one fundamental element: risk and the pleasure and satisfaction a creator or athlete derives from taking.

From a young age, I have been passionate about sports that require courage and skill, such as skateboarding and snowboarding. This experience taught me that every move carries

some risk, and precisely, this inseparable element of uncertainty and adrenaline is the source of deep satisfaction. Similar emotions accompany me during my artistic work, as experimenting with form, medium, and message often involves the risk of misunderstanding or rejection.

In contemporary art and extreme sports, risk is an act of courage and creativity that enables discovering new possibilities and transforming reality. My passion for discovery and creating something new inspires and motivates me to continue exploring.

The primary goal of my research is to discover and examine the analogies between the risks taken in extreme sports and those in contemporary art. My research is transdisciplinary, based on analysing my artistic and sporting practice and in-depth interviews with artists and athletes. I aim to demonstrate that risk is not an end but a tool that allows for greater control over one's actions and the ability to surpass personal limitations.

Extreme sports and contemporary art are fields that, at first glance, seem distant from each other, but their combination in artistic research is scarce and intriguing. By comparing risk in these two areas, I observe that transcending intellectual and aesthetic boundaries, like athletic training, requires continuous effort and sacrifice.

Changes in my thinking and openness to new aesthetics in my work have often resulted in the loss of some audience members. However, the more challenging and unconventional works I created, the more interesting people I encountered. The absence of fear when taking risks allows one to overcome limitations and open oneself to new possibilities. Though exhausting, this constant experimentation and reassessment of previous achievements bring excellent satisfaction. To make significant changes, one must first learn to change oneself.

Breaking through and stepping out of one's comfort zone is the key to growth in both art and sports. We can achieve true innovation and progress in our creative endeavours only when we dare to take risks.

1.4. Research Purpose, Conceptual Scope, and Research Methods

I want to make something I never saw before and be changed by it.[1]

My research aims to create something entirely new, something I have never encountered in art, which will transform my perception and creative process. The central premise of my transdisciplinary research is to discover and analyse the analogy between risk in extreme sports and experimental contemporary art. I also aim to develop a unique artistic language based on artificial intelligence.

In my work, I pose key research questions: How does risk influence creativity and the pushing of boundaries in art? How does extreme sports impact transcending intellectual and visual barriers in contemporary art? Analysing the attitudes of creators and athletes who consistently strive to expand the boundaries of their fields reveals that risk is not an end in itself but a means to achieve complete control over one's actions and to push the limits of possibility further. Although continually taking risks and stepping outside the comfort zone is demanding and exhausting, it ultimately brings the most profound satisfaction. Experimentation and reevaluation of previous achievements are integral parts of this process.

Transcending intellectual barriers in culture requires continuous effort, education, and systematic training. Understanding the mechanisms that drive top extreme athletes and artists toward the unknown can serve as a model for young creators and provide a tool for evaluating contemporary artistic achievements.

My final artistic project, based on artificial intelligence and inspired by the thinking of artists like Marcel Duchamp and Bruce Nauman, allows for the creation of a multi-layered artistic language that can serve as an antidote to conservatism, political correctness, and populism, which has stifled the development of art in recent years.

In my artistic research, I employed various methods: introspection of individual creative and sporting practice, in-depth interviews with free solo climbers, analyses of the relationship between risk and progress, AI-powered web applications, and research in magazines and literature on contemporary art.

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[1] Philip Guston, *Paintings*, 1969–1980, essay by Robert Storr, *Gagosian Gallery*, 2003, s. 25.

Through these approaches, I aim to deepen my understanding of the relationship between risk and creativity, which may offer new insights into the role of experimentation in contemporary art.

2. The Concept of Risk in Artistic Creation

Risk plays a crucial role in contemporary art, serving as one of the primary sources of innovation and artistic breakthroughs. Artists who dared to step off the beaten path and push the boundaries of traditional forms of expression have often changed the course of art history. In the 20th and 21st centuries, artists unafraid to experiment, challenge authority, and redefine the concept of art have paved new directions and become icons of their time. To explore the idea of risk in artistic creation, I will present three figures who, in my opinion, best represent this idea.

Marcel Duchamp is one of the most significant examples of an artist who took risks in his work. Through a series of changes and experimental techniques introduced in his practice, he proposed a radically redefined approach to art. Duchamp dared to propose numerous innovations that ultimately became the foundation for all later conceptual art. His work is often considered the starting point of contemporary art.

On the other hand, Bruce Nauman explored the boundaries of human perception and artistic identity. His works challenged the viewer, often based on repetitive, simple actions such as *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*. Nauman consciously took the risk of creating art that was difficult to engage with, provoking questions about the very nature of the creative act. His courage lay in defying conventional expectations regarding art, both in terms of form and content.

David Hammons is another artist who made risk a central element of his work. His pieces, often with a solid political and social dimension, challenge aesthetic norms and boldly engage with themes of racism, identity, and power. Hammons did not shy away from controversy —on the contrary, he actively provoked it, creating works that were as aggressive as they were reflective. His bold approach to art makes his work artistic and social commentary, requiring viewers to confront uncomfortable truths.

These artists demonstrate that risk in art is not limited to technical innovations but is primarily about the willingness to challenge established beliefs and provoke discussion. Their work transforms the concept of art and forces reflection on its role in society. Let us look at how these artists used risk as a creative tool and what consequences this had for their careers and the development of contemporary art.

2.1. Marcel Duchamp

Figure 3. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917

I force myself to contradict myself to avoid conforming to my taste.[2]

The work of Marcel Duchamp challenged the traditional concepts of art at the beginning of the 20th century. He radically questioned the conventional definitions of art by introducing conceptual works like *Fountain* (1917), an industrial ready-made object that lacked any traditional artistic process. The story behind this piece has become legendary. Duchamp, seeking to exhibit his work at the Society of Independent Artists in New York, which promised to accept any artistic work upon payment of the entry fee, submitted an inverted urinal. This piece, signed by R. Mutt in 1917 and titled *Fountain*, was intended to question the traditional definitions of art. However, the Society's board, considering it a prank by an anonymous artist, rejected *Fountain*, claiming it was not an actual work of art. Duchamp, who was a member of that board, resigned in protest. By doing so, he risked rejection and misunderstanding by both the artistic establishment and the public. This act has become one of the most frequently cited rebellions

[2] Marcel Duchamp, quoted in: Harriet & Sidney Janis, *Marcel Duchamp: Anti-Artist*, *View Magazine*, March 21, 1945, reprinted in: Robert Motherwell, *Dada Painters and Poets* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1951).

against cultural institutions in art history, and it likely contributed to the structural changes seen in such institutions today.

Through his ready-made, Marcel Duchamp questioned the long-held belief in the sanctity of the creative process, one that, through the mastery of craft (whether painting or sculpture), defines any significant work in the canon of art history. His actions attempted to push the boundaries of what could be considered art. His experiments with authorship were also reflected in his use of pseudonyms and his shifts in identity (such as Rrose Sélavy).

Duchamp believed his radically experimental works might wait for the right audience for decades. He described the relationship between artist, work, and viewer in a statement at the American Federation of Arts conference in Houston in 1957:

In other words the personal art coefficient is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed. To avoid a misunderstanding, we must remember that this art coefficient is a personal expression of art à l'état brut, that is, still in a raw state, which must be refined as pure sugar from molasses, by the spectator; the digit of this coefficient has no bearing whatsoever on his verdict. The creative act takes another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation; through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstatiation has taken place and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the aesthetic scale. All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists. [3]

Duchamp's early departure from painting, which could have brought him commercial success and a large audience, was another act of courage and risk undertaken in favour of personal artistic freedom.

I am interested in ideas, not merely visual products.[4]

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[3] Marcel Duchamp, *The Creative Act*, lecture delivered at the American Federation of Arts Convention, Houston, April 1957, published in *ARTnews* (Summer 1957).

[4] Idem, quoted in *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, 1946.

He treated his life as an endless work of art, choosing less popular and more difficult paths to accept, such as his later fascination with chess, driven by a lack of need for overproduction in art. As a result, his work is characterised by a sharp selectivity of ideas from which individual pieces were born. Each of his works provokes viewers to reflect and change their perception of art.

