

Failure is an Option and Tempo Giusto

The conditions of a globalised, information-rich, consumerist world make it harder for us to reflect and then act rather than to merely react. The prevalence of success mantras leaves little room for creative risks and unintentional failures.

Yet failure as a transient state is a desired one, for artists, cultural producers and for viewers. Failure is one part of the cycle of attempting to succeed that includes asking questions, testing hypotheses and learning through experience. It is a necessary process for gaining a better understanding of the connections between our brains and our bodies, of the world around us and even of humanity.

Artists have always taken on challenges to ask the question “what if...?” and to reflect new ways of seeing and thinking. In making work, there would have been countless failed attempts at getting it right, but as art is a physical medium, even Conceptual Art, artists need to externalise and articulate their ideas in order to reflect and make decisions as to whether they can be art, or if they are any good.

In 1984, artist Joel Fisher curated a touring exhibition *The Success of Failure* that started at the Diane Brown Gallery in New York, where he highlighted that failure only exists as the counterpart to success. He asked the question of whether contemporary art, as in other areas of life, suppressed the stories of obstacles on the road to achievement. In the process of attaining any given goal he says “there are many ways to fail, it seems, but success is singular”, and continues that “we share success; failure, no matter what, is more private.” However as failure is as real and as felt as success, perhaps being transparent in the process of art-making reveals more about culture than merely the finished work of art. Playfully, Fisher proposes *anaprokopology* as a new branch of study for “success that is not achieved or is irrelevant.” He goes on to suggest that we list our major failures on our CVs, as a way of completing our achievements.

Not everyone agreed with Fisher’s proposition. Vivien Raynor writing for the New York Times thought that among others, Frank Stella’s *Borgia V* failed as a failure, in other words, it was too successful. Raynor wasn’t wrong, but what Fisher succeeded in was the airing of the paradox within the polarized terms of failure and success.

An exhibiting artist of *The Success of Failure* John Baldessari is quoted in Sarah Thornton’s *Seven Days in the Art World*, as saying “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.’”

Baldessari famously destroyed all his early works in his 1970 *Cremation* project, as did many before him such as Jasper Johns and Francis Bacon, and since, like Tracey Emin in 1990. These pivotal acts of destruction are not intended as failures but as catalysts to clear the deck and start afresh without the burden of

clutter of the studio and of the mind. Baldessari's *Cremation* work launched his influential role as a conceptual artist and Emin subsequently had her seminal *My Major Retrospective* solo show at White Cube.

In a more recent act Michael Landy's *Art Bin* at the South London Gallery (2009-10) called for artists and owners of art to dispose of their unwanted works. The 600m cubed transparent bin was "a monument to creative failure." Landy, who in 1991 had destroyed all of his over 7,000 belongings in his week-long performative work *Break Down* at the old C&A outlet in London's Oxford Street, continually attempts to decelerate the momentum of a super-consumerist society. While commenting on our unhealthy appetite for ever more material goods, the *Art Bin* is also a leveller for all things considered to have failed, whether it is made by a successful artist (such as Gillian Wearing, Jeremy Deller and Damian Hirst) or an unknown one. Success may be said to come from the courage and knowing when to self-edit, although the criteria for success are many and varied.

In 2006 Berlin based artists Marek Pisarsky and Anne Peschken, working under the collective name of Urban Art, collected tonnes of unwanted painted canvas from artists from all over Europe. Like Landy, they acknowledged the amount of surplus art, or art that the market has failed to favour, that had accumulated in artists' studios and homes. Perhaps by purging them, the artists could move on to make better work like Baldessari or Emin. Urban Art's agenda goes further to explore the conditions of art production within the wider context of social and political structures. Reflecting global production practices, their Globalpix company employed cheap labour from Poland as factory workers to reconstruct canvases by weaving strips of old paintings to produce new art. One of their 'Pixel' paintings, depicting a scene of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, was bought by a company whose headquarter is on the site of where it happened, with the profits shared by the workers who had made the painting. Here failure is literally embedded within success, and co-existing as in the idea of Yin and Yang.

The relevance of an artwork can also change with accidents that occur to celebrated artists' work. Ai Wei Wei's monumental *Template* sculpture collapsed in a storm at *Documenta 12* in 2007. Then in 2009, having been arrested by the Chinese authorities for criticising it for its failure to protect its citizens in a major natural disaster and then covering it up, the artist and architect remade the work, for a major solo exhibition in Munich. Here the sculpture, made up of reclaimed wooden doors and windows, engineered to keep the same twisted structure that resulted in the Kassel storm, spoke more of errors of social justice than the destructive forces of nature.

