

Art

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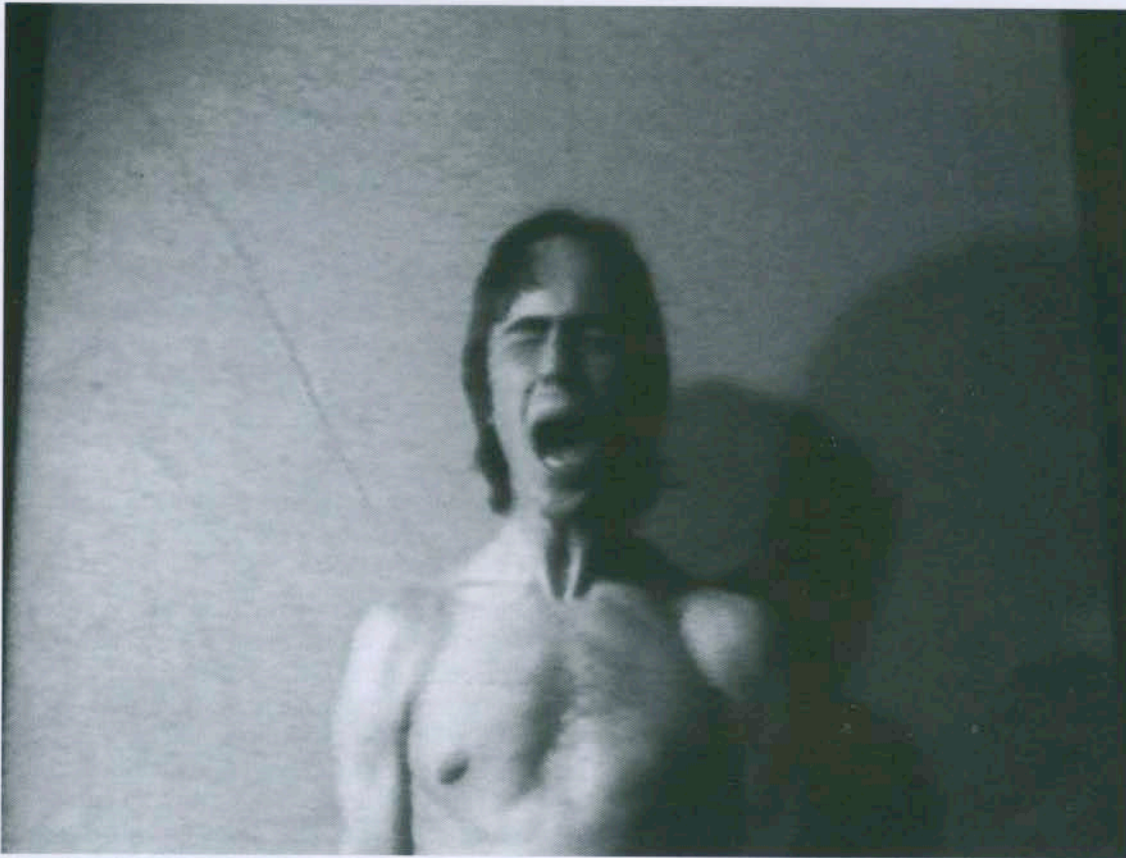
Art Failure
Lisa Le Feuvre

