

Failure as Art and Art History as Failure

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‘Art must have the right to be bad!’ Such a proclamation, used by Hans-Peter Feldmann in the composition of a small montage, could be read on the walls of the exhibition that Museo Reina Sofia dedicated to this contemporary artist in 2010–2011. In both a ludic and ironic way, Feldmann’s provocation overtly highlighted, from inside the museum, how unstable the notion of art can be, and how artistic value is often an ambiguous and disputable category.

This statement – voiced by someone who deliberately uses cheap objects and simplistic techniques in his creative strategy – was certainly a proud one. With these words, Feldmann was not only challenging the institutional authority that usually certifies the ‘quality’ of works of art, but he was also appropriating the museum legitimising function, by using an artistic gesture that allows him to transform simple and trivial elements of everyday life into artworks. If art has, then, the right to be bad, this exclamation further suggests that, if it is an *artist* who states the existence of such a right, then so much the better.

Using the same logic, it is important to underline how a work of art, which genuinely wants to be bad, often ends up being positively considered. In this sense, *bad* art is not the same as *failed* art. On the contrary, bad art would only fail if it wished to be good – since failing somehow implies the non-accomplishment of a goal. So, bad art that does not aspire to be good, claiming only its simple right to mediocrity, fully achieves its purpose, and thus represents a flagrant case of success.

There is tension between (non)fulfilment and expectation, and so failure becomes a far more complex notion, carrying connotations, symbolic charges and cultural roles, which are often diverse and contradictory. Moreover, failure can be very differently assessed, not only with regard to patterns of intention and anticipation, but also in terms of scale, social spheres or disciplinary practices. As Scott A Sandage demonstrated in his book *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*,¹ the lexicon of failure was initially much related to the world of statistics, credit and finance. In a related interview, Sandage highlights how the word failure has been used differently over time:

... from 1820 through the Civil War, or thereabouts, *failure* was used to describe people who met economic catastrophe, but the construction was ‘I *made* a failure’, rather than ‘I *am* a failure’. It was an event that could be discrete, without touching upon one’s moral and existential being.²

Failure has thus been subjected to a number of historical shifts. It was only more recently that the term started to be used at a more personal level, and in association with additional forms of underachievement.

This article proposes to examine failure in yet another way: by looking at different forms of failing within the specific context of art. Even though art practices are well acquainted with the notion of failure (from the idea of the rejected artist, to the menace of creative crisis, or to the anxiety to reach impossible perfection), it is important to also highlight how the artworld has integrated failure in a productive manner. In particular, the stance that artistic failure may not configure just an impossible obstacle, but can equally offer an ideal standpoint for open experimentation and for raising constant questions, has proven to be quite popular among creators, particularly post the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century.

However, in art-related scholarly circles, the concept of failure is still relatively absent and has remained largely unexamined, both theoretically and historically. For this reason, it seems important here to approximate these two artistic universes, art practitioners and academics, and explore not only their differences and affinities regarding the notion of failure, but also the resistances and contaminations that they can exert on one another. By comparing two different media that approach the same topic, an art history conference panel and an edited book on artistic production, a broader analysis of failure will be provided. This analysis will also propose a significant shift from the creative perspective of art practice to the disciplinary impact that failure may cause upon art history and its methodological discourses.

The first event under analysis – a remarkable case of success that lived up to its expectations – took place recently in Chicago, in one of the panel discussions during the 102nd College Art Association (CAA) Conference in February 2014.³ This vivid session was timely hosted and organised by Jan Dirk Baetens from the Radboud University, Nijmegen, and had the suggestive title: *Towards a Loser’s Art History: Artistic Failure in the Long Nineteenth Century*.

The nineteenth century is usually, but not exclusively, understood as a turbulent period. It is marked by a succession of revolutionary advances and changes that helped define a particular history, ideologically supported by the concepts of innovation and progress. A similar understanding is

equally manifest in art historical discourses, as they frequently emphasise major artists who broke with the past and with academic traditions, and thus launched the future paths to modern art.

