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FAILURE

Documents of Contemporary Art

TO BE AN ARTIST IS TO FAIL AS NO OTHER DARE FAIL

Samuel Beckett, 'Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit', 1949

Lisa Le Feuvre

Introduction//Strive to Fail

Uncertainty and instability characterize these times. Nonetheless, success and progress endure as a condition to strive for, even though there is little faith in either. All individuals and societies know failure better than they might care to admit – failed romance, failed careers, failed politics, failed humanity, failed failures. Even if one sets out to fail, the possibility of success is never eradicated, and failure once again is ushered in.

In the realm of art, though, failure has a different currency. Failure, by definition, takes us beyond assumptions and what we think we know. Artists have long turned their attention to the unrealizability of the quest for perfection, or the open-endedness of experiment, using both dissatisfaction and error as means to rethink how we understand our place in the world. The inevitable gap between the intention and realization of an artwork makes failure impossible to avoid. This very condition of art-making makes failure central to the complexities of artistic practice and its resonance with the surrounding world. Through failure one has the potential to stumble on the unexpected – a strategy also, of course, used to different ends in the practice of scientists or business entrepreneurs. To *strive to fail* is to go against the socially normalized drive towards ever increasing success. In Samuel Beckett's words: 'To be an artist is to fail as no other dare fail.'[1]

This collection of writings investigates the ways that artists have used and abused the idea of failure across a number of definitions and modes of address, taking a journey through four imperatives: dissatisfaction and rejection; idealism and doubt; error and incompetence; experiment and progress.

The first section, *Dissatisfaction and Rejection*, addresses claims on failure that arise through discontentment with and refusal of the way things are, whether in the artwork or the surrounding world. Failure is ever concerned with the artwork's place in the world and is tied to its twin, achievement – a relationship fed by distinctions, fears and opportunities.[2] The paradox of failure is that one cannot set out to fail, because the evaluation process of success – as measured by failure – becomes irrelevant. For Beckett, embracing failure offered the possibility of refusing the primary drive of successful art in his time, expression – the concept of which he viewed as a misconstruction at the core of our reception of art.

Although this book focuses on failure in recent art, it has been the source of a productive and generative drive since at least the first stirrings of the modernist era. The Parisian Salon des Refusés of 1863, for example, was an exhibition of failures. At the time, the Salon was an ultimate site of artists' validation; in 1863 the Academicians rejected around 3,000 works that they felt challenged the criteria and authority of the Academy of Fine Arts. The outcry at these exclusions, which included works by Whistler and Manet, led to an alternative exhibition of rejects alongside the official selection.[3] Émile Zola included the event in his 1886 novel *The Masterpiece*, describing artists desperate to be removed from the official selection to the Salon des Refusés, as the 'failures' were far more relevant to their work than those approved by the academicians.[4] For an artist to place a work into the world is to lose control. What does refusal mean? Who are the arbiters of taste? Failure here becomes a pivotal term, rejected by one group, embraced by another.

When failure is released from being a judgemental term, and success deemed overrated, the embrace of failure can become an act of bravery, of daring to go beyond normal practices and enter a realm of not-knowing. In 1953 Robert Rauschenberg proposed to Willem de Kooning his *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Confronted with the younger artist's request de Kooning agreed, but he chose a work he considered the most difficult to perform the act of erasure on. It took around a month, and around fifteen different erasers, for the drawing to be pared back to almost-white in a gesture of removal that broke with conventional art-making. Dieter Roth's experimental pushing of failure to its limits too enabled him to view the work of preceding artists from a new perspective. In the late 1950s he began to take the view 'that even Malevich's black square resulted from a feeling of failure. One always arrives at something one can no longer depict.'[5] When the conventions of representation are no longer fit for purpose failure can open new possibilities.

As the texts on works by artists such as David Critchley in the 1970s and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster in the present make clear, one of the most crucial areas where we can identify the endemic presence of failure in art-making activity is in the gap between intention and realization.[6] In the video work *De Novo* (2009), Gonzalez-Foerster ruminates on the ways in which any possible proposal, artistic or otherwise, is informed by the history and failures of all those that might have gone before. She describes her past ideas as 'black holes' that always seem unsatisfactory when realized. Critchley's work *Pieces I Never Did* likewise shows the artist talking to camera, where he describes eighteen propositions for artworks, taking in performance, film, video, installation and sculpture, each one never moving beyond notes in a sketchbook. Such is the process of wrestling with ideas: self-censorship often defines a creative act as a failure before it has been released into the unpredictable realm of the public.

In 2010 the artist Michael Landy filled the South London Gallery with a dumpster-shaped vitrine measuring 600 cubic metres, forming out of polycarbonate and steel a waste container for artworks. Anyone rightfully owning

a work of art could apply to use the disposal facility, with successful applicants approved by Landy in a process that validated self-declared failures. On acceptance, works were logged into an inventory, with provenance and details noted, and then either immediately thrown in by their owners or carefully stored by white-gloved art handlers to be disposed of later. Landy declared this sculpture a 'monument to creative failure'. In his autobiographical memoir *Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failures* (1997), the writer Paul Auster recalls one of the ruses he devised to avoid deciding what to write: he dreamt up a literary prize for self-nominated failures. He then reflects on the way this compulsion to sanctify failure was an attempt to hide his own abject fear of what it might be.[7] The judgement involved in naming something a success or a failure is symptomatic of the time and place, and contingent on the critical apparatus one uses to define it.[8]