Art is either plagiarism or revolution.[5]

Usually a painter confesses he has his landmarks. He goes from landmark to landmark. Actually he is a slave to landmarks—even to con-temporary ones.[6]

Repetition and familiarity of motifs make us feel comfortable. Most art viewers—both at the beginning of the 20th century and today—prefer the work of artists who use a particular set of motifs that are uniform and easy to interpret. Marcel Duchamp's works constantly negate this approach to art.

At a time when art was often associated with aesthetics and beauty, Duchamp risked rejection by presenting works that engaged the intellect more than the senses. Through these actions, he risked his reputation and initiated changes that permanently altered the art world, paving the way for conceptual and postmodern art.

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[5] Idem, *The Creative Act*, lecture delivered at the American Federation of Arts Convention, Houston, April 1957. Reprinted in: Robert Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp*, trans. George Heard Hamilton, New York: Grove Press, 1959, p. 77.

[6] *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, arthistoryproject.com, accessed August 31, 2024.

2.2. Bruce Nauman

[...] [...] just there all at once. Like getting hit in the face with a baseball bat. Or better, like getting hit in the back of the neck. You never see it coming; it just knocks you down. I like that idea very much: the kind of intensity that doesn't give you any trace of whether you're going to like it or not.[7]

[...] a deliberate assault on the senses, both aesthetic and otherwise [...][8]

[...] Mr Nauman's goal seems to be to knock you out rather than win you over [...][9]

Figure 4. The author with Bruce Nauman's work *Contrapposto Studies* (2015/2016), Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 2022

[7] Bruce Nauman, *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words: Writings and Interviews,* ed. Janet Kraynak, MIT Press, 2003, s. 320.

[8] Jerry Saltz, [Nauman's work is] a deliberate assault on the senses, aesthetic and otherwise. W: Postmodern Culture, Johns Hopkins University Press, May 2016, s. 198.

[9] Andrew Solomon. *Complex Cowboy: Bruce Nauman*. The New Yorker, 30 March 1998.

Figure 5. The author with Bruce Nauman's work *True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967), Basel, 2021

Figure 6. The author with Bruce Nauman's work *Double Poke in the Eye II*, 1985, Basel, 2020

Picasso allegedly said that *if a great artist spits, it's art*[10]. In this context, Bruce Nauman, a young artist at U.C. Davis in the 1960s, might have considered anything he created in his studio art. However, unlike Picasso, Nauman was not an overly confident artist but a thinker full of doubt. This deep, existential doubt formed the foundation of his work and distinguished him from other artists like Joseph Kosuth, Jenny Holzer, and Barbara Kruger. Throughout his career, Nauman grappled with the philosophical dilemma of art's boundaries. If art is strictly defined by tradition and institutions, it becomes limited and controlled. On the other hand, if anyone who calls themselves an artist can create art, its meaning becomes vague and diluted, much like Wittgenstein's idea of words moving effortlessly on ice—without clear identity or meaning.

After completing his studies, Bruce Nauman frequently pondered fundamental questions: What is art, and why does someone become an artist? Working in his studio with little contact with other artists, Nauman spent much time reflecting on his identity as an artist. His early works emerged from these reflections, exploring questions about the essence of being an artist and the meaning of artistic actions. His early projects primarily aimed to understand how artists spend their time and what defines their work. This initiated a body of work filled with projects that continue to force viewers to reflect deeply and challenge the established rules of the art world.

There is a common belief that the average art viewer expects a piece to have five characteristics to be considered true art. First, it must *resemble something*, i.e., be figurative. Second, *exceptional skill* or *talent* was required to create it. Third, the work should give the impression that it took *significant time and focused effort to produce*. Fourth, it should be made

Figure 7. Bruce Nauman, *Bouncing Two Balls Between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms*, 1967–1968

[10] Pablo Picasso, Conversations with Christian Zervos, 1935.

from materials that, if not valuable, are at least respectable (e.g., bronze, marble, steel, oil paints on linen canvas, or—in the era of mechanical reproduction—good film and photographic paper). Finally, the work's subject matter should, if not be attractive or lofty, at least not repulsive.

Only the most philistine viewers expect every artwork to meet all five criteria. Most regular viewers are willing to accept four—for instance, a piece that interestingly uses recycled materials or a compositionally and technically beautiful photograph of an unpleasant subject like war or crime. Viewers versed in contemporary art may accept three qualities: avant-garde audiences are content with two, and almost no one will settle for just one.

Bruce Nauman's early films are challenging on all five of these fronts.
The work *Bouncing Two Balls* (1967–1968) might have seemed far from what the average viewer considered art. Even experts could perceive it as an ironic reference to Duchamp, dismissing traditional notions of art. Nauman's films often documented simple, repetitive actions, requiring no visible talent or effort, which could frustrate viewers attached to conventional norms. These films might have seemed trivial and devoid of artistic value to many. Yet, their value lay in consciously questioning the definition of art and the challenges they posed to the viewer. Nauman reflected on what defines a work of art and whether it must meet traditional expectations to be considered valuable. With Nauman's early films, one needed faith —not just in the artist's knowledge of contemporary art history but also in the idea that the challenges posed by his work to conventions were worthwhile.

Even more than the most formalist analysis of composition, pacing, and sound would be needed to convince sceptics of their value. The question remains: What, exactly, is valuable in these films?

Evaluating the artistic value of Bruce Nauman's early films is problematic because it requires consideration of their historical significance, innovation, courage, and visual and conceptual subtlety. Nevertheless, any analysis of his work should begin by acknowledging his profound artistic sincerity, visible both before and after the creation of these films. Nauman's early period, which marked his breakthrough and critical contribution to modern and contemporary art, does not diminish the significance of his later, diverse, and fascinating works. In the late 1960s, like Picasso with Cubism or Pollock with abstraction, Nauman developed his unique style—combining poetically existential conceptualism with a bluntly conceptual approach to sculpture.

Nauman took significant risks, directing his work in a direction that completely ignored traditional audience expectations of art. His early films and other works consciously reject

figurative art, require the viewer to redefine artistic talent, challenge conventional notions of creative labour and effort, and use non-traditional materials. Moreover, Nauman does not shy away from disturbing, repulsive themes that force the viewer into deep reflection, often evoking discomfort.

Bruce Nauman's *Carousel (Stainless Steel Version)* (1988) consists of four large steel arms extending from a central pole, forming a rotating cross. Hanging from the arms by their necks are polyurethane casts of animals, including small coyotes, a bobcat (in two sizes), and parts of deer bodies. The animals appear skinned. As *Carousel* rotates, the casts drag across the floor, reminiscent of awkwardly suspended animal bodies in a slaughterhouse, particularly evident with the dismembered deer. Despite its macabre appearance, the slow, circular motion and the soft scraping of the casts impart an eerie calm to the installation.

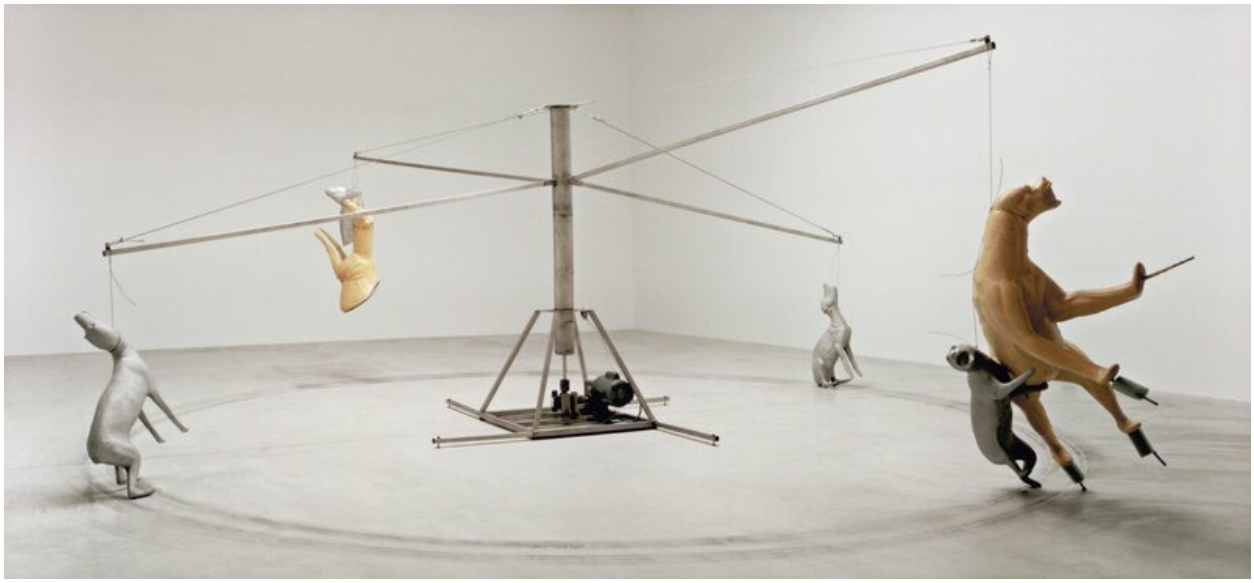

Figure 8. Bruce Nauman, *Carousel (Stainless Steel Version)* (1988)