Art & Music
David Briers

Conrad Atkinson
Michael Corris



ART FAILURE

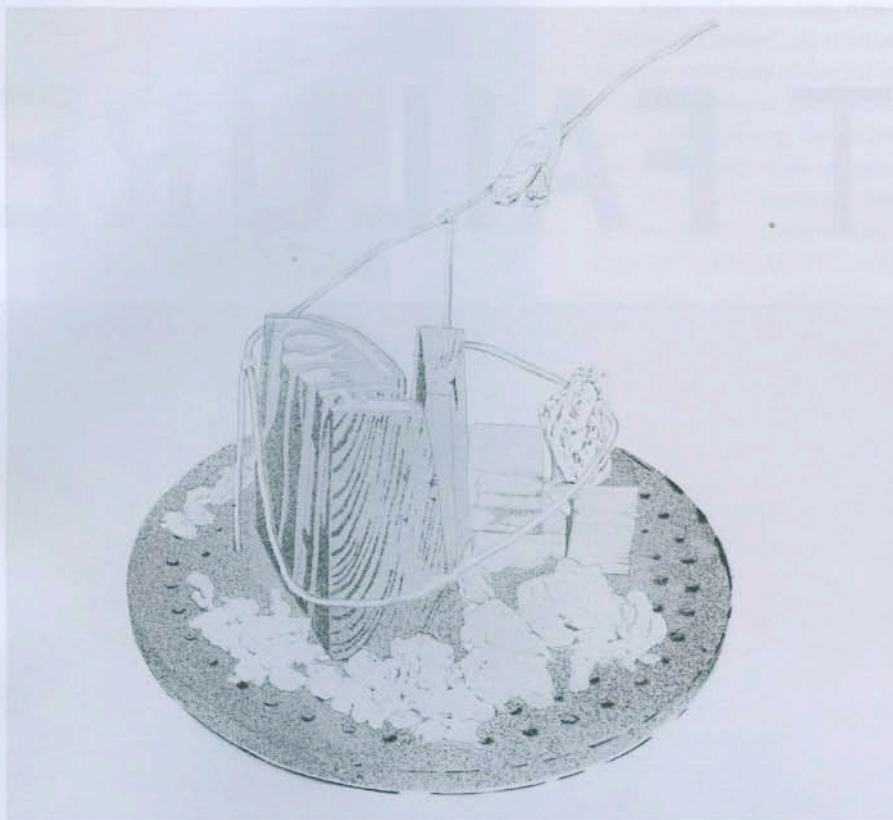


David Critchley *Pieces I Never Did* 1979 video still

Lisa Le Feuvre discusses the paradoxes of failure in art.

LAST YEAR AN EXHIBITION AT KUNSTHAUS BASELAND, TITLED 'THE ART OF FAILURE', EXPLORED WAYS ARTISTS HAVE RESPONDED TO UNCERTAINTY AND INSTABILITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY. Identifying failure as a symptom of our times, the selection of artworks included Céal Floyer's *Trash* which turned attention to discarded material from computer-user interfaces; Deimantas Narkevicius's *Once in the XX Century* showing the dismantling of a Lenin monument in Vilnius; and Rosemarie Trockel's *Continental Divide* where the artist fights and argues with her double over the question, 'who is the best artist?' The 2006 Nordic Festival of Contemporary Art presented a series of artist commissions addressing absurdity in the face of failure in the exhibition 'Fail again. Fail Better' – the title taken from Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho*, his 1983 prose poem concerned with the futility of the act of expression, the failure of

Clare Stephenson
The Failure 2004



language, and divergences between intention and reception. In 1987 the artist Joel Fisher curated an exhibition titled 'The Success of Failure', an anthology of works that were not made for various reasons – Keith Sonnier rejected a work on discovering the unacceptable conditions at a factory making a component; Alice Aycock was hampered by rain; Paul Thek rejected a painting as it failed to follow through his intentions.

The concept of failure seems pertinent to contemporary practice, operating across different modes of address and definition: be it turning attention to failed promises and myths of the Avant Garde, as can be seen in the practice of Clare Stephenson; setting out to realise assumed impossible tasks, as in Janette Parris's performances; or working with inadequacies of language and representation, for example Cerith Wyn Evans's explorations of relationships between communication and miscommunication. Active claims are also being made on the 'space of failure' – for example in Matt Calderwood's work. In *Ground Experiment #1*, 1998, Calderwood carefully places a paving slab on the floor and on each corner, following careful measurement, he places a coaster and then a wine glass. A second slab is balanced on the top, on which the artist then stands and jumps until the glasses shatter and the platform falls – a surprisingly long process. In his 2007 exhibition 'Projections' at David Risley Gallery, Calderwood presented five large plasterboard sculptures that are not made so well, and in fact would fall over if their weight was not corrected by containers of water counterbalancing the objects.