To achieve resolution is to achieve a masterpiece – a work, in the classic modernist formulation, where nothing can be improved, nothing added.[9] Yet this enterprise, in which the artist is creator of the 'perfect' artwork, is doomed to fail from the start. Zola's novel of 1886 followed from an earlier short story by Honoré de Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* (1831), which narrates a failure of belief, reputation and — that very crux of artistic practice — the failure of the artist's realization to meet an intention.[10] Balzac describes an ageing painter working tirelessly on a portrait of a past lover. The work is hidden from all until it will be complete and perfect. Ever dissatisfied, the artist meticulously strives to make his painting so realistic that it is indistinguishable from a living body. However, when revealed, the pursuit of perfection has undone the representation, leaving a 'wall of paint', with a single, perfect foot just visible amongst the mass of colour. The master tries to justify the painting as an atmosphere rather than a depiction, but ultimately, in this era of representational painting, he believes it to be a failure, evidence of his lost mastery. Balzac's account is of the gaps between intention, expectation and realization.

John Baldessari advises his students: 'Art comes out of failure. You have to try things out. You can't sit around, terrified of being incorrect, saying 'I won't do anything until I do a masterpiece.'[11] In Baldessari's *Wrong* (1967–68) — a technically 'wrong' photographic composition, in which the artist stands in front of a palm tree so it appears to sprout from his head — the aura of the compositionally 'right' image is disrupted so that – even though the new image perhaps replaces this merely with an alternative aesthetic – with the break in representative conventions, a pleasure in failure is introduced.[12] Who has the right to claim the wrongness of an image? What does it matter if a tree sprouts out of a head? This is a turning away from the authority of what is deemed to be right. Assumptions are where attention starts to waver: we can sometimes only become truly attentive when something is indeed wrong.

While speculative thought strives for ever-deepening levels of understanding in the search for content, irony asks questions, not to receive an answer but to draw out of content and form yet more questions. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's writings are suffused with paradox, choosing a series of endlessly unfurling contradictions over definitive truth. The ironist deals with the *how* of something being said rather than the *what*, paying a distanced attention to the surface of statements so as to identify gaps in knowledge and productive miscommunication. Where we embrace the irony of bad taste like the artist Martin Kippenberger, deliberately turning away from technical skill, we distance ourselves from the assumed natural order of things.

Kippenberger always seemed to push too hard or the wrong way, resulting in a space of failure where he seemed more than happy to cast himself. His *Metro-Net* project (1993–97), for example, set out to install a series of subway entrances around the world that would lead to nowhere. The first was built on the Greek island of Syros; another was designed as a mobile structure that was crushed on the occasion of its exhibition at Metro Pictures in New York, simply so it could fit through the door.[13] As Ann Goldstein has written, Kippenberger 'mastered the act of failing not through his own incompetence, or even that of others, but through a savvy and strategic application of the oppositional and incongruous.'[14] Indeed, in the face of failure, is there any point in striving for success, when there can be an immersive warmth in being simply pathetic, in not trying. As Ralph Rugoff claimed in his landmark group show 'Just Pathetic' (Los Angeles and New York, 1990), to turn away from ambition is a position: 'To be pathetic I stop being a loser, haplessly falling short of the idealized norm', seeking no place in history, turning instead to a desultory and indifferent claim on the present.[15]

The second section, *Idealism and Doubt*, considers how in the field of art these polarities operate as productive engagements. If failure is endemic in the context of creative acts, this opens the question not whether something *is* a failure, but rather *how* that failure is harnessed. Indifference can offer a position of resistance akin to the attitude of Herman Melville's scribe in *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1853), analysed in different ways by Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben. Melville's narrator, an elderly lawyer, describes his encounter with Bartleby, a man who he chose to employ in his chambers on the basis of his apparent constancy, which he believed would even out the inconsistencies of his existing employees, one of whom was irascible in the morning, the other in the afternoon, both moods adjusted by lunchtime drinking. However fast and committed the scrivener is at his chores at the start of his employment, he very quickly adopts a particular attitude of indifference, responding to questions and requests with the simple phrase 'I would prefer not to', in an incessant passive resistance to required and prescribed behaviours.

o take such a position is to be beyond redemption, to refuse either success of ure, a position Lotte Møller discerns in the work of Annika Ström, and Jennifer gie in the work of Matthew Brannon. As Leo Bersani and Ullyse Dutoit state *Arts of Impoverishment*, their study of Beckett, Mark Rothko and Alain Resnais: rely nothing can be more dangerous for an artist or for a critic than to be essed with failure. "Dangerous" because the obsession we are speaking of is : the coming anxiety about failing, but rather an anxiety about not failing.'[16] adoxes are at the heart of all dealings with failure – it is a position to take, yet e that cannot be striven for; it can be investigated, yet is too vague to be ined. It is related but not analogous to error, doubt and irony.

dealism, with its travelling companion doubt, is driven by a misplaced belief perfection – a concept setting an inaccurate route to what-might-have-been, the past, and even to perfection itself. Is there a method more pertinent than rfection to the ways we understand our place in the world, and in which art complicate what we think we know? Think of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled rfect Lovers)* (1987–90), an identical pair of battery-operated wall clocks, ced side by side, which inevitably will fail to keep the same time. The rfection' here lies in the failure of accuracy; anything else would be romantic tion. Like these out-of-sync clocks, human beings are all fallible; perhaps this most explicitly revealed to us in the ways that we understand the past through emory and imagination. Here failure abounds. As Gonzalez-Torres demonstrated much of his work, photographic, or indexical, recollection will never be the ost truthful. In 1929 Walter Benjamin reflected on Marcel Proust's unravelling perceptions through an engagement with the power of forgetting that is driven an endless methodological dissatisfaction: Proust's typesetters record his nstant changing of texts, not to correct mistakes but rather to introduce arginal notes, as if in a desperate attempt to remember everything.[17] It is near possible to record every single thing and event in our lives – the task would be overwhelming as in Borges' *Funes the Memorious* (1942).