Carousel is one of many works in which Bruce Nauman presents the viewer with a significant challenge. He risks combining aesthetic beauty with brutal, violent imagery. This combination is unsettling because it forces the viewer to confront the dissonance between traditionally understood beauty and the repulsive images of violence and death.

Nauman chose materials and forms far removed from the art materials traditionally recognised by art history. The polyurethane taxidermic forms are presented as beautiful objects, even though their association with the slaughterhouse and death suggests something entirely different. Nauman took the risk of departing from the expectations of art as a form of aesthetic pleasure, not only for casual viewers who prefer decorative art but also for sophisticated, well-versed art connoisseurs. Nauman consciously created a work that immediately affects the viewer

with an almost physically felt impact, in line with his intention for art to be like *a blow from a baseball bat*—something that surprises and floors you rather than gently persuades. This risk involved rejecting the idea that art should be contemplated comfortably and pleasingly. *Carousel* demands a quick and emotional response from the viewer, which can be challenging for those seeking more obvious experiences in art.

Carousel is visibly experimental because Nauman not only merges incompatible concepts of beauty and violence but also transcends traditional aesthetics, forcing the viewer to confront uncomfortable truths. The artist experiments with form, materials, and subject matter, creating a beautiful and repulsive piece that challenges conventional notions of art and aesthetics. In this work, Nauman explores the boundaries of perception, emotion, and morality, posing questions to both himself and the viewer—questions that have no easy answers.

Nauman is also known for using neon signs, often presenting subversive, ambiguous slogans. Works like *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967) and *Human/Need/Desire* (1983) use this commercial material to challenge traditional art and language function. The risk in these works lies in confronting the viewer with the paradoxes and ambiguities of language, which can lead to feelings of uncertainty and discomfort. Throughout his artistic life, Nauman has been pushing the boundaries of art and perception, often confronting viewers with complex, sometimes uncomfortable, questions about human nature, making him an artist who continuously takes risks in his work.

In the context of this analysis, Nauman's work is profoundly experimental because it challenges and outright rejects norms and conventions that many consider to be the foundations of art. The artist took risks by going against the expectations prevalent in the art world, creating works that are difficult to classify and even harder for a broad audience to accept. This risk and uncompromising approach to art makes Nauman one of the most influential contemporary artists, constantly pushing the boundaries of what we consider art.

Constantly questioning one's work and even the very sense of being an artist is risky behaviour, as it is harder to convince the broader art world and the public to engage in complex intellectual debates than with unbridled self-confidence.

2.3. David Hammons

As an artist, I don't associate with collectors, gallerists, or museums; I consider them all frauds.[11]

David Hammons is the last of the three artists who best represents a risky and experimental approach to contemporary art.

Tracing his career reveals a unique, risk-laden attitude toward the art market and its associated institutions.

Figure 9. The author with David Hammons' work *Flying Carpet* (1990), MoMA, New York, 2023

When Hammons arrived in New York in the mid-1970s, the city was dominated by painting. However, he defied this trend by creating body prints—works in which he imprinted parts of his body using grease and pigments on paper. When a piece from this series titled *The*

[11] David Hammons, *The Walker*. Interview with Peter Schjeldahl, *The New Yorker*, December 23, 2002.

Wine Leading the Wine (1969) sold for a hefty $1,000, Hammons saw it as a perfect reason to abandon his current work and pursue a new direction:

I had to give up body prints because they were selling too well. I was making a lot of money from them. But I ran out of ideas... It took me two years to find something new that interested me, and I followed that.[12]

His goal became imagining abstract art that would be impossible to sell, leading him to create works using brown paper bags, hair, barbecue bones, and grease. *After all, who would want to pay big money for such things? [...].*[13] Many of these works smelled and left grease and oil marks on the walls of museums and galleries. The artist had achieved his aim: almost no one wanted to buy them when they were first exhibited.

Beyond his uncompromising rejection of the commercial aspects of his art—a bold and unprecedented act of courage—his entry into the art world was also an exit of sorts: *Rousing the Rubble* turned out to be Hammons' first and last major institutional retrospective. Since then, he has become known for declining participation in institutional exhibitions (and beyond), favouring galleries and institutions on the margins of the art world. A street corner on the Lower East Side on a winter day, the Illinois State Museum with its natural history dioramas, or a shop in Tribeca selling ethnic items—these places seemed to suit his taste better than any respected metropolitan art institution or prestigious biennial (by 1993, Hammons had declined invitations to the Whitney Biennial four times).

Being on the margins means being part of the whole but outside the mainstream. It's a space you remain in that you hold onto because it feeds the ability to resist. It offers a radical perspective from which one can see and create, imagining alternatives and new worlds.[14]

Marginality, in his case, is a conscious choice. It recalls bell hooks' theory, which views the margins as the ultimate site of resistance. It's a way to prevent the art world and its logic from imposing the game's rules. Many people know what they expect from their art, but do they know

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[12] Idem, *David Hammons: Body Prints*, 1968–1979, ed. LACMA, 2021, p. 13.

[13] Idem, *Interview in Art Papers*, 1986. Quoted in: *Art in Context*. Available online: https://www.artincontext.org/david-hammons/, accessed September 13, 2024.

[14] Idem, Material Matters: Black Radical Aesthetics and the Limits of Visibility, Journal #79, e-flux, 2016.

what they want from the art world? Hammons' attitude toward the market and institutions shows his determination to direct his career on his independent path. One of David Hammons' most recognisable works, showcasing his unconventional approach to art, is the performance *Bliz-and Ball Sale* (1983):

There was no pre-publicity. It wasn't ,David Hammons' doing a performance. It was a guy selling snowballs. ... It wasn't written up at the time, it wasn't publicised, it wasn't in the Village Voice, it wasn't in the art press, nobody sent out a press release. It was for whoever happened to walk by that day. All of his work was about being completely outside the structure and the flow of all of that infromation. People just encountered it. ... Most people just looked and laughed, they just thought it was so bizarre. And so perfectly comical - a man standing on the street selling snowballs. It wasn't even an artist on the street, , cause that would have ruined the effect. It was just a man on the sidewalk selling snowballs.[15]

Instead of displaying his works in a gallery, he chose the margins of the street, a conscious protest against the commercialisation of art. Selling brief snowballs without lasting value was an anti-commercial act, risking misunderstanding and rejection by the art world. In this work, Hammons rejected the idea of art as a commodity while challenging expectations of what can be considered a work of art.

David Hammons' work, shaped by his experiences as an African American artist who has influenced the art landscape in the U.S. since the 1960s, is full of reflections on the struggles faced by Black citizens. His pieces consistently comment on the social exclusion and marginalisation of this group, rooted in systemic inequalities. Over the years, he has created many works that serve as acts of defiance against this inequality, provoking and often evoking extreme reactions from viewers.

In 1988, Hammons created a painting depicting Reverend Jesse Jackson with bleached skin and blonde hair. The work, titled *How Ya Like Me Now?,* was initially displayed in a predominantly Black neighbourhood of Washington, D.C., where it met with immediate and violent reactions, and the billboard-sized portrait was vandalised. Hammons took a significant risk, not only politically but also personally, by creating a piece that provoked such strong emotions and directly confronted viewers with issues of racial and political identity.