At the CAA conference, however, what the 'Loser's' panel proposed to do was to bring together papers that countered the progressive logic of the success stories that tend to underlie the art historical narrative for this specific period. In other words, the intention here was not to discover forgotten geniuses, rehabilitate misunderstood artists, or inscribe new heroes into the pantheon of history. Quite the contrary, the only aim was to examine case studies where art or artists had been actually touched by failure, defeat, disaster or misfortune. With this simple ambition, the session prompted the idea that an inquiry into the phenomena of artistic failure could offer equally important contributions to the understanding of this period and of its artistic production. At one of the largest and, arguably most influential, art history conference in the United States, the *losers* have accomplished their initial aspiration and have therefore emerged as winners.

In a meaningful theoretical way, this panel also proposed a critical distance from any heroic or apologetic interpretation of failure. It is widely known that modern and contemporary art in particular have been recurrently assigning a positive value to the lack of success, at least in some of its forms, which leads us to the second subject of this review. The recent publication *Failure*, edited by Lisa Le Feuvre for the well-known collection *Documents of Contemporary Art*⁴, is a case in point that clearly highlights how the concept of failure, as an operative method, has become a very attractive notion for the art world. The publication brings together prestigious names such as Bruce Nauman, Francis Alÿs, John Baldessari, or Fischli and Weiss, to demonstrate how, artistically, the act of failing often contains a strong creative potential.

Many of these artists work precisely towards the unattainable, using processes of trial and error, which are then visible in the artworks themselves. By doing so, they stress the crucial importance of research and experimentation as productive artistic routes. According to Le Feuvre, these procedures stimulate possibility in the very gap between intention and realisation. Additionally, the playful dimension that is embraced reinforces the artistic pleasure associated with the act of failing: things are usually funnier when they do not work so well, and can therefore become absurd or unexpected. In these kinds of unsuccessful projects, failure accentuates the importance given to elements of artistic practice, such as exploration or discovery. At the same time, it also points back to childhood, where not succeeding is vitally integral to processes of development and learning. For all these reasons, such an understanding of failure still comprehends a seductive idea of progression, echoing Samuel Beckett's famous words: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'⁵

The book edited by Le Feuvre gathers contributions of artists, curators, philosophers, art critics, scholars, writers, etc, and offers a collection of writings that inspect the ways in which artists have used failure, according to different scopes, definitions and approaches. The book is organised, accordingly, into four distinct but complementary sections: ‘Dissatisfaction and Rejection’; ‘Idealism and Doubt’; ‘Error and Incompetence’; ‘Experiment and Progress’.

The first part, ‘Dissatisfaction and Rejection’, begins with some extracts from Paul Barolsky’s article on the fable of failure in modern art.⁶ The selected text is a perfect start for a book on this topic, in that it contextualises failure historically, as one of the most endemic and influential myths of artistic creation, especially since the late eighteenth century and its understanding of the ‘modern’ artist. Barolsky collects different examples of literary fiction – from Balzac to Zola, Henry James to Alberto Moravia – which explore a recurrent theme: the impossibility of achieving artistic perfection, regardless of how long and consuming the quest for that very perfection may be. Through these examples – inhabited by fables of empty canvases, never-accomplished masterpieces, failed aspirations for the perfect absolute – emerges the idea that artistic activity is often tainted by anxiety and doubt, and by the inevitable space separating intention and concretisation. This regular sense of failure importantly reverberates through the history of modern art and literature.