The thinker Paul Ricoeur considered in detail the processes of memory and collection, noting that perfect memory, like Gonzalez-Torres' *Perfect Lovers*, is plete with both error and perfection. Ricoeur describes memory as always being the mercy of the powerful forces of distraction and influence from other periences held in the mind. 'Pure' memory is simply the act of recollection; emory influenced by imagination is an engagement.[18] This is demonstrated in née Green's return to the site of Robert Smithson's work *Partially Buried Woodshed* 970): Green's *Partially Buried in Three Parts* (1996–99) directly addresses membered and forgotten history. Her multipart installation interweaves terviews with local residents, activists, her family members and artists, about eir imagined and actual memories of America in the 1970s. The charge in Green's

work is in the power of the failure to remember and in the failure of the facts of events, specifically the anti-Vietnam protests at Kent State University, to be written into history. As with Gonzalez-Foerster's recollections, the references build, to draw attention to the moments of forgetting and to the ways in which recollection is a process clouded by mistake, misrepresentation, failures of verisimilitude.

If perfection and idealism are satisfying, failure and doubt are engaging, driving us into the unknown. When divorced from a defeatist, disappointed or unsuccessful position, failure can be shifted away from being merely a category of judgement. Section 3, *Error and Incompetence*, examines these two aspects of failure as positions that can be taken up positively. Julian Schnabel, for example, describes in this section his work as a 'bouquet of mistakes'.[19] Rather than producing a space of mediocrity, failure becomes intrinsic to creating open systems and raising searching questions: without the doubt that failure invites, any situation becomes closed and in danger of becoming dogmatic. Art-making can be characterized as an activity where doubt lies in wait at every turn and where failing is not always unacceptable conduct. As the artists Fischli and Weiss note of their video *The Way Things Go* (*Der Lauf der Dinge*, 1987), in which an assembly of mundane everyday objects and pieces of garbage perform a hilarious set of chain reactions: 'For us, while we were making the piece, it was funnier when it failed, when it didn't work. When it worked, that was more about satisfaction.'[20] After all, if an artist were to make the perfect work there would be no need to make another. Emma Cocker describes in her text 'Over and Over. Again and Again' that to try again is to repeat, to enter into a series of rehearsals with no end point, no conclusions.[21] Beckett's advice in *Worstward Ho* (1983) is to keep on trying, even if the hope of success is dashed again and again by failure: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'[22]

These refusals to accept incompetence as an obstruction often employ repetitive strategies, just in case a single error was an aberration. In the work of artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, Bruce Nauman and Bas Jan Ader, Sisyphean tasks are driven by a performed disbelief in error as a negative. In an art context such repetition has the potential to pass through the threshold of tedium and even slip into slapstick. To set out to succeed at failing, or to fail at failing, is to step aside from the orthodox order. Slapstick, as described by Jörg Heiser in this section, fills narrative with illogical possibilities that evoke embarrassment and laughter.[23] Embarrassment is a natural response to failure: you want to disappear when it happens, when the world looks at you and judges you for your failing. What though, if being embarrassed is not so bad after all? We all embarrass ourselves frequently, yet it is fear of the judgement of our failures that endures.

Chris Burden's practice acts out the simple question 'what happens if you...?', making the risk of failure a space of opportunity as he pushes the limits of

possibilities and courts incompetence. Burden proposes questions that are manifested through actions and events, interrogating structures of power and assumptions, introducing doubt, and never fully eliminating the unknown. He offers a series of impossible proposals that are then acted out: integral to each is the possibility and frustration of failure. This can be seen most explicitly in *When Robots Rule: The Two Minute Airplane Factory* that took the form of an assembly line manufacturing model airplanes to be launched into the cavernous space of Tate Britain's Duveen Galleries in 1999. Although on paper the machine was capable of the task, in practice only a single plane made the flight, with visitors instead confronted with technicians carrying out tests and adjustments. Technology has no intuition, reflexivity or ability to know if something 'looks right', yet the purpose of machines is to increase efficiency beyond the ability of the human hand. At Tate the apparent failure made the work all the more poignant; the inability of the machine to replicate human endeavour became a poetic philosophy of failure. The once-success, though, raises the question 'what if it was tried again?'. With an adjustment could countless model airplanes be manufactured in a day? He has observed that 'some of my favourite sculptures were the ones that were total disasters. You fantasize a way they are going to be, you try to do everything in your power, and then they are total flops. It's really interesting to examine how you could be so wrong.'[24]

Failure, by definition, takes us beyond assumptions and what we think we know and can be represented. Section 4, *Experiment and Progress*, examines failure's potential for experimentation beyond what is known, while questioning the imperatives of progress. The act of testing takes on a different register when considered as a process rather than a result-oriented search for progress. When testing is an end in itself, non-completion, and therefore non-perfection, becomes a valid option. There is a pleasure in testing through failure. The artist Roman Signer, for example, courts failure just in case success unexpectedly turns up. If not, though, it really doesn't matter. His 'accident sculptures' ironically mimic experiments and their documentation. Paul Ramírez-Jonas addresses the hierarchies of failure through an exploration of the spaces between desire for progress and actual experience.[25] His video *Ghost of Progress*, 2002, is shot from a camera mounted on his bicycle handlebars as he traverses an unnamed city in the developing world. At the opposite end of the handlebars is a scale model of Concorde – once a symbol of optimistic progress, now a failed experiment. Utopian hopes and ultimate commercial realities embodied by Concorde are juxtaposed against a background of survival street commerce, new and old cars, public transport, noise, decaying historic and modern buildings, smog, dirt, and people going about their daily lives.

