



Feeling the Risk We're In

An Investigation

20.02.25

This document sets out our approach on this Investigation into Risk. It covers:

- **Purpose:** people acting on the risks we're already in;
- **Urgency:** more delay leads to more, possibly irreversible, damage;
- **Destination:** people equipped and acting on the risk we're in;
- **Success Path:** parallel strands trying out different ways to equip people for action;
- **Outputs:** initial ideas for outcomes, while staying open to the unpredictable.

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Purpose: people acting on the risks we're already in

How do we best communicate the risk we are in, as a human species, as our earth systems trajectories lead us towards chaotic termination? We have been figuring out how to answer this question since reading Spratt and Dunlop's paper '*What Lies Beneath: The Scientific Understatement of Climate Risks*' (some of us since 2018, the rest of us a bit later).

Extinction Rebellion was an instance of this effort to communicate, a partially successful one. But we don't yet have a situation where enough of us know or feel the real risk we're in. If we did, our hunch for this Investigation goes, we would be more ready to transform our social, political and economic cultures – whatever it took.

We're putting our energies into this work not to create panic but to better engage with reality ourselves and to see how that could extend to others. Grounded in our ambition to replace the values of consumption and production with care and freedom, we ask:

- What kinds of systems of care, structures of freedom, and methods of being with each other are needed for people and populations to feel capable of acting on the scale of the risk we're already in?
- How can people be equipped with what they need to make a difference, in the face of all that stands in the way of making a difference?

Urgency: delay leads to more, possibly irreversible, damage

We've already passed tipping points that are breaking the valuable things in our lives. Yet the social understanding of this, in Western cultures at least, is narrowly and weakly understood. Even when the rhetoric ('Keep 1.5 Alive!') or polls (86% believe climate change will harm future generations) imply people do understand, actions are not commensurate with the threats. There is a Great Stuckness, not an information deficit. Something else is causing this stuckness, further glued-up by incentives forced on us by incumbents of the status quo, who only want to hoard freedom, wealth and power.

This Investigation is about cutting through to the heart of the stuckness. A crack is opening in the understanding of the risk we're in that is being shared by key messengers from (way) outside the climate movement. An example is work by the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries who are (finally) pushing different and interesting kinds of narrative to help communicate how uninsurable the world has become (a message we first heard 10 years ago from Christiana Figueres). Climate risks are now becoming more widely spoken about in professional domains, from insurance to real estate, and not least in the military.

Even so, the move to foregrounding story, not science, has a sense of desperation about it. Perhaps science is reaching the end of its useful road for how humans make sense of how to live, and has, as some admit, become part of the problem. We know our future will not be like the past. So, decisions that use modelling from historic data are dangerously complacent. We stand at a unique moment in our history. What does scenario planning, or any approach to being successful in the future, look like in this context? Especially where we seem to be ignoring the fact we are in a dynamic of increasingly making the existing risks even worse.

Risk is a term used in many different domains – finance, security, science (though subtly different in each). Research from the UCL Climate Action Unit has also shown how these domains understand "risk" very differently. As such, there is unrealised potential in



working with a risk lens that can have traction in many domains. We believe our inquiry can be a force multiplier, investigating the kinds of messages that can work and the range of messengers who can deliver them, to bring about waves of activity that transform those social, economic and political cultures that desperately need to work differently.

Talking about the climate crisis in terms of risk finally has some traction. But the wider environmental movement might be so tired from many years of doing this work, that we miss the opportunity to be properly heard. We're at that point now. We're not doomed to be King Midas or Cassandra, so let's keep going!

Destination: people equipped and acting on the risk we're in

There is a wider understanding of the risk being posed by the collapse of our earth energy systems in people's everyday lives, as it reaches us through its impacts of flooding, fires, extreme heat, food shortages, drought, and an increasingly unaffordable cost of living. These things are understood at the heart of policy and government, too, even if they do not know what to do nor how to admit their deep uncertainty. There is, then, much potential to achieve transformational change with the right messages.