Paradoxes are at the heart of all dealings with

failure – it is both a position to take, yet one that cannot be strived for; it can be investigated, yet is too vague to be defined. It is related to, but not analogous to, error, doubt and irony. Through failure, one can potentially stumble on the unexpected – it is a strategy utilised in the practices of business, politics and entrepreneurship. Yet, to strive to fail is to go against socially accepted drives towards ever better success. Failure, when divorced from a defeatist, disappointed or unsuccessful position, is shifted from being a simply judgemental term. Between the two subjective poles of success and failure lies a space of potentially productive operations. Rather than being a space of mediocrity, failure is required in order to keep a system open and to raise questions rather than answers. Without the doubt that failure ushers in, any situation becomes closed and in danger of becoming dogmatic.

In 1979 David Critchley made a video work titled *Pieces I Never Did*, shown in December at Fieldgate Gallery in the exhibition 'Analogue & Digital'. The artist talks to the camera describing 18 propositions for artworks, taking in performance, film, video, installation and sculpture, each one never moving beyond notes in a sketchbook. Critchley sits at his desk seemingly bored by his ideas, at other times a little embarrassed, carefully describing his now obsolete thoughts. The 35-minute tape is shown on three monitors, slightly out of sync, creating a continuous litany of rejected possibilities. One plan that he had was to record himself shouting 'shut up' until he 'couldn't shout any more'; however, he felt that there 'didn't seem any reason to do that particular one and I forgot

about it'. Paradoxically his descriptions are constantly interrupted by realisations, often impeding the descriptive accounts. Throughout, the video cuts to the artist, now semi-naked, standing against a wall and shouting, 'shut up' until his voice disappears from over-use. He describes an idea to fling himself around a constructed room until it gave way; to change the colour of his body by having things thrown at it; and a work where 'apples' is written to obliterate a text – with the same methodology then applied to speech, so that the words 'apples, apples', repeated ad infinitum, block out the sound of his voice.

Critchley describes (while eating an apple) the failures of translation between writing something down and its realisation as an artwork. The words are mashed up as he crunches away. For an artwork to 'work' it must go beyond descriptive language otherwise there is no need for it to be made. This process brings the work into a negotiation with doubt and error, which are exacerbated when the artist releases control once the work is ready to embrace the possibilities of failure, when the work is presented to an audience. Another idea Critchley recounts, and enacts, is to set a camera on one end of a plank while he jumps about on the other end, a plan that would lead inevitably to an unreliable documentary as the camera would move away from the subject, or even break in the process. The description brings to mind Matthew Crawley's 1999 work with the self-explanatory title: *Turning on a video camera, opening it up, and poking around in there until it breaks*, or Steve McQueen's *Catch* of 1997, that shows the artist and his sister throwing a video camera back and forth while it is recording. This performed document is a film-as-event that, as with much of McQueen's practice, brings about a physical relationship to the film; it is head-spinning and disorienting as one tries to make sense of what is being shown. McQueen engages with the impossibilities and resistances of representation, and does so with a politically charged attitude, mindful of the failures inherent in the very operations of attempting to show experience.

As Critchley's *Pieces I Never Did* continues, the screaming of 'shut up' persists and the dominant narrative slips between the professional account of rejected ideas and the, at turns, angry and tragic figure demanding an end to some unspecified conversation. It is as if the artist is desperately blanking out this rational description of works that were never made, proposals perhaps rejected because the idea was too flawed or dangerous, or because another artist could make the same piece better, or that it was irrelevant in some way – or that he simply forgot about. All the while, these now-made works annoyingly interrupt the narrative of unrealised works. Other, more recent, catalogues of unrealised projects are Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Unbuilt Roads* or the online archive *Unrealised Projects* devised by artists Sam Ely and Lynn Harris. These collections show proposals that have been deemed failures before they have been realised, yet nonetheless they are released into the sphere of critical engagement.