This speculative experimentation or testing is tied up with the modernist project, where the idea of the inventor (be it the artist, scientist, philosopher or explorer) is embedded in the desire for a progress-driven radical break in understanding. When one's expectations are dashed there can be an opportunity for a new register of thinking. As Robert Smithson states in his conversation with Dennis Wheeler (1969–70), by isolating the failures one can 'investigate one's incapabilities as well as one's capabilities', opening up possibilities for questioning how structures and limits shape the world.[26]

The philosopher of science Karl Popper popularized the process in logic known as *falsifiability*: the probability that an assertion can be demonstrated as false by an experiment or observation. For example 'all people are immortal' is an easily falsifiable statement, demonstrated by the evidence of even one person having died. For Popper, the essence of scientific experiment is the investigation of more complex falsifiable propositions, or hypotheses. What characterizes creative thinking within an experiment is the ability to 'break through the limits of the range', that is to apply a critical mode of thinking rather than working with the sets of assumptions at hand. In order to do so one must engage with failure and embrace the unanticipated.[27] In art, failure can also be a component of speculative experiment, which arrives at something unrecognizable as art according to the current criteria of knowledge or judgement.

In this uncertain and beguiling space, between the two subjective poles of success and failure, where paradox rules, where transgressive activities can refuse dogma and surety, it is here, surely, that failure can be celebrated. Such facets of failure operate not only in the production but also equally in the reception and distribution of artworks, inscribing certain practices into the histories of art. As we know, these histories are constantly tested and challenged and are themselves implicated in artists' roles as active agents, seeking new forms of rupture, new delineations of space within contemporary experience, in order to place something at stake within the realm of art.[28] The impossibility of language, as explored in Liam Gillick and Will Bradley's inclusions in this section, forces a stretching of this structure of understanding beyond its limits, in order to pull on thought rather than words: this opens moments of un-understanding which in time can be elucidating. To paraphrase the section from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that closes this collection: often it is worth considering that the deepest failures are in fact not failures at all.

1 Samuel Beckett, from 'Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit', *transition*, no. 48 (1949); reprinted in Samuel Beckett, *Proust & Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1965) 119–26.

2 See Daniel A. Siedell, 'Art and Failure', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 40, no. 2 (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, Summer 2006) 105–17.

3 See Bruce Altshuler, ed., *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions that Made Art History. Volume 1: 1863–1959* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2009) 23–30.

4 Émile Zola, *L'Oeuvre* (Paris, 1886); trans. Ernest Vizetelly, *His Masterpiece* (New York: Macmillan, 1896); reissued as *The Masterpiece* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008).

5 Dieter Roth, interview with Felicitas Thun (Basel, February 1998), in *Dieter Roth: Gedrucktes Gespresstes Gebundenes 1949–1979* (Cologne: Oktagon Verlag, 1998); reprinted in *Flash Art International* (May–June 2004) 104–5.

6 See Clive Gillman's text on David Critchley in this volume, 42; and Daniel Birnbaum's text on Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, 65.

7 See Paul Auster, *Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failures* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997) 35–7.

8 See Tom Holert, 'Surviving Surveillance? Failure as Technology', *Printed Project*, no. 6 (Dublin, 2007).

9 See for example Russell Ferguson's citation of Virginia Woolf and Michael Fried, in *Francis Alÿs: Politics of Rehearsal* (Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art/Göttingen: Steidl, 2007) 11.

10 Honoré de Balzac, *Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu* (Paris, 1831); trans. Richard Howard, *The Unknown Masterpiece* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001).

11 John Baldessari in Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: Norton, 2008) 52.

12 See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Rightness of Wrong', in *John Baldessari: National City* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art/New York: D.A.P., 1986) 33–5; reprinted in this volume, 33.

13 See Marcus Verhagen, 'Trash Talking', *Modern Painters* (February 2006) 67–9; reprinted [retitled by the author as 'There's No Success Like Failure': Martin Kippenberger] in this volume, 43.

14 Ann Goldstein, 'The Problem Perspective', in Ann Goldstein, ed., *Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008) 39–44.

15 Ralph Rugoff, from catalogue essay for 'Just Pathetic' (Los Angeles: Rosamund Felsen Gallery/New York: American Fine Arts, 1990), cited in Michael Wilson, 'Just Pathetic', *Artforum* (October 2004).

16 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993) 1–9.

17 Walter Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust' (1929), in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 201–16.

18 See Paul Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000); trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 7–10.

19 Julian Schnabel, Statements (1978) in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1996) 266.

20 Peter Fischli, David Weiss and Jörg Heiser, 'The Odd Couple: An Interview with Peter Fischli and David Weiss', *frieze*, no. 102 (October 2006) 202–5.

21 See Emma Cocker's essay in this volume, 154.

22 Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (London: John Calder, 1984); see also Brian Dillon, 'Eternal Return', *frieze*, no. 77 (September 2003) 76–7; reprinted in this volume, 122.

23 Jörg Heiser, 'Pathos versus Ridiculousness: Art with Slapstick', in *All of a Sudden* (New York and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008).

