

# Tanya Leighton

Press Release

Dan Rees  
'Aleatory Compensatory'

4 March – 15 April 2023  
Preview: Friday 3 March, 6–8pm

Feels Good Man

"We need art now more than ever" is a phrase that was repeated in various forms during the great unknown of a global pandemic. People, both professionals and pub philosophers, found themselves clutching at straws in an attempt to navigate meaning in this troubled time. During this period, art was being asked to assume the role of an instrument of social catharsis rather than a form of social critique. Much like on a social media timeline or under an authoritarian regime, the user was asked to harness their feelings. These new works of Rees's are directly inspired against the implicit desire within the phrase "we need art now more than ever" to condemn art to a conciliatory function.

Writing in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno proclaimed that "All efforts to restore art by giving it a social function—of which art is itself uncertain and by which it expresses its own uncertainty—are doomed."<sup>1</sup> Any attempt to do so, would, if I may take certain liberties on behalf of Teddy, be a mere LARPing of sociality.<sup>2</sup> We have witnessed the current alchemical turn of an artwork's expectation to become a moral projection or Delphic Oracle much like a tabloid newspaper, and it is exactly this which Rees's work runs counter to. The artist instead continues the line of Adornian questioning that one cannot necessarily articulate or claim a social function of art, instead one must go *through* the individual work's social, historical, and conceptual embodiment, in order to reconstruct its claims as art.

For Adorno, the artwork has a greater claim to be a spontaneous free subject than the viewer who is embroiled in capitalist relations. Counter to the Adornian desire to disintegrate the liberal fantasy of subjectivity, is the dominant perspective in our contemporary sphere which posits that individual subjectivity is reinforced through the intensity of 'encountering' the artwork. Interestingly, or perhaps very 2023 "adjacent", the mobilisation of emotions are exploited by today's market traders of diet pills and convenient conspiratorial narratives that box-off great unknowns to the realm of *feels*. Work LARPing formal claims to feeling can nestle alongside airport pop psychology texts and self-help books about confirmation bias, apophenia, unexpected black swans, and the hierarchy of lobsters.

In previous projects, Rees has purposely employed the decorative appeal of abstract painting in combination with specific class signifiers to play with differing forms of social and artistic hierarchies. POP (Pissed Off Painter) artists may complain that Rees is mocking painting and using it as a form to bookend or crash-test dummy his more conceptual-looking works. Is one

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supposed to stand in front of these marble works like Houellebecq's protagonist in *Submission*, gazing at *The Madonna of Lourdes*, wanting to believe, LARPing his hero Huysmans but in lieu of a sublime experience, feels nothing? NO! Art should not be reduced to such corporatised rhetoric which itself LARPs the logic inherent of Brexit era "Keep Calm & Carry on".

Rees's previous soft subversions and appropriations have sometimes been interpreted as what could be labelled a "*neolitera*" understanding of the role of art in society. More productive would be a dialectical reading that allowed for the various tensions that develop to be considered an informative part of the work's discourse. These new marble works, with their hobbyist art and children's art connection have an uncertain claim to painting, (the serious medium). In the same way, painting itself has an uncertain claim to art in general, mainly because we should have moved on from its privileged status. Marbling is to painting, what painting is (often) to art, a reminder of the need for the visually harmonious to temporarily settle the discomfort of permanent crises.

Therefore, the works are not a commentary of a horrific epoch we have recently witnessed (though admittedly have lived through). The attempt at solving life's problems through art becomes analogous to solving one's problems with self-help manuals. The capitalisation of misery via the desire to make meaning 'meaningful' again results in the gamification of the self and life. These works ask the viewer, what are their expectations of experience? What preconceptions are being projected onto these canvases? Are they here to solve your problems? Are they works that hypostatise uncertainty? The question is though; as with other crumbling edifices<sup>3</sup>, will you clap at them?

– Steven Warwick

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (1970), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Live Action Role Play, or the gamification of the public sphere and discourse. It can be thought of as a contemporary update of the analogue proposed by Goffman in his book *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*.

<sup>3</sup> Performatively clapping for NHS nurses during the pandemic, while their salaries remain at austerity-era levels.

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Dan Rees (born in 1982 in Swansea, United Kingdom) lives and works in Berlin. Rees studied at the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste – Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main until 2009 and graduated from Camberwell College of Arts, London in 2004.

Recent exhibitions include 'The Beauty of Early Life' at ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe and 'OMNIBUS' at Kinderhook & Caracas, Berlin both in 2022; 'World Art Trends 1982' at Nuno Centeno, Porto in 2021; 'Attachment' at T293, Rome in 2018, and 'Road Back To Relevance', Nomos Foundation, Rome in 2016.

His work is in the major public collections including Tang Museum, Skidmore College, New York; National Museum, Wales, and the Henry Art Gallery Collection, Seattle.

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The gallery is open by appointment, Tuesday – Saturday, 11–6pm.