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[15] Idem, David Hammons: Rousing the Rubble, MIT Press, 1991, s. 35.

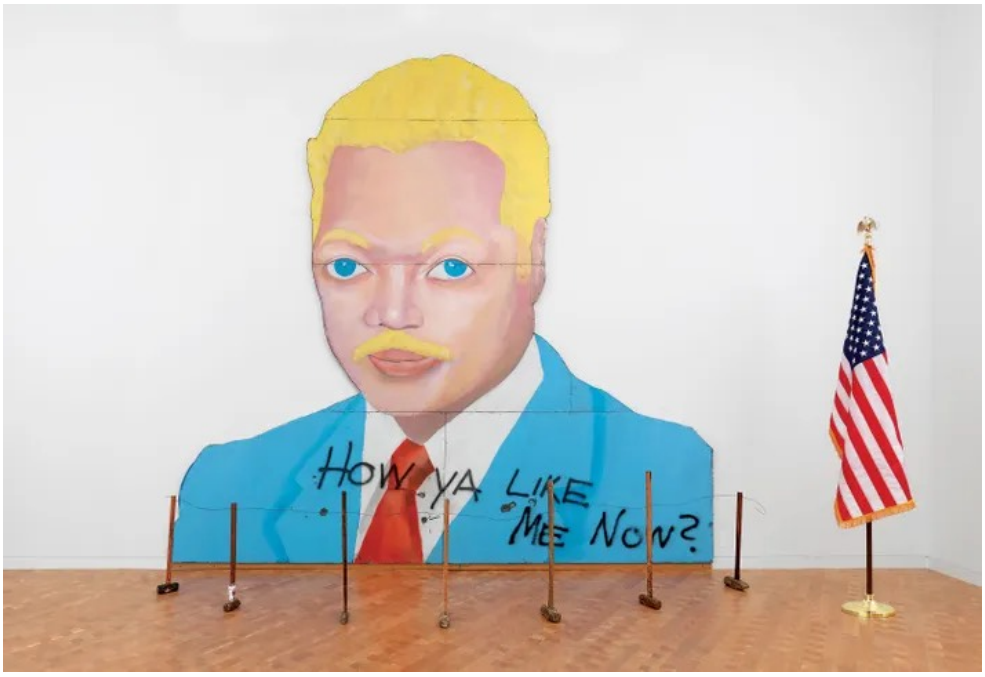

Figure 10. David Hammons, *How Ya Like Me Now* (1989)

David Hammons' installation *Untitled (Night Train)* (1989) consists of empty liquor bottles arranged in the form of train tracks. Hammons created this work as a commentary on the issue of alcoholism in African American communities and their historical marginalisation. The choice of material—empty bottles—and the theme of alcohol and violence in the lives of African Americans represent yet another risk Hammons took, introducing viewers to a confrontation with social problems often ignored by the mainstream art world.

2.4. Summary and Author's Commentary

Figure 11. The author with David Hammons' works *Untitled* (2010) and *Untitled (Night Train)*(1989), MoMA, New York, 2023

From the analysis of the works of the contemporary artists discussed, we can conclude that the risks they take manifest in several vital aspects: formal decisions (particularly about the rule of *five traits that help the average art viewer recognise an object as a work of art*), their relationship with the audience, and their relationship with the art world. A crucial point in considering the level of risk and experimentation in such works is the assumption that the object in question is indeed a work of art. To confirm this assumption, we can assess our confidence in the artist's knowledge of art history and the cultural references embedded in the work.

All three aspects are interconnected in a cause-and-effect chain. If a contemporary artist engages in an experiment that challenges all *five traits that help the average art viewer recognise an object as a work of art*—i.e., the work is non-figurative, its value does not stem directly from *visible talent* or painstaking physical labour, it does not use *unusual* materials, and it does not

reference an exciting subject—it becomes difficult for most audiences to engage with. Hostile reception by the art world could lead to the artist's marginalisation, lack of commercial success, or—in extreme cases—the destruction of the work. Lack of audience interest also directly affects the artist's relationship with the art world, primarily focused on commercial success in the era of late capitalism.

Even though all the artists analysed in this chapter are now considered significant figures in art history, many had to endure prolonged misunderstandings. This was a direct consequence of their risky approach to creating experimental contemporary art and expanding the boundaries of what is considered art. Following the career of Marcel Duchamp, we see his boundless dedication to art: he was repeatedly rejected by the local art community, chose not to start a family (a socially risky decision in the early 20th century), and withdrew from situations of excessive success to explore new paths where his audience could struggle to keep up with his provocative artistic vision. In doing so, he risked being misunderstood and relied financially on friends and family. Similarly, the early work of Bruce Nauman was marked by material precariousness. David Hammons spent much of the early part of his career in poverty, often struggling to make ends meet.

What stands out, however, is that all three artists persisted in their creative experiments, which provoked audiences, perplexed art institutions, and significantly pushed the boundaries of contemporary art today.

3. Taking Risks and Pushing Boundaries in Extreme Sports

Extreme sports have gained immense popularity in recent years, redefining traditional concepts of sport and physical activity. Their growing significance attracts increasing participants, often surpassing conventional sports in popularity. As a global phenomenon, extreme sports have a substantial social and economic impact, prompting researchers to pay them the same level of attention previously given to conventional sports. However, new research approaches are necessary due to the unique challenges associated with pushing human limits and the high risk involved in these activities, considering the complexity of participants' motivations and experiences. As technologies evolve and athletes' skills improve, extreme sports continue to develop, becoming an integral part of global sports culture, intensifying research on their effects on physical, mental, and social health.

3.1. Free Solo Climbing

In June 2017, American climber Alex Honnold accomplished an extraordinary feat, scaling the 900-meter El Capitan wall in Yosemite National Park without using ropes or protective gear. He was the first to complete the climb in a free solo style. The sight of Honnold hundreds of meters above the ground, slowly navigating the rock face, evokes immense emotions.

Honnold, then 33 years old, quickly gained fame in extreme sports. He has never fully revealed his motivation for such risky challenges despite this. However, he admitted that he wasn't seeking an adrenaline rush:

If I feel a rush of adrenaline, something has gone wrong... because every move and stage of free solo climbing should be slow and controlled.[16]

This example perfectly illustrates how extreme sports are often misunderstood as reckless and daring activities. Alex Honnold spent over a year preparing for his free solo ascent of

[16] Alex Honnold, *Alone on the Wall: Alex Honnold and the Ultimate Limits of Adventure.* W.W. Norton & Company, 2015.

El Capitan, repeatedly climbing the route with ropes and meticulously planning each move to minimise the risk to an absolute minimum.

Eric Brymer, an associate professor at the Queensland University of Technology and a psychologist specialising in studying human performance in extreme conditions, notes that those who participate in extreme sports are far from the stereotypical adrenaline junkies.

They are highly trained individuals with deep knowledge of themselves, their discipline, and their environment, who seek enriching and life-changing experiences […][17], he emphasises.

According to Brymer, the need to take on challenges is a natural human instinct, although modern society often suppresses this instinct by creating controlled environments. Instead of viewing the spirit of adventure as something abnormal, Brymer suggests that it is a natural part of human nature that we should embrace.

For extreme athletes, the key is to take risks intelligently and controlled. The feeling of stepping outside their comfort zone signals to pull back, indicating a lack of sufficient skill and ability to act safely. According to Brymer, assessing risk involves deep knowledge of the task, the environment, and one's abilities, and the key to success lies in the ability to balance these three elements.

To better understand the situation faced by athletes who undertake extreme feats, I invited two Wrocław-based climbers with free solo climbing in their sports careers for an interview.