24 Chris Burden, interview with Jon Bewley (1990), in *Talking Art*, ed. Adrian Searle (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1993) 26–7.

25 See Inés Katzenstein, 'A Leap Backwards into the Future', in *Paul Ramírez Jonas* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2004) 108–12; reprinted in this volume, 184.

26 Robert Smithson, from 'Interviews with Dennis Wheeler' (1969–70), section II, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) 208–9; reprinted in this volume, 171.

27 See Karl Popper, *Endless Quest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); and Bazon Brock, 'Cheerful and Heroic Failure', in Harald Szeemann, ed., *The Beauty of Failure/The Failure of Beauty* (Barcelona: Fundació Joan Miró, 2004) 30–33.

28 See Joseph Kosuth, 'Exemplar', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994) 51–9; reprinted in this volume, 90.

Sarah Thornton
On John Baldessari//2008

Baldessari has mentored countless artists, and although he now teaches at UCLA, he is still seen to embody the think-tank model that has spread all over the United States, although it exists in one of its purest forms at CalArts. One of his mottos is 'Art comes out of failure', and he tells students, 'You have to try things out. You can't sit around, terrified of being incorrect, saying, "I won't do anything until I do a masterpiece".' When I asked how he knows when he's conducted a great crit class, he leaned back and eventually shook his head. 'You don't know', he said. 'Quite often when I thought I was brilliant, I wasn't. Then when I was really teaching, I wasn't aware of it. You never know what students will pick up on.' Baldessari believes that the most important function of art education is to demystify artists: 'Students need to see that art is made by human beings just like them.' [...]

Sarah Thornton, extract from *Seven Days in the Art World* (London: Granta Books/New York: W.W. Norton, 2008) 52.

Stuart Morgan
The Man Who Couldn't Get Up: Paul Thek//1995

There are artists who grit their teeth, plot their strategy, make their work and become successful. And there are artists like Paul Thek. Fugitive, unworldly, Thek collaborated with others for much of his life and died in 1988, a disillusioned man. Now a retrospective exhibition, originating at Rotterdam's Witte de With, re-examines his career with the help of photographs, film, diaries, sculptures, installations and paintings.

As a project, it is fraught with difficulties. Not that Thek's initial success and eventual failure were part of a period that is lost. It is the meaning of that life at that time which is lost: a life of travel, communes and festivals, of drugs and promiscuity, but above all, perhaps, of expectations of the future. Now we feel we know better; the high hopes of the 1960s were unfounded. Worse still, with the passage of time, what Thek called 'the wonderful world that almost was' became a joke, a dream, a hieroglyph without a key.

The year is 1963. In the catacombs at Palermo a good-looking young man is standing, arms folded, with skeletons ranged behind him. As a portrait, the snapshot seems far from successful: the subject seems out of place because his mind is elsewhere. The second attempt by the same photographer, a head and shoulders shot taken eleven years later, shows the subject, still handsome in his way but baggy-eyed, with thinning hair and a lined forehead. Only one clue reveals that it is the same person. For by now the loss of focus that had previously seemed charming has become an inevitability; he looks straight through us because he cannot escape his own mind. Perhaps he is still in Palermo, among the catacombs. 'There are about 8,000 corpses', he wrote, 'not skeletons, corpses decorating the walls, and the corridors are filled with windowed coffins. I opened one and picked up what I thought was a piece of paper; it was a piece of dried thigh.' As always his reaction was unusual ... 'I felt strangely relieved and free', he wrote. 'It delighted me that bodies could be used to decorate a room, like flowers.'

By the late sixties everyone knew the work of Paul Thek. Pictures of his work appeared in art magazines. Critics interviewed him. In 1966 Susan Sontag even dedicated her greatest book, *Against Interpretation*, to him. But then what? 'He fell wounded', reads one of his notebook entries from 1979. 'Some tried to help him up, but he was wounded to the core, they tried – then, one by one – they left him, drifted away into their own lives, their own hoped for successes, and failures, but he had fallen, they (some of them) urged him on, urged him UP, tried even to SEDUCE him once again into living, and Life as always knew what she was doing; the Pleroma lit up in his brain, like a vaginal dentifrice.' Half farce, half pathos, the tone recalls the sick humour of the sixties: the tone of Joseph Heller or Terry Southern, with Nathanael West lurking in the distance. It is also the work of a self-dramatizing figure, someone carried away by the sheer theatre of it all. Yet despite the fact that the strain and self-pity seem calculated, no amount of artifice can conceal the truth: this is a cry for help.

Signs of strangled emotion were evident from the first, with decorative paintings in bilious colours reminiscent of early, fairytale Kandinsky. They reappeared in chastened form in a series of paintings called *Television Analyzations*, begun in 1963. One image is of a society woman – all mouth, bosom and necklace – leading what looks like a growing procession of clones, all, like her, giving cheesy grins and making cathedrals with their long fingernails. Everything is grey except for her vivid, red necklace, only part of which is visible. In another 'analyzation', again of only part of a woman's face, her open mouth and fleshy tongue are featured, while another shows a hand cradling a fruit bat. His notebooks leave readers in no doubt of Thek's attitude to women; a mistrust so deep it verged on loathing. Regard the paintings as glimpses of the vagina, and the distancing effects – the sense of protection offered by the regressus in

excellence: 'I marvel at the sky because it exists', and 'I am safe, whatever happens'. The experience of a tautology – that is, a proposition that is impenetrable to truth conditions on account of always being true ('The sky is blue or the sky is not blue') – has its correlate in Bartleby in the experience of a thing's *capacity* to be true and, at the same time, not true. If no one dreams of verifying the scrivener's formula, this is because experiments without truth concern not the actual existence or non-existence of a thing but exclusively its potentiality. And potentiality, in so far as it can be or not be, is by definition withdrawn from both truth conditions and, prior to the action of 'the strongest of all principles', the principle of contradiction.