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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. One example is the fully operational *B-Car*, 1975, a lightweight vehicle he described as being able to travel 100 miles per hour at 100 miles per gallon. 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-failure, though, raises the question 'what if it was tried again?'. With an adjustment could countless model airplanes be manufactured in a day? The answer is not the point. Repetition is a close ally of failure – as Beckett states in *Worstward Ho*: 'All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' Burden's is a practice suffused with possibilities where questions are posed in a consideration of how structures and limits shape the world.

The artist Paul Ramirez-Jonas addresses the hierarchies of failure through an exploration of the spaces between desire for progress and actual experience. The 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 taken out of service. Utopian hopes and ultimate commercial



Paul Ramirez-Jonas
Broadside 2007

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. In *Broadside*, 2007, Ramirez-Jonas uses the quintessential symbol of the author – the typewriter. But these machines type on to thick slabs of wet clay, turning the process into something dirty, messy and fragile, since the brittle nature of the unfired clay will result in it cracking and breaking. Presented on a portable lectern, the slabs stand awaiting public reading, and are inevitably damaged in some way by transportation. Rather than producing original texts, Ramirez-Jonas transcribes existing passages; this activity is reminiscent of the ultimate occupation of Gustave Flaubert's characters from his 1881 novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Following the inheritance of a fortune, a pair of copy clerks, François Denys Bartholomée Bouvard and Juste Romain Cyrille Pécuchet, set out to increase their knowledge. Taking up residence in the countryside, armed with an expanding library, they try their hand at experiments that include farming, medicine, museology, love, garden design, distilling alcohol – each one costing more than it

should, and ultimately ending in complete failure as they swallow reference books whole, refusing to analyse information or synthesise conflicting positions. Eventually their thirst for knowledge settles on the task of copying and cataloguing everything that comes into their possession, with no desire or use for any engagement with the content.

While Critchley munches on his apple in *Pieces I Never Did*, he points to the difference between what a work announces it is doing and what it actually does. A reliance on the intentionality of an author assumes that there is not a gap between plan and completion. Here the concept of irony becomes useful for thinking through failures of intention. Definitions of irony are many – Thomas Mann described in relation to Goethe that 'irony is that little grain of salt that makes the taste palatable', and Søren Kierkegaard that 'just as scientists claim that there is no true science without doubt, so it may be maintained with the same right that no genuinely human life is possible without irony'. The ironist deals with the how of something being said rather than the what, paying a distanced attention to the surface of what is being said in order to identify gaps in knowledge and productive miscommunication. These contradictions are the condition of communication – any cluster of signs brings together fragile gatherings of meaning that become reconfigured through their juxtaposition. The paradox of failure is that one cannot set out to fail as the evaluation process of success, measured by failure, becomes irrelevant. Of course, it is possible to engage in activities that one knows will not work. Beckett embraced failure: in 1949 the journal *Transition* published 'Three Dialogues', a text where Beckett ostensibly discusses painting with Georges Duthuit. Although published as dialogues, the text was primarily written by Beckett; many Beckett scholars now regard it as the closest the writer came to producing a statement of 'his own position. Beckett pronounces that failures are the inevitable outcome of artistic behaviour, that 'to be an artist is to fail as no other dare fail', continuing that the artist should make of 'this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation'. Failure is perhaps an act of bravery that involves daring beyond normal practice in order to enter a realm of doubt and not-knowing. The gap between the intention, presumably predicated on success, and realisation produces a generative space through the abstract possibility of failure, in doing so leaving a space for engagement and maintaining an incomplete system. ■

The Art of Failure was at Kunsthau Baselland May 5 to July 1 2007. **Fail again. Fail Better** was a part of 'Momentum, the Nordic Festival of Contemporary Art', September 2 and October 15 2006.

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