Because the problem is not about an information deficit but a great stuckness, we believe creative responses have a better chance of intervening well. The outcomes we aim for are not a technical appreciation of risk. Instead, our guiding star is **for people to experience the emotional realisation of the true level of risk we're in, while feeling equipped to act**. For the outputs from this Investigation to have been worth it, they must:

- Situate us individually and collectively in the cosmic order of our lives, where we can taste the risks we're in and understand what it is we ought to do;
- Get beyond the stuckness by going to the fringes and listen to the weirdos and generalists, those who move across disciplines, those who see the big picture, who trust (or are!) shamans and medicine women;
- Figure out how to caringly put the general public into long emergency mode, going against our innate psychological makeup that stops us thinking too far ahead;
- Stop those in power being so hubristic, provide them with the freedom to honour and speak to the uncertainty they must also face in what to do about the risk we're all in;
- Help scientists and researchers speculate without getting torn to pieces;
- Find commitment mechanisms to stop those who wield good power getting derailed by the impacts of climate collapse from the causes of collapse ('Stay on target!').

In the year cycle we're working through, this Investigation must help us help others feel and respond to the scale of the risk we're in, our outcomes preparing them to make better political decisions such as assembling together or voting; and to do so out of love, care and the respect for freedom of others, rather than acting out of fear and insecurity.

Success Path: parallel strands trying out different ways to equip people for action

If we stand in the future with our vision achieved, we'll be living in a Britain where the 2029 UK election saw a paradigm shift in democracy. Where every neighbourhood in the country taking back power from a broken status quo elite, implementing transformations in society and culture from the bottom up. Where the elected politicians go about writing a new constitution based on participation in assemblies, dealing with everything that matters to us, because we understand the risk those things are at.

To make our contribution to this larger vision, this Investigation will take the following steps:

- Manage this project's risks through:
 - Pre-mortem (what could go wrong) so what could we do to minimise downsides;
 - Pre-parade (what could go right) so what can we do to make these happen;
- Develop our own rapid, creative methodology: part democracy art school, part demonstration, part centrist dad debate, part creative magic;
- Set up an advisory panel of experts in various fields and domains of risk;
- Identify parallel strands of creative work that aim to generate the systems of care, structures of freedom, and methods of being with each other that are needed for people and populations to feel capable of acting on the scale of the risk we're already in;
- Invite the right participants in the right ways;
- Run interventions with artists, organisers, risk practitioners, policymakers, scientists and a few feral wildcards through meetings, workshops, relationship building, reporting, synthesising, and creating outputs (which includes a brief to amplify findings);
- Figure out quick and slow ways of putting these works into the world for feedback;
- Breathing, waiting, composting, synthesising;
- Disseminating them in ways that are irresistible and unexpected.

We've identified the following parallel strands to follow over a 12 month period.

- **SPECULATIVE INSURANCE:** what everything will be like without an insurance industry;
- **SPECULATIVE STORIES:** we've thousands of years of stories about the emotional realisation (or not) of the risks we face (Cassandra, Boy Who Cried Wolf, King Midas); how do we learn from this deeply ingrained mythopoetic knowledge, and use it to communicate today?
- **WORK AT THE FRINGES:** In 2017 Spratt and Dunlop were already telling us to look beyond the mainstream political and scientific experts who were underestimating climate risks, if we weren't to suffer a "failure of the imagination" in communicating the real levels of risk. We still need to do this work. Who should we be listening to, and learning from?
- **COMMITMENT DEVICES:** What are the mechanisms that will help people from becoming derailed by the impacts of climate collapse from being able to focus on the causes ('Derailment risk')?
- **HIGH RISK CHOICES IN EXTREME RISK:** We often only commission dangerous research because we know we are in the kind of world that needs to hypothesise "what will happen if..." If high risk breeds high risk, what are we missing in how we're accelerating risk?
- **HOW MUCH RISK PEOPLE TAKE WITH OTHER PEOPLE'S LIVES:** Your Parent-Teacher Association would not wrap a playground in flammable cladding and fill it with dodgy electrics and send your kids to play there. But that's what corporate people do – just read the report on the Grenfell Tower fire. The sense of 'don't trust an expert without skin in the game of the downsides of the impact of their decisions,' (Nassim Taleb) guides our thinking.

Outputs: ideas for outcomes, while staying open to the unexpected

We are purposefully not locking down what the outputs might be, to let things emerge through the process. But we do have a hypothesis that the kinds of outputs that will take shape will be working with:

- **Metaphors** – what are the metaphors (bridges, planes, swans, meteors, world destruction) that are going to communicate the risk we're in, in the right way;
- **Infrastructure** – what are the structures to share and amplify the metaphors that we already have and what are the ones we need to build? These could be media platforms, leadership programmes, verbatim theatre, intergenerational fabric workshops, etc.
- **Creative concepts** – proposals for work that broadcasts and amplifies ways for people to have that emotional realisation around the risk we're in in ways that shift the cultural conversation; an example could be a concept for a TV comedy-drama.