In first philosophy, a being that can both be and not be is said to be contingent. The experiment with which Bartleby threatens us is an experiment *de contingentia absoluta*. [...]

Giorgio Agamben, extract from 'Bartleby, o della contingenza', in Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze, *Bartleby: La formula della creazione* (Macerata, Italy: Quodlibet, 1993); trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 243; 253–5; 259–61 [footnotes not included].

Paul Watzlawick
On the Nonsense of Sense and the Sense of Nonsense//1995

[...] That we do not discover reality but rather invent it is quite shocking for many people. And the shocking part about it – according to to the concept of radical constructivism – is that the only thing we can ever know about the real reality (if it even exists) is what it is not. It is only with the collapse of our constructions of reality that we first discover that the world is not the way we imagine.

Ernst von Glasersfeld writes in his introduction to *Radical Constructivism*:

> Knowledge is assembled by living organisms in order to organize the actual shapeless flow of experience as far as possible into reproducible experiences with relatively reliable connections between them. This means that the 'real' world only manifests itself when our constructions fail. But as we can always only describe and explain the failure in those terms, which we have used to build the failed structures, a picture of the world, which we could make responsible for the failure, could never be conveyed to us.
>
> Somewhat more metaphorical would be the following analogy: the captain of a ship has to cross straits he does not know and does not have a chart fc navigational help such as a beacon, etc. on a stormy, dark night. In the circumst only two things are possible: Either he sails into a cliff and loses his ship a life; in the last moment of his life he realizes that the reality of the straits w as he imagined and his course did not correspond with the actuality of the s Or he reaches the open sea; then he knows only that his course was accura no more. He does not know whether there could have been easier, sl crossings than the one he blindly chose. And he does not know what th condition of the straits was.[1] [...]

1 Ernst von Glasersfeld, *Radical Constructivism: A Way of Knowing and Learning* (London: Press, 1995).

Paul Watzlawick, extract from *Vom Unsinn des Sinns oder vom Sinn des Unsinns* [On the Nons Sense or the Sense of Nonsense] (Cologne: Taschen, 1995); translated in *Markus Vater* (So Germany: Museum Baden, 2007) 76.

Scott A. Sandage
The Invention of Failure: Interview with Sina Najafi and David Serlin//2002

Sina Najafi and David Serlin Can you start by telling us the scope of forthcoming book [*Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, 2005]?

Scott Sandage The book is a cultural history of the idea of failure in Americ from roughly Benjamin Franklin to Bob Dylan. [...] It is a book about orc people who throughout American history fell short of whatever the prev mark was in the period in which they lived.

One of the problems I had was answering the question, 'Why had n written a book about failure before?', at least not a book about real peopl failed, rather than what sermons or short stories or novels or advice manu about failure. There had been an assumption that there is no source ma that, by definition, someone who failed miserably throughout his life wou have left a paper trail. This turned out to be a false assumption. One of the re is that failure has been such a ubiquitous part of the American experienc archives are full of people who have failed. For example, one of the best sc I have found was a cache of about 5,000 letters that ordinary people wr

el Fisher

Judgement and Purpose//1987

Anaprokopology

For the ancient Greeks the idea of success was intrinsically linked to the idea of perfection. In such a world view, no idea could have been more foreign than that expressed by those dangerous new religions that glorified the potential of the child or the imperfections of a repentant sinner. The shift in values was profound when, suddenly, it was not the 'finished' man who was 'chosen', but the imperfect disciple – when the sick, the afflicted and children were no longer despised. For us, thousands of years later, the conflicting ideas of the ancient Greeks and the early Christians operate within us simultaneously rather than sequentially. This should not be possible, but it is. The result is that sometimes we view success as finished perfection – at other times as the perfectibility of growth.

Since failure only exists in contrast to success, it, too, mirrors this contradiction: it can be considered as a kind of incompleteness, or as existence without grace. Paying attention to the way we seem to hold two opinions simultaneously, and to the resultant judgements we make, gives us an opportunity to explore some general attitudes toward human achievement. Given such radical ambivalence, what are the means we use to steer or guide our efforts?

In this essay I propose a new field of study to explore attitudes toward human judgement, a study of the science of failure in which anthropologists or philosophers might usefully engage. It is surprising to me, in fact, that philosophers have not attended to the concept of failure. The more I think about it, the more I believe that the consideration of failure should exist as a distinct area of study. With some good humour, then (and appropriate Greek roots), I've coined a neologism to encompass a theoretical concept of failure, an analysis of its mechanism, and its consequences in guilt or shame. I propose *anaprokopology*, from *ano*, not, and *prokopi*, success, as a general term to designate that area of existence in which success is not achieved or is irrelevant. This particular study, however, lies within the general literature of connoisseurship and concerns the process of making distinctions. Perhaps it can also be expanded to a broader relevance.

Location

Why are we surrounded by the potential of failure? To what extent is failure imaginary or real? Although we haven't yet any larger systematic study of failure, there is a modest literary genre in which many forms of failure are contrasted to a single instance of success. Probably the best known example is the New Testament parable of planting seeds. The seeds (by implication either us, or the word of God) are destined to failure if, instead of landing on fertile ground, they fall either in the path, on rocky ground, or among the thorns. There are dangers in each of these places. The seeds might be eaten by birds, trampled under foot, choked by brambles, or succumb to drought. There are many ways to fail, it seems, but success is singular.