Although the subsequent excerpts gathered in the book continue to explore positions of discontentment and dissatisfaction, perhaps one of the most interesting ideas of this first section relates to the double notion of rejection – which here unfolds both as a form of involuntary dismissal or disapproval, and also as a voluntary refusal of the ways things are. The section does not only deal with classic examples of artistic rejection (such as the 1863 *Salon des Refusés*, which gathered artists and artworks that ended up being far more relevant than those selected for the official *Salon*); but also includes cases that attest to the transformation of the extreme and eccentric into the canonical. An essential example is Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s 1997 text on John Baldessari, ‘The Rightness of Wrong’, which clearly demonstrates how, at least since Duchamp, cultural production that was initially transgressive could be comfortably integrated by the art establishment. In a similar vein, further examples are given of artists who deliberately pursued *wrong* practices (like silence, forgery or erasure), just for the joyful and libertarian sake of subverting rules, hierarchies and conventions.

The second part of the volume, ‘Idealism and Doubt’, works with these two interlaced and contrasting concepts. It emphasises the existence of opposing artistic angles: one that idealistically seeks full accomplishment and faultlessness, and another that embraces failure as the unavoidable starting (and ending) point of all human endeavours. The section starts with Paul Ricoeur’s

perspective on the intertwined relationship between fallible memory and imagination, and with Kierkegaard's elaboration on irony, the art of refined dissimulation. Later on, two interesting analyses – by Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben – focus on Herman Melville's short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853), highlighting how indifference can also be regarded as a powerful form of passive resistance. Bartleby, the main character, is a recently employed scrivener who, in ten key moments along the narrative, manages to pronounce one sentence that disorientates everybody around him: *I would prefer not to*. By repeatedly using these words whenever he is asked to do something, Bartleby reaches a formula that incessantly prevents everything from happening, and invalidates any possible reactions or violent responses. The impassive attitude of the scrivener is surely bound to failure, for it stubbornly refuses to embrace any kind of success.

The following texts in this section deal with other aspects of art and life that are also necessarily meant to fail. The text by Joseph Kosuth, for instance, stresses how the prevalent failure of Conceptual Art has proven to be highly influential for the subsequent artistic practices, explaining that if something meant to be *different*, then succeeds, it does not stay different for long. Additionally, an interesting account by Lotte Moller on the artist Annika Ström, an artist whose work tends to revolve around notions of failure and imperfection, shows how Ström's projects, through their fearful and poetic results, reveal how success-oriented our society ultimately is.

While Moller's piece also explores wider issues, such as the fallibility of human memory, the difficulty of expressing simple and almost imperceptible emotions, or the inaccuracy of words before a mutable world, the last two sections of the book take all these imperfections further as meaningful premises. The third section, 'Error and Incompetence', is formed by a number of texts, mostly artists' accounts, which show how failure can be fully embraced as something more than a mere complication. Although it will not be possible to cover all of them, important names like Larry Bell, William Egman, Tacita Dean, Julian Schnabel or Fischli and Weiss, are brought together here. Despite their differences in terms of pursuing failure as an art process, most of them have in common a sort of *Deleuzian* understanding of the practice of *repetition* – not considered as an endless recurrence, but rather as a persistent and ceaseless point of departure.

The examples show how often artists are the ones who set themselves a variety of impossible tasks, as can be illustrated by Bruce Nauman's seminal work *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966). Such is also the case for John Baldessari's ball series (eg, *Throwing three balls in the air to get a straight line*, or *Throwing four balls in the air to get a square*, both 1973), in which each photograph repeatedly and deliberately captures a playful moment of non-achievement. All the artistic examples

evoked suggest how unrealistic pursuits and open-ended actions can be continually chosen as preferential working modes, even if (or especially if) they touch upon absurdity and non-sense. Furthermore, such performances provide evidence for how the reconfigured Sisyphean gesture of continuous attempt, rehearsal and repetition can be of importance. Since, to use Emma Cocker's words, its 'shifting position between investment and indifference, seriousness and non-seriousness, gravity and levity serves to rupture or destabilise the authority of the rule whilst still keeping it in place'.⁷