3.2. Interview with Wojciech *Dozent* Wajda

Krystian Truth Czaplicki: Hi. Please tell us a little about yourself.
Wojciech "Dozent" Wajda: I started climbing legally (with a Climber's Card) to venture off the trails in the Tatra Mountains. In 1981, I began regularly going to Sokoliki, hiding in the bushes, and using Kolankowski's guidebook to climb without protection. I managed to buy a rope (a Bielski rope), and before the summer break, I met a guy from Kamienna, and we used that rope for top-rope climbing (Direttissima Ptaka). After the summer, while passing the exam for the

[17] Eric Brymer, *Evoking the ineffable: The phenomenology of extreme sports*. Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice, 2017, vol. 4, no. 1, s. 63.

climbing course, I met my first climbing partner, Architect (Wojciech Wąchała), and together, before martial law, we completed a few climbs (including a winter one), and I also became a member of the Mountain Climbing Club. In the rocks, I met Paweł Jach and Jacek Skrzypczyński. Martial law briefly interrupted these adventures, but in the spring, I led (accompanied by Architect) climbs like Zielone Rynny, Ryska Czernera, Direta Zipserowej (V+), Prawy Komin, and Komin Jakubowskiego. Then there was the climbing course, where, due to a lack of instructors, I formed an independent climbing pair with Architect (showing considerable arrogance). During that time, I led climbs like Gorayskiego, Ścięgosza, Sosnę, Direta Jastrzębiej, and Lotniki. I also met the Skudlarski brothers, Jan Krajewski, Ewa Pakulska, Bodek Stefko, and Marek Płonka. In August, I didn't get into Betlejemka (with Bodek Stefko; it's a long story), but I compiled a list and became a climber. As a result, I stopped hiking tourist routes in the Tatra Mountains.

K.T.C.: What made you start climbing without protection?
W.D.W.: At the time, it was the standard way of moving around. There wasn't a single sport climbing route in Sokoliki. Everything had to be done either on your gear or free solo. I enjoyed that.

K.T.C.: What feelings accompanied you during this type of climbing?
W.D.W.: Freedom and speed. When I was free soloing while working in the Tatras, I missed that feeling. One doesn't feel free if a route that would take 20 minutes to free solo takes two hours and makes you feel tied to a slow training group.

K.T.C.: Did you think about the consequences of falling before every climb?
W.D.W.: I rarely entered the route if I started thinking about it. This is called *the suspension of reflective consciousness.* Unfortunately, once this led me in the wrong direction—rather than traversing slightly to the left to the more accessible section, I started straightening my route—but that only happened once in 37 years of regular free soloing—generally, [every climber should trust their] reflective consciousness. If you can't do that before entering a route, don't go. If doubts arise mid-route, either downclimb or traverse out.

K.T.C.: How did you prepare for free solo climbing? What was your process?
W.D.W.: Spontaneously. I also abandoned many planned free solo climbs.

K.T.C.: Does free solo climbing influence rope climbing? Are you a better climber because of your free solo experience?
W.D.W.: I was a better mountain climber—doing a poorly protected pitch is more accessible. However, perhaps years of free soloing make me hesitant to make risky moves on a sports climbing route. I wouldn't say I like falling.

K.T.C.: Does free solo climbing affect everyday life, like work or family?
W.D.W.: I thought it didn't. I wasn't doing free solo climbs close to my limit, and while climbing, I showed *absolute confidence in success* (that's a quote), and Asia trusted me. But there was one time when it didn't work out. When I regained consciousness, I started apologising to Asia—there was reason for it.

K.T.C.: If you can, please tell us about the accident and how it affected your life.
W.D.W.: Here's a description from my Facebook:
October 7th. Asia and I were about to return to camp, but I felt slightly under-climbed. That's how the path to the accident started, which somewhat resembles a known plane crash. I thought Asia didn't feel like belaying anymore, so I decided to free solo my route (an easy, weak IV). I wasn't feeling great, which was my first mistake. The second mistake was that I started playing around with variations. At the bottom, there was a V-grade boulder, still manageable. I reached 14 meters, and then it was mistake after mistake. I should have traversed left onto the main route. There was a waist-high ledge, a weak hold for the right hand, and a high, slanted step (mossy) for the left foot. I stepped up, but the proper hold was too low, so I backed down. Last chance—wasted. I spotted a higher hold for the right hand, stepped up with my left foot, reached for a round pinch with my left hand (unrecognised earlier), and the hold slipped. Then my foot slipped—and down I went from 12 meters.
Given that over 37 years of climbing, I'd free soloed between 200 and 300 kilometres (closer to 300) of accessible to moderately complex routes (max VI), and I theoretically (and practically) knew how to do it, I turned out to be an absolute idiot that day. Now, I have a year of rehabilitation ahead, most likely a permanent sports brace for my ankle and, perhaps someday, a hip replacement. There's a chance I'll return to climbing and skiing, but it will probably take a lot of work and suffering. I've stopped training in the mountains and on rock. I still climb at a much lower level (the difference is more minor on the climbing wall and limestone).

K.T.C.: Have you free solo climbed since the fall?

W.D.W.: Only once on the rock (during a descent), a few times on the climbing wall (but keep quiet). The loss of freedom in free soloing is why I don't train others in the mountains—and I won't. I'm curious how I'll climb in granite in the spring. If there are any free solo climbs, they will be straightforward ones.

3.3. Interview with Krystian Macieja

Krystian Truth Czaplicki: Could you say a few words about yourself?
Krystian Macieja: My name is Krystian Macieja. I have been climbing for 21 years. I'm a Certified Sport Climbing Instructor and an instructor for the Polish Mountaineering Association. Climbing is my passion, my job, and my everyday life.

K.T.C.: When and how did your climbing adventure begin?
K.M.: My adventure began when my brother took me to the rocks when I was ten. The beginning was tough, as the first attempt at a straightforward route was too much of a psychological challenge for me, and my brother had to pull me down from the rock. Fortunately, things went much better in the following days, and that's when I discovered my talent and love for the sport, which continues to this day. When I was 12, I started competing in climbing competitions. Shortly after, I became the Polish champion in lead and speed climbing. I represented Poland on the international stage, where I had the chance to compete against the best climber in the world, Adam Ondra. Later, I stopped competing due to the pressure and lack of coaching support. I also discovered that you can succeed in climbing without competitive pressure.

K.T.C.: What made you start climbing without protection?
K.M.: For me, climbing plays a crucial psychological and social role—both in my life and general. It's about battling yourself, being in nature, and setting new goals. Looking for new challenges, I tried free solo climbing. In free solo, there's no room for error. Everything must be under 100% control, and mental strength plays a more significant role than anything else. Then there's the adrenaline, which, in a way, I'm addicted to, and I need to dose it into my life from time to time.

K.T.C.: What feelings accompany or have accompanied you during this type of climbing?
K.M.: Let's go back to psychology. In free solo climbing, you may have excellent skills and know all the moves, but if you panic, you fall. It would be best to control your mind constantly and not allow certain things to happen. Breathing control is also crucial here. It's a feeling comparable to taking drugs, but everything happens 100% sober. There's also a form of meditation before starting the climb.

Climbing a route where you risk your health or life (this can happen even with protection) gives life a different meaning. All the problems that once weighed on you suddenly seem trivial. When it comes to the essence of solo climbing, the most significant meaning is the catharsis you feel after completing a route. It brings a sense of internal cleansing. You feel calmer, appreciate life more, and you gain self-confidence in your abilities. You realise you've become a perfectionist in this field.

K.T.C.: Did you think about the consequences of falling before each climb?
K.M.: You have to be aware of the consequences of a failed attempt. I did my solo climbs when there were no other climbers around so that I wouldn't expose anyone to the sight in case of a fall. Solo climbing is something I do just for myself. I'm not looking for an audience or applause. It's a very intimate, personal moment. There was always one person with me who would help or call for help in case of a fall.

K.T.C.: How did you prepare for free solo climbing? What was the process like?
K.M.: Preparing for such a climb involves memorising the route and climbing it possibly hundreds of times with protection. Every move is performed from memory. Knowing the movements gives you more confidence in what you're doing. Muscle memory also plays a biological role. Then comes the mental preparation for the climb. This can take various amounts of time—sometimes days, months, or years, and sometimes it's just a moment, an impulse when you know you're ready to start the climb.

K.T.C.: Does free solo climbing affect climbing with a rope? Has your free solo experience made you a better climber?
K.M.: Free solo impacts rope climbing. The barrier of fear fades, and with a rope, you feel more confident and can push yourself further. This significantly influences traditional climbing, where you place your protection and decide when and where the next anchor point will be.