The structure of the parable is not uncommon. I found a similar pattern in an obstetrics textbook which I bought in London shortly before my son was born. It provided a frightening inventory of all the ways a birth could go wrong. There were dozens of chances for disaster in contrast to the essentially unmentioned possibility of a living, healthy baby. Success takes up a very small part of the story. It is easier to consider failure, almost as if the method might be determining the form. There is a hint here, perhaps, that analysis itself is more comfortable with failure.

Such examples would lead us to believe that failure is more common than it is. Manifest failure, however, is relatively uncommon. Often one anticipates failure as the logical end of the path one is following and, when such a situation is sensed or recognized, the path can be abandoned. Perhaps that is why unfinished work used to be seen as a form of failure. In such a resonant example as the story of the Tower of Babel, the unfinished becomes a metaphor for failure itself.

Now, unfinished work is more often accepted as worthy of serious consideration. This shift in values is one on which artists and art historians have had some effect. The metaphor absorbs process in some of Michelangelo's later sculpture (St Matthew, the Rondanini Pietà, the Dying Slave); we see the figures as bound and imprisoned in the rock. Today the unfinished is considered a convention, and there is general agreement that the Michelangelos are masterpieces. We no longer need to face the unfinished with a negative prejudice or a suspended judgment. We have begun to look at a work as somehow complete at every point in its development.

While it is true that many inevitable failures are abandoned, others get 'finished'. Sometimes it takes a long time to recognize a problem. Sometimes flaws only appear in retrospect, not having been obvious during the creative process. In such a case the artist might exhibit a work publicly, even sell it, recognizing too late a serious problem in the work. One needs a special kind of judgement here. How can one expect to recognize failure at a time when one doesn't know or recognize one's goals. Many artists define what they want by observing their own decisions which are often very precise. The sense of 'getting it right' is pre-verbal and instinctive. The clarity in a work is evolutionary, and the history of its evolution maps an artist's development. With some artists, and in some works by all artists, such clarity never appears. Instead, we feel a chronic, nagging suspicion about these works. We are never certain whether they are the

best or the worst things we've ever seen, and we suspend judgement. Most often artists hold back such works for future consideration. Picasso kept *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* rolled up under his bed for years. The decision to release it may have been prompted by someone else. Sometimes a decision is never made, and the artist never relinquishes the work. I'm sure that it is not unusual for older artists to be more and more surrounded by such questionable failures – their obvious successes long since having left home.

The Frontier

Failure has a curious birth. It comes indirectly, without a trace of cynicism, almost as if it creates itself. Failure is never planned for or organized. It comes from outside intention, and always implies the existence of another separate, more vital concern. A genuine failure cannot be intentional. An intentional failure is no such thing, but an unwholesome, nihilistic form of success.

Once again we are involved with intention. It seems to me that over and over again in different ways it is intention that has marked the way of art in the twentieth century. The recognition of intention implies that, to some extent, an artist is accountable for his images or actions. The existence of intention provides an opportunity for failure, ground on which failure can grow.

Failure itself draws a distinction. Where failure occurs, there is the frontier. It marks the edge of the acceptable or possible, a boundary fraught with possibilities. This edge mixes certainty and insecurity. It taunts us to try again and tells us firmly to stay back. The failure tells us clearly where our limitations – at that moment – are. A few minutes later it might be different. This is why the risks of failure add value to success.

All things fail save only *dreams*. (Ruth Benedict)

The Forms of Failure

The most extreme form of failure occurs when standards are so high, and their satisfaction so unlikely, that the likelihood of success becomes almost fictional. Though such standards guarantee failure, they do not discourage the passionate impulse to strive toward the highest ideals – leading to the realm of almost mystical failure that is akin to the implied and eternal failure of *neti neti* (not this, not that), the ancient Upanishad formula for distinguishing the sacred. The search for the impossible objective is the most profound and pure manifestation of anaprokopological form. Beckett sums it up in his distinctive voice. [...]

Other approaches to work are less ethereal: there are works for which there is a kind of 'rightness', whether it occurs internally as part of the work or externally in its relationship to the world. [Among the artists surveyed in the US touring exhibition 'The Success of Failure', 1987][1] Keith Sonnier has explained why it was necessary for him to abandon a whole series of works when he saw the conditions in which the children who would be producing them were working. The impulses of his heart and his sense of compassion were greater than his need to follow through on the pieces he had planned. The means of production would have tainted the art. Similarly, an unseen supporting pipe destroys the spirit of Jackie Winsor's piece, because the work itself implies that it stands by itself. Winsor knew that false implications could under¬mine the work. The seriousness with which she considered that factor proves that the successful creation of an artwork relies on more than visual standards.

One artist's good work can be another's failure. Eric Fischl, in talking about failure, points out that the most interesting idea in one of his paintings was actually not his idea. And curiously, an artist's original idea may not have a place in his or her own work.

What is appropriate to a given artwork has multiple dimensions. Integrity (an ultimate unity) prevails when something is both internally and externally appropriate, both true to itself and true to its environment. And the work must also follow through on the promises it makes. It can't soften or dilute its purpose at the last moment.