Finally, 'Experiment and Progress', are the two failure-related concepts guiding the fourth and last section of the volume. The closing chapter rests on the idea that there is a pleasurable quality in failure, more specifically, there is pleasure in the processes of testing and experimenting that do not lead to any particular result, but rather cherish a self-sufficient idea of process. In this vein, the accounts collected here, from Harald Szeemann to Hans-Joachim Müller, validate such failure practices by inspecting both the poetic potential and the satisfaction that non-achievement can nevertheless generate in the field of artistic creation. Russell Ferguson's essay on artist Francis Alÿs, *The Politics of Rehearsal* (2007), is particularly illuminating in this regard. It shows how Alÿs' work is conceived to severely frustrate the reasons and the imperatives of progress. His projects tend to reject the idea of completion, resolutely assuming an open-ended, unresolved dimension that treasures repetition and reconfiguration. According to this condition, in which finishing is a permanently delayed state, Alÿs works in continuous rehearsal, refusing the final resolution of the masterpiece. Yet, the unproductiveness of his oeuvre also assigns political value to such endless incompleteness, defining a strategy for resisting the logic and authority of dominant goal-oriented or progress-driven cultural economies.

Overall, the book offers a valuable and comprehensive survey on artistic failure. The compiled essays thoroughly question and locate failure-related gestures, notions, and theories in the artistic realm. For these reasons, the volume examines failure according to an evolutionary logic that shapes its importance and creative potential. However, little attention is paid to the role played by failure in the academic contexts of art, where this notion is still not so common. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate what happens when the notion of failure is also fully embraced by art history scholars and discourses, and this is what the scholars mentioned above from Chicago intended to do.

In a somewhat different way, this conference session proposed to simply address failure as failure, seeking to investigate not only how art history is able to deal with this concept, but also to understand how it can use failure to reposition and redefine itself as a discipline. This open celebration of

difficulties, fiascos, defeats, misfortunes and disasters was shaped through the addresses of five researchers who approached the theme, examining it from different and complementary viewpoints, and also from the surprisingly illuminating perspective of the nineteenth century. As a result, they succeeded in positively examining important marginalised and invisible spaces of art history, and opened up new territories for artistic cultural studies.

Stories of failure have been widely legitimised by a number of mythologies of a romantic flavour, associated with tragedy, ruin and artistic misunderstanding. The paper by Erika Schneider, from the University of Framingham, demonstrated how well artistic misfortune can surpass the imaginary level and become a far more actual and desirable condition. Through the example of Philadelphia artist George H Comegys (1811–1852), her paper brought to the fore how the stereotype of the struggling artist, typically defined as someone unacknowledged by his peers and always on the verge of mental and financial ruin, could also constitute a precious and commoditised commonplace. Drawing on this argument, Schneider analysed the marketing potential of failure, revealing how, in the case of Comegys, this notion was used by art institutions, and by the artist himself, to promote public empathy and increase his importance in cultural markets and circuits.

The exploitation of artistic misery and misfortune, often associated with illness and madness, was recurrent during this period. In his paper, Marc Gotlieb from Williams College focused on even more excessive examples. Gotlieb investigated a series of artistic suicides that were often immortalised through painting or visual representation. From real suicides to fictional ones, often motivated by unfortunate careers, academic master/pupil confrontations, national disappointments or lack of institutional recognition, all the examined cases contributed to a wider theory surrounding the issue of suicide in its iconographic, cultural and discursive dimensions.

In turn, Alexis Joachimides from the University of Kassel analysed the work of British painter James Barry. Barry would have been a fairly successful figure, had it not been for the final years of his career, dramatically altered by professional failures and the breakdown of other aspects in his personal life. Barry is of particular interest because, already in his decadent and isolated phase, he worked for several years on a cycle of historical paintings for the Royal Society of Arts, whose public acclamation was inversely proportional to the creative effort Barry invested in them. These paintings, whose reading was more cryptic than captivating, generated great controversy, leading to Barry's subsequently expulsion from the Royal Academy in 1799 – the first case in the institution's history. His decline, however, fed a posthumous interest in this failed artist. The three biographies published in the years after his death devoted an unexpected attention to Barry, re-evaluating his work in the

light of his misfortune and demonstrating how failure can be quickly recuperated by an artistic imaginary fuelled by bohemian and melancholic values.