K.T.C.: Can free solo climbing affect your everyday life, such as work or family?
K.M.: Definitely. After a solo climb, you become more confident, making you a better climber and person. Climbing powerfully impacts who you are in everyday life and how you function socially. Climbing is a challenging sport where physical ability alone isn't enough. Success depends on many factors, mainly psychological. The climbing community consists primarily of

educated people, like doctors, who know what they want from life and set the bar high for themselves. To climb worldwide, you also need a lot of knowledge and skills, such as logistical planning. Every trip has to be well-organized—there's no travel agency for that. Meeting people both on the climbing wall and the rocks has a significant influence on personal development. The climbing community is large and positively impacts a person in many aspects of their life.

When climbing, you forget all of life's problems. It's just you and the route you want to conquer. It's impossible to think about anything else while climbing. It requires total concentration and focus.

The climbing community is made up of people who continuously help you grow, and the so-called brotherhood of the rope strengthens our relationships. A good example is the youth from troubled homes, whom I work with and from which I come. Climbing can change someone's life, for which I'm incredibly grateful. It also has a therapeutic effect, helping people escape challenging environments or addictions.

3.4. Summary

Risk-taking in extreme sports, such as free solo climbing, is often misunderstood as recklessness and irresponsibility. In reality, extreme athletes spend significant time meticulously preparing and minimising risks. They strive for complete control over the situation. Researchers studying the psychological aspects of high-risk sports indicate that the drive to take on challenges is a natural human instinct. Extreme athletes are highly trained individuals who take risks in a conscious and calculated manner, relying on deep self-awareness, mastery of their skills, and a thorough understanding of their environment.

Wojciech "Dozent" Wajda highlights that although free solo climbing was once standard, it gave him freedom and speed. Taking risks in extreme sports, such as free solo climbing, required him to *suspend reflective consciousness*—he didn't dwell on the consequences of a fall, allowing him to make intuitive decisions. While he often backed out of risky climbs, an accident significantly impacted his life in terms of sports and personally. After this event, Wajda scaled back his free solo climbing, recognising that losing confidence in the technique made it too dangerous. His story illustrates that pushing boundaries is critical in extreme sports, but so is the ability to consciously withdraw when the risks become too great.

For Krystian Macieja, solo climbing presents a significant psychological challenge, where mastering the mind and controlling emotions are crucial. Risk is inherent, but Macieja emphasises careful preparation instead of recklessness, which involves repeatedly completing the route with protection and mastering every move perfectly. The risk is taken consciously, and success in such an endeavour leads to inner purification, increased self-confidence, and a better understanding of one's abilities. Solo climbing also influences everyday life, boosting confidence and improving the ability to handle challenges. Macieja stresses that the climbing community and its associated experiences play a significant role in personal development and can have a therapeutic effect. Macieja believes risk-taking in extreme sports is deeply connected to personal growth and inner transformation rather than the desire to impress others or seek adrenaline.

4. Pushing Boundaries in Contemporary Art: An Analysis of Past Works

In light of the information I previously provided about risk in contemporary art, I aim to analyse my artistic work to date. I will then integrate my experiences with amateur extreme sports into my creative practice.

My nineteen years of work in contemporary art can be divided into four main stages that have shaped my development as an artist. The first is public art, followed by the transition to gallery spaces with works made from steel structures and everyday objects, then pieces based on mannequins covered in hydrographics. The final stage is my current work with artificial intelligence, to which I will dedicate the next chapter of this dissertation.

In each stage, I will focus on the relationship between the risks I have taken and my formal decisions, interactions with the audience, and the art world. When considering the level of risk and experimentation, I will evaluate how many of the *five formal traits make work more accessible for the average viewer* I have challenged. I will consider the symbolic nature of the work, whether its value for the audience stems from visible talent and the labour-intensive physical effort required to create it, whether the materials used fall within the canon of art history, and whether the work addresses an appealing subject. I begin with the assumption that each of the works discussed is a piece of art, which I will justify through an analysis of my art history and the cultural references underpinning my work. My goal is to show how these elements have shaped my artistic path and influenced the evolution of my work in the context of contemporary art, as well as how they led to the creation of the artwork that forms the basis of my doctoral thesis.

4.1. Public Art

The beginnings of my artistic practice (2005–2013) were rooted in public art. The essential characteristic of this type of work is its directness and accessibility to a broad audience.

Analysing the works I created over these eight years using those mentioned above *five formal traits that make work more accessible for the average viewer* to understand, I have drawn the following conclusions:

The objects balance on the edge of figurativeness, often referencing objects already in public spaces, sometimes drawing on amateur garden designs or even works from art history

(e.g., land art). They also possess a certain quirky sense of humour. To sum up, while figurativeness is present, it cannot be fully confirmed in the strictest sense of the term.

Large-format works in urban spaces evoke the idea of significant physical effort. At the same time, smaller pieces generally require physical agility on my part to install them in difficult-to-reach locations. Objects directly exposed to random passersby were often damaged, and there were even occasions when viewers called the authorities because they were unsure what they were encountering.

Most public art pieces were characterised by the temporary nature of the materials used in their creation (such as polystyrene and styrene). Leaving these works unattended in urban spaces often led to their degradation. However, in some cases, I used materials like marble or bronze, which remained solid and durable despite being stripped of their noble context. These pieces gave the impression of being robust and long-lasting, mimicking the characteristics of materials familiar from art history and thereby imitating one of the *five formal traits that make a work more accessible for the average viewer* to understand.

Experienced viewers generally reacted positively to the works. Most focused primarily on the relationship between the works, their surroundings, and the visual, conceptual play they presented.

Figure 12. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, public space intervention, Wrocław, Poland, 2005–2006

Figure 13. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, public space intervention, Wrocław, Poland, 2005–2006

Figure 14. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, public space intervention, Puławy, Poland, 2007–2008

Figure 15. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, public space intervention, Wrocław, Poland, 2008

Figure 16. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, public space intervention, Wrocław, Poland, 2008

Figure 17. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, public space intervention, Klenová, Czech Republic, 2009

Figure 18. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, public space intervention, Wrocław, Poland, 2011