Some years ago I heard a story about a wealthy collector who decided to put a Picasso painting up for auction. He took it to the auction house and was told by the experts that they would not take it because they thought it was a fake. The man was outraged, and after a few rude comments about the credentials of the auction-house experts he took the painting directly to Picasso himself. He explained the problem to Picasso and asked him to verify it as truly one of his pictures. Picasso looked at the painting carefully, and then came back to the collector.

'I'm sorry', he said. 'They are right. It is a fake.'

'But that can't be!' gasped the man, 'I bought it directly from you fifteen years ago.'

'Well', said Picasso, 'I can make fake Picassos just as well as anyone else.'

What we call a sense of timing also has to do with this multiple dimension of the appropriate. Without timing a work may be unintentionally invisible; one cannot make a proper evaluation. Thirty years ago when Meret Oppenheim painted her picture, she saw it differently than she did when she put it into this exhibition. At that time, instead of seeing the painting in front of her, she saw only what she thought the painting *should* be. Paul Thek's contribution to this show plays with the sense of the inappropriate in contrast to conventions: he proposes a work that reverses sexual stereotypes by changing 'Our Father' to 'Our Mother'. It is a work that probably has more impact now, when sexual inequality

is still obvious, than it will have in the future. It deals with what could be called 'threshold values'. It makes us wonder what distinctions it may be appropriate to make in periods of change.

Corresponding to the different forms of failure are different kinds of obstacles. Except for psychological obstacles, which are mostly a matter of anticipation, obstacles appear unexpectedly or contrast with expectation in the overall plan. Alice Aycock expected good weather when the rains came. If she had expected rain, she could have made a number of adjustments – she could have planned the opening for another time and place, or she could have designed a different sort of work. When an obstacle stops the action completely, all the energy that has existed as expectation is homeless. What one feels is a sense of loss.

More and more we find instances of things that work in photograph or in reproduction but not in reality. When something works photographically but not actually, one thing that might be wrong is scale or proportion. Scale has a specific, narrow margin of error, and is very sensitive to degree or amount. I take these to be larger issues. Sometimes everything in the recipe can be right except the proportion of the ingredients. We need something more than perfect aim. Our arrow must go far enough to reach the target, and not so far that we overshoot it. In many fields, excess is a kind of deficiency. Twice as much is not twice as good. There is a critical threshold beyond which is error.

Often things fail only in amount – too this or too that. Too aggressive, too argumentative, too arrogant, too arty, too big, too coercive, too confused, too cultured, too dangerous, too derivative, too illustrative, too intellectual, too immature, too limited, too self-conscious, too sentimental, too sloppy, too shy, too subtle, too thin, too little. Too much. The excessive is our preferred value judgement. Which extremes do we value? The kinds of extremes we find objectionable are gauges of our attitudes and values.

Just as all vision has its blind spots, all images have a field of eclipse. Creating the image is only part of the problem. Somehow the image must penetrate the viewer's mind. Images as complex structures are subject to a whole range of snares, traps and blockages. And they always carry with them a great deal of additional information.

Failure within the general area of image-making presents its own set of problems and unites a diverse range of artists in this show. Though perhaps not initially obvious, the work of Lawrence Weiner falls under the heading of image-making. How? Weiner's work fails, he says, because 'no one knew what it looked like'. In other words, the image didn't carry at all. The gift remains ungiven.

The best artist is the imperfect artist. (Wyndham Lewis)

Intentional Existence

In what ways are we mindful of our failures? Sometimes, of course, not at all. There are times when pain blocks a conscious recognition, when our failure taints our own abilities and what we and others expect of ourselves. It is generally felt that we 'own' our failures in a different sense than our successes. We share success; failure, no matter what, is more private. Thus, we also conspire to protect our friends from their failures. This illusory protection adds another layer to the pain, sometimes even damaging those it tries to protect. This is the failure in failure; by comparison, the original failure is refreshingly simple and minor. The difficulty we have in containing failure is probably the reason some people view it as contagious. And yet the emphasis is not quite right: a failure when recognized is never so serious as when it isn't recognized. A balance is restored. We could even say that an acknowledged failure does not exist.

Inventors, I suspect, have a very high failure rate, but their attitude of 'try-try-again' protects, within society, the freedom to persevere. Edison once said that he failed his way to success. Nowadays we tend to make collective the kind of individualism that Edison represented. Now we do things in groups. Someone gave me a quote from a Silicon Valley executive: 'We tell our people', he said, 'to make at least ten mistakes a day. If you're not making ten mistakes a day, you're not trying hard enough.' Imagine the change if we valued a list of major failures on a person's resumé. If it is true that only failure or anticipated failure is the author of change, a list of failures would be more revealing than a list of successes.

As a scientific method the ideal experimental sequence is to make predictions based on observations and then to look for the facts to prove the hypothesis wrong. You look for failure and hope you won't find it. This is a middle-ground alternative to looking only for success but it is still several steps away from seeing failure as positive.

We may fall short of our goals but, even in our failures, those things for which we strive somehow endure – precisely because we are striving for them. They have an *intentional existence*. We intend (that is, lean toward) a more perfect state and the goal of that dream or striving locates itself mysteriously in the work. I'd like to suggest that some great works of art might themselves be failures and moreover, that their failure contributes to their greatness. I also think it is possible that there is more genuine content in failure than in success. Sometimes the failures of big ideas are more impressive than the successes of little ones. [...]

1 'The Success of Failure' (organized by Independent Curators Incorporated, 1987–88).

Joel Fisher, extracts from 'Judgement and Purpose', in Joel Fisher, ed., *The Success of Failure* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1987) 8–10; 10–11.