On a less biographical note, Ethan Robey from the Parsons School of Design focused his analysis less on personal failures but rather on the failure of devices. For this purpose, he looked into the phenomenon of panoramas, the popular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century entertainment systems, which although rooted in landscape painting, heralded many aspects of modern visual culture. Robey exemplarily examined bad panoramas that thwarted the expectations and satisfaction of its viewers, notably through the case of John Vanderlyn's panorama of Versailles – a panorama successively displayed in various locations, but a real commercial disaster. His paper also revealed how the organised space André Le Nôtre designed for the gardens of Versailles configured a visual regime rather incompatible with the immersive reception processes required by panoramas.

Finally, the 'Loser's' panel closed with Geoffrey Batchen from the Victoria University of Wellington, who presented a paper appropriately named 'The Biggest Loser'. Driven by the need to examine neglected and less visible areas of art history, Batchen's talk configured perhaps the strongest methodological moment of the panel, in close continuity with the disciplinary position that the author has been taking in recent years. Batchen poignantly underlined how an art history excessively focused on visual and concrete objects – that is, majorly concentrated on works of art that can actually be seen, kept, preserved and displayed in museums – is a discipline that necessarily faces certain risks and dangers. He argued that specifically in the case of the early history of photography, it has been possible to study, analyse and document a large number of photographic images that, although very significant at different levels, can no longer be viewed. These *other* images, which are often known only from written accounts and descriptions, or from their reproduction in other media, are able to define a kind of alternative, ghostly history of photography that is usually silenced and excluded from canonical discourses.

Using various striking examples, Batchen elegantly demonstrated how the history of photography could be thoroughly, and surprisingly, rewritten if only it would be able to incorporate these 'lost images'. In this way, the historian claimed that a narrative that could be comprised of a non-illustrated history of photography, based on an imaginary museum less limited by the material condition of its objects, would be able to contribute to and define a more accurate and inspiring kind of history. Without this turn, and in the present scenario, the 'biggest loser' seems to be art history itself, especially if it fails to follow new directions and investigate its own areas of absence and invisibility. Through such an inclusive perspective, art history will not only be able to integrate artists and works

that have not gleaned recognition but, most importantly, it will mainly be a less fragile discipline, not as much affected by the misconceptions and imprecisions that still subsist and distort our views of the past.

In conclusion, the five papers had generally fulfilled the panel's initial promise. The session offered an important contribution to a necessary reconfiguration of art history from the inspiring perspective of its defeated ones. Because failing is also human, this panel further enforced that if we are willing to embrace failure and reflect more consciously about the defeats that make up history, we will certainly be in a better position to learn more from our past. In this way, we are also more likely to fail a little less.

1 Scott A Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006

2 Sina Najafi, David Serlin, and Scott A Sandage, 'The Invention of Failure: An Interview with Scott A Sandage', in *Cabinet* 7, 2002, <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/7/inventionoffailure.php>

3 *Towards a Loser's Art History: Artistic Failure in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Conference Session, 102nd College Art Association Annual Conference, Chicago, 12 February 2014

4 Lisa Le Feuvre, ed, *Failure*, Documents of Contemporary Art, Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2010

5 Samuel Beckett, 'Worstward Ho' [1983], in *Nohow On*, Calder Publications, 1992

6 Paul Barolsky, 'The Fable of Failure in Modern Art', in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol 73, no 3, summer 1997 <http://www.vqronline.org/essay/fable-failure-modern-art>

7 Emma Cocker, 'Over and Over, Again and Again', in *Failure*, op cit, p 156

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