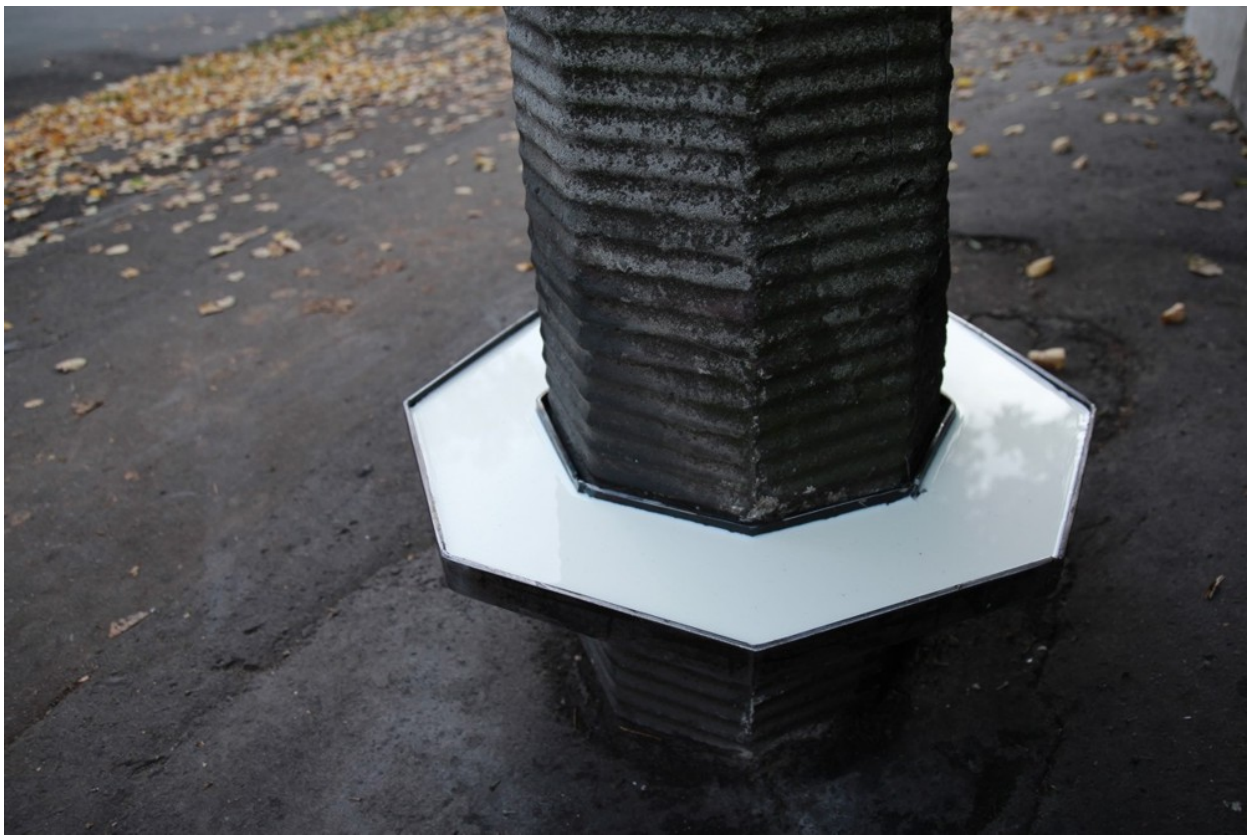

Figure 19. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, public space intervention, Wrocław, Poland, 2012

Figure 20. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, public space intervention, Warsaw, Poland, 2012

4.2. Transition to the Gallery Space

In 2013, with the exhibition *Displaced House* at the Mieszkanie Geppertów Gallery, I began creating objects in gallery spaces composed of steel structures combined with elements familiar from everyday life.

The gallery space transforms the audience's nature; it is no longer a random passerby. The *white cube* is laden with the entire history of art, which adds additional layers of meaning to any work placed within it, making its reception more complex and challenging.

Deconstructing the objects I created after 2013, the viewer encounters steel structures and everyday items, which, stripped of their usual context, begin to function as something entirely different. References to other forms may be apparent, but they are hidden under additional layers of meaning.

A significant change in this phase of my work is the titles of the pieces. Each title functions as a fixed element, often a quote, without serving a descriptive purpose, which is what viewers are generally accustomed to. The titles become one of the layers of meaning in each work, making their interpretation more complex.

The use of everyday objects means that the works I created between 2013 and 2016 may distance the viewer from the impression of *concentrated labour* and *visible talent* from the artist. However, more experienced viewers will recognise the accumulating references to art history resulting from intensive intellectual work. In some gallery works, the chosen medium presents significant conservation challenges, thereby distancing the piece from commercial aspects, which are often crucial to the average viewer. I began incorporating materials such as liquids, creams, condoms, and plastic packaging, which quickly lost their properties.

The increased number of layers of meaning in each work made them more intriguing for those who associate art with intellectual engagement.

Figure 21. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, *Blurring the Line Between Norm and Disease*, 2014, chrome steel, glasses, Absolut, 70 × 33.5 × 31.5 cm

Figure 22. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, *Love*, 2016, chrome steel, Durex Invisible, 61.5 × 14 × 103 cm

Figure 23. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, *Psychotic Morning*, 2014, chrome steel, Listerine Cool Mint glasses, Absolut, 22 × 8 × 8 cm

Figure 24. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, *Stress*, 2015, powder-coated steel, heat-activated straightening spray, 60 × 7.5 × 7.5 cm

4.1. Works Using Mannequins

In 2016, I created the work *Because Blood Has Bubbles Like Champagne It Fizzes*, in which I used an adult male mannequin for the first time. In 2018 and 2020, I produced two solo exhibitions composed entirely of works based on mannequins.

The scale of the objects dominated the space in each exhibition. I employed new production methods in these works, such as hydrographics and laser-cut steel. Though raw, the pieces were characterised by careful execution and attention to detail. The works presented at exhibitions at the Piktogram Gallery (Warsaw), the Sunday Art Fair (UK), and DAMA (Italy) were mainly met with approval from international art professionals:

The sculptures of Krystian Truth Czaplicki are as weird as they are well made. In the huge space of Piktogram (formerly used by the School and Pedagogical Publishing House), there are three figures with beards looking down onto the viewers. They are not necessarily men (or not just men), with their smooth plastic bodies and arms consisting of colorful product labels. The artist did not want to give any explanation about the works, or speak about his motifs. He just provided a typed sheet at the entrance of the show, with some dialogue from the film The Matrix Revolutions. A sampling of some of the lines: "Do you believe you're fighting for something? For more than your survival? Can you tell me what it is? Do you even know? Is it freedom or truth? Perhaps peace? Could it be for love?"
These questions set the tone and give some hints as to what the sculptures could mean. To me they are fascinating even before the question comes up if I like them or not. The material authority in the work is convincing, which supports their ambivalence in terms of gender and mental state.

Often in galleries you find a leaflet that explains to the viewer what the artist meant and how the works should be understood. As often as not, these texts are far-fetched, trying to prove too hard the significance of the works on view in the context of current times. For this reason I appreciated Czaplicki's refusal to accommodate us with a direct explanation. Instead he offered a mental detour. He recalled the story about the moment that the American painter Philip Guston showed figurative works for the first time, in 1971, breaking away from abstraction. Quite a number of people were shocked and judgmental about that, as they believed he was breaking away from the "purity of means", which was considered holy in high modernist times. Yet fellow

painter Willem de Kooning came up to embrace him and congratulated him. He said: "You know, Philip, what your real subject is? It's freedom!"

The audience may feel discomfort in front of the mannequin-based works because their unnatural expressions or rigid poses disrupt empathy and emotional connection, intensifying unease while prompting reflection on the boundary between the human and the artificial. For viewers with little knowledge of art history, the negative emotions evoked by the mannequins are so strong that the remaining aspects—such as the titles or layered motifs forming a puzzle—automatically become antagonistic.

Even viewers well-versed in contemporary art often need help to interpret these works. Their nature evokes issues of identity, which are currently presented in the mainstream in an overtly clear way, creating a form of populism. Works where the gender of the depicted figure may not be immediately apparent pose a risk that many are unwilling to engage with.

In 2024, a series of mannequin-based works created for the *Amateur Threesome* exhibition at the Piktogram Gallery in Warsaw (2020) faced backlash. Photos of the works were displayed in the windows of Szewska Gallery in downtown Wrocław. The lack of understanding was amplified by unfounded accusations directed at me and the Art Transparent Foundation (the gallery's patron), escalating into defamation and criminal threats. These situations are well-known in art history. Contemporary art has a unique ability to evoke fear, even terror, among audiences who can only accept works of art that meet all *five formal traits that make a work more accessible for the average viewer*—traits typical of the most philistine of viewers.

Figure 25. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, *Tornados Are Typically Very Quiet Until They Come Close*, 2018, lacquered steel, mannequin, hydrographics, climbing harness, carabiner, goggles, 200 × 210 × 117 cm

Figure 26. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, *Seemed to Change His Style with Each Wife*, 2018, lacquered steel, mannequin, hydrographics, goggles, rings, 240 × 110 × 45 cm

Figure 27. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, Michal Wolinski, 2022, steel and mannequin covered in hydrographics, 287 × 90 × 36 cm

Figure 28. Krystian *Truth* Czaplicki, *Hammering Nails Did a L👳t for Faith*, 2020, lacquered steel, mannequins, beard, transport belt, 285 × 110 × 75 cm

5. Analysis of the Work @plantbasedyoghurt as a Form of Pushing Boundaries in Contemporary Art

In early 2023, I began creating the project @plantbasedyoghurt on Instagram. This project uses an AI-generated image application directly related to my doctoral research.

Using AI applications to create images for the @plantbasedyoghurt project deepens the viewer's confusion. Some posts are not made by me but by other users, resembling a kind of recycling or ready-made. The most exciting images are those with errors, where the application generates something different than the creator intended. Often, these errors become the basis for developing further photos.

The initial impression of the @plantbasedyoghurt project could be more ambivalent. Some elements evoke human-made charcoal drawings or oil paintings, resembling a carefully curated account. At the same time, other aspects—such as references to pornography—may remind viewers of a bot or spam.