While many as yet unsuccessful experiments and ideas are kept private, collaborating artists Sam Ely and Lynn Harris have created a web-based archive of *Unrealised Projects*. By posting up selected participants' proposals and their documentation for the failed attempts, they offer readers access into an area of

artistic practice that is usually unseen. Among the artists, designers, curators, writers, performers and musicians who have contributed to *Unrealised Projects* is curator, teacher and writer Lisa Le Feuvre whose entry in the 2004 volume reads:

“For maybe the last five years or so I have wanted to realize a project on failure. For me failure is something fundamental not only to art, but to human conduct too. When we speak sometimes we talk at our loudest when we miscommunicate. I like it when things don't work: often then something better than expected happens. Exhibitions that fail fascinate me. On failing a space is opened up for the viewer, a possibility for dialogue.”

Le Feuvre has since published articles in *Art Monthly* (February 2008) and *Tate Etc.* (Spring 2010) exploring the question of 'what is failure?' In opening up the subject of failure as a valid and indispensable process in art-making and exhibition-making, she highlights creativity as activity that oscillates between perceived failure and success, concluding that “...[there] lies a space of potential where paradox rules and where transgressive activities can refuse dogma and surety. It is here we can celebrate failure.”

As discussed, failure can only be a temporary position for better things to come, as complete success can only be an idealised goal that may be reached in the strictest of conditions. Time is such a condition which governs all, whether it is in the workplace or in our domestic and social lives. The governing role we have assigned to time is so successful that often it is a major contributing factor in the production and viewing of art. One major criticism of public funding systems is that their parameters rarely take into account sufficient time for the incubation and development of good ideas, and rushed ideas often lead to mediocre art or half-baked projects. The challenge then in a deadline driven society is how artists and producers can take a long view, and ask the audience to do the same.

One such project is artist-curator Gavin Wade's *Strategic Questions*. In 2002 he began 40 projects in response to 40 questions written by R. Buckminster Fuller to a leading figure in the world building industry and then published in Fuller's *Utopia or Oblivion* in 1969. By 2008, Wade had curated and collaborated with other artists, writers and curators on 23 such projects, with artworks that are published, two of which had been part of the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007) and Guangzhou Triennial (2005). A sample of the questions are “What is comprehension?”, “What is structure?” and “Has man a function in universe?” Each of the 40 questions are realised at the right moment according to the various resources and locations available. In working through this seemingly life-long project, Wade and his collaborators inevitably ask many other open-ended questions, and use these as tools to engage with people and social systems. Over time the questions and their responses take on shifting contexts and thus the evaluation of whether the project succeeds or fails is suspended, and

eventually becomes less relevant than when and how the project impacts on people, art and culture.

Many cultural producers too have found that working within a framework of critical reflection and subsequent action, over a period of time, has achieved better projects with lasting legacies.

In 1998, after many years of working on possibly the largest contemporary art exhibition in Britain, Tate Liverpool director Lewis Biggs and the Henry Moore Sculpture Trust director Robert Hopper, launched *artranspennine* as an idea to “create a dialogue between art, people and place”. In this ambitious exhibition spanning Liverpool to Hull, the curators wanted to connect art to locations, with an emphasis on the deeper meaning with the people living there. *artranspennine* successfully exhibited newly commissioned and existing art in the designated region’s arts venues, large and small, and in other public spaces where art engaged directly with the public. It was an intention of the curators to produce *artranspennine* as a five-yearly exhibition which although never continued, set the precedence for the fledging Liverpool Biennial.

As Britain’s main international contemporary art biennial, it piloted in 1999 and has since built a growing reputation with the collaboration of Liverpool venues, curators and cultural producers. Festival Director Lewis Biggs recounted in a recent speech how small ideas grow organically, hopefully towards sustainability, and points to how the idea of *artranspennine* has also influenced Will Alsop’s proposed Supercity and The Northern Way project. Whereas Alsop’s vision provoked debate on how the North may be regenerated, The Northern Way has had backing from 3 regional development agencies and has delivered some iconic public sculptures across the North East, North West and Yorkshire regions.

One other notable but unintentional development from *artranspennine* was that artists Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson appropriated its big idea, branding, format and all, and curated *artranspennine 03*. By taking it over and then handing the baton to another artist-led duo Harfleet and Jack for the 2008 edition, the artists were simultaneously subverting the original’s grand claims while celebrating its potential as a serious cultural venture.

In work as in leisure, anxieties of competitiveness and making mistakes has encouraged us to react harder and faster, be more machine-like. What cultural producers and artists alike have demonstrated is that big ideas take time and failed attempts for resolution and fruition.

The proposition here for viewers is that when looking at art we can benefit greatly from actively asking questions and spending enough time to consider the work, so that it has a chance to 'speak' back from its various perspectives. One such method may be adopted from the growing Slow Movement. Originating in the

Slow Food campaigns, there are collectives of people all over the world challenging the wisdom of speed, and calling for us to find the right balance of fast and slow, or to borrow a term that Carl Honoré uses in his book *In Praise of Slow*, our own tempo giusto.

Kwong Lee
on behalf of Castlefield Gallery