A vital characteristic of this project is its endlessness. As the artist creating it, I feel an unparalleled freedom in the process.

The popularity of AI programs like Dall-e has led most viewers to regard AI-generated images as quick and requiring little effort or knowledge. AI-generated photos tend to have a recognisable style. Therefore, one of the goals of the @plantbasedyoghurt project was to explore unexpected aesthetics for AI. A trained observer will notice many cultural references and allusions to art history. Some elements address contemporary global issues, making the process of creating them in an AI-based program, with a high degree of randomness, quite labour-intensive.

Like public art interventions, this work is widely accessible to all audiences. It does not require institutions, galleries, curators, or a specific exhibition to reach its viewers. It is also problematic from a collector's perspective because the medium escapes traditional forms of archiving. Its variability and interactivity make it difficult to capture within static frames, challenging conventional models of art and value.

In @plantbasedyoghurt's work, individual posts create a network of narratives and meanings that interact. Each post exists as a separate entity and as part of a broader structure that grows and evolves with each new element. In this way, the individual entries are not static but dynamically influence each other, much like elements of contemporary art, which are shaped through reception and interpretation.

The individual posts in @plantbasedyoghurt can engage in various dialogues: they can complement each other, create contrasts, or remain in a state of apparent tension. This constant intertwining of content and form resembles an endless cycle of interpretation, which never allows the viewer to fully grasp the whole — simultaneously making the work elusive yet alive.

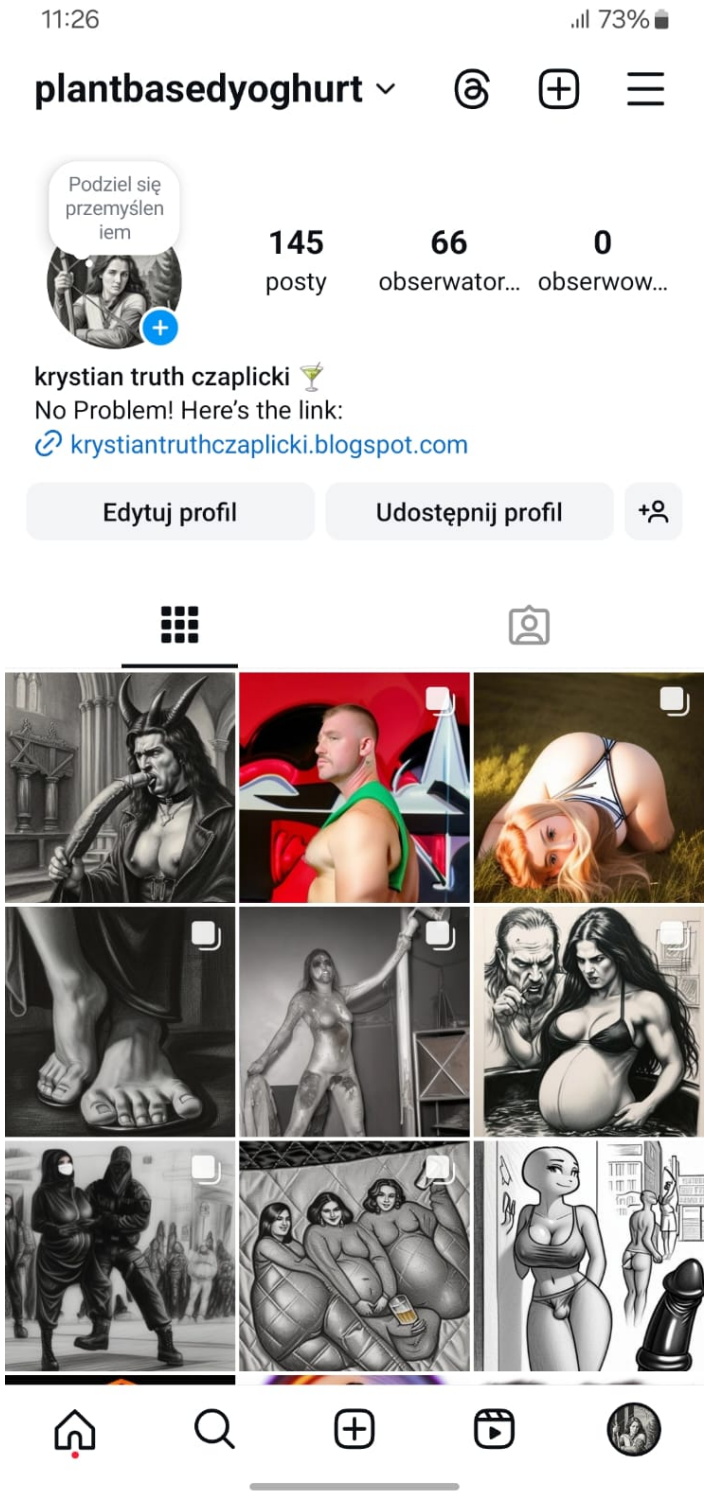

Figure 29. http://instagram.com/plantbasedyoghurt

5.1. Summary

Suppose an artist possesses extensive knowledge of art history and cultural references. In that case, the risk taken in creating a work can be based on departing from the *five formal traits that make a work more accessible for the average viewer*. Creating more demanding works and adhering to one's vision despite opposition from the art world, as seen in the cases of Duchamp, Nauman, and Hammons, means that the project @plantbasedyoghurt fits perfectly within these parameters. Basing the work on artificial intelligence introduces a kind of inception that challenges its symbolic nature. The creation process of *@plantbasedyoghurt* is so innovative that it is difficult to definitively assess whether it required intensive effort or how its elements came into being. Due to its permanently online nature, the work distances itself from the concept of noble material.

By analysing all stages of my artistic journey, I demonstrated how I gradually moved away from pleasant topics for the viewer. While this was not my initial goal, this process naturally emerged as a side effect of my need to explore new ways of thinking within contemporary art, engaging more with intellectual challenges than emotional ones. I believe that only what presents us with intellectual challenges enriches us, which is how contemporary art should be.

In the work @plantbasedyoghurt, I broke away from traditional connections with the art world, transforming it into an intervention in the public space of the internet. It is not a project but a multidimensional and multilayered work based on knowledge and intuition.

6. How Amateur Extreme Sports Influence Risk-Taking in Artistic Creativity: A Comparison of the Concept of Risk in Both Fields

I engaged in extreme sports before embarking on my artistic path, significantly shaping my teenage character. This early experience led me to associate taking on new life challenges not with fear but with a way of pushing my boundaries and stepping outside my comfort zone.

Participating in extreme sports, I experience a unique sense of community that paradoxically coexists with deep solitude. Being part of a larger community of athletes who are also exploring the limits of their abilities gives me a sense of belonging, something essential in the art world. Yet, the actual challenges in art and sports are faced alone. These are the moments when we must rely solely on ourselves, our intuition, and our willingness to take risks. Just as standing on the edge of a cliff requires complete focus, the creative process is also a solitary act that demands courage to confront the unknown and unpredictable.

Intuition is crucial in my approach to extreme sports and my artistic practice. Intuition becomes my most important guide in borderline situations, where every move can be decisive. Over time, I realised that this skill, honed in extreme conditions, also permeates my artistic practice. Intuitive decision-making, often beyond the limits of rational thinking, has become an integral part of my creative process. In this way, sports have taught me that trusting intuition can lead to discovering new, unexpected paths in art, even if it means taking risks with unpredictable outcomes.

Risk is a primal need that drives us to explore new territories in both art and life. In a world dominated by commerce, where the pressure to conform to market expectations is immense, taking risks becomes both an act of rebellion and a necessity. My experiences in extreme sports have taught me that I can grow as an artist by stepping outside my comfort zone. Rejecting commercial standards in favour of authentic expression often leads to alienation, a feeling frequently shared by those who choose this path. However, it is precisely in this alienation that I find the strength to create works that genuinely reflect my inner struggles and my need for authenticity. 😎

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Figure 30. The author during deep water solo climbing, San Vito lo Capo, Italy, 2024

Figure 31. The author jumping off a rock on a snowboard, Alleghe, Italy, 2024

7. List of Figures