

Failed paper: Skirting the call for and about failure through failure.

JORGE R. LUCERO

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

“It’s not that I
forgive myself if I
fail and it’s not that
I recognize the
potential of failure. I
purposefully cause
things to fail
because I’m looking
for the edge.”

Correspondence concerning this article should be
addressed to the author: jlucero@illinois.edu

*

This paper has a disrupted chronology. The asterisks separate individual components creating parenthesis around thoughts on failure, as well as actual acts of failure.



At the same time the paper is yours and you are free to begin reading it at any asterisk and in any order that makes sense or feels intuitive to your particular sensibilities, tastes, or intellectual tendencies. Put another way, there is no single way to read or go through this paper because this paper serves no purpose.



Making definitive statements like that regrettably make this paper much more purposeful, but dear reader I want you to know that I sincerely wish it didn't. From here on down you may read with or without purpose. Please reread sections, ignore sections, or pair sections for consumption as you see fit. You may experience the paper by arranging your encounters with it across prolonged stretches of time (years perhaps) to increase its potential uselessness and forgettability. You may, of course, read the paper in the sequence that is laid out here, inevitably breaking the conceptual infrastructure of the paper and forcing the paper to exist as a failure of intent, which would be okay too. The sequence you find here is a single, authoritative iteration of the paper and you can bow to it or rebel against it.



Either way you will be following directions. Having said that, you may look at this introductory caveat as a gift. Much like an abstract is a gift to the reader, you may see this opening paragraph as an open invitation to ignore this paper entirely. This is a failed paper whose failure is enacted by every person who reads up to this line; by every person who clicks on the Journal's hyperlink to its first page; or even every inadvertent or casual reading of its title in the Journal's table of contents.



It is a failure by every moment it is purposefully (or accidentally) ignored or shared in any whatsoever.

*

Conceptualism—what Luis Camnitzer (2007) distinguishes from the tidily canonized Conceptual Art—lends itself to the “failure” call of this special issue of the *JSTAE* by enacting and reflecting failure itself. Because conceptualisms are understood as strategies—rather than merely a select group of artworks that use ideas as material—their durational exhaustion, imperceptibility, undocumentability, deemphasis of productivity, and anti-artness (McEvelley, 2005) are stressed as major elements of their increasing—almost unavoidable—atrophy. The conceptualist gesture is frequently noted for its troubling of authorship and its decentering of origins, prescribed interpretations, and fixed meanings. In conceptualist gestures, art, writings, events, pedagogies, or other creative practices merely serve as a means by which the originator of the gesture partially or wholly removes themselves from the effect of that gesture. The effect of the gesture is the life of the gesture, and “life” in this case means the duration, inertia, and multiple meanings of the conceptualist gesture itself. Duchamp stated that the life of the conceptualist gesture extends—even—beyond the life of the maker: “the artist doesn’t count. He *does not count* (emphasis in original). Society takes what it wants [from the gesture]” (Duchamp in Tomkins, 2013, p.30). In other words, even the most successful, decidedly complete gestures remain unfinished and therefore—to an extent—failed. An external consumer—let’s say a

reader, student, or audience member—comes along and attempts to complete the original gesture by:

- * Infusing meaning(s) in the gesture.
- * Making connections between the gesture and something else.
- * Asking questions to others and to themselves.
- * Having their own creative response, which in the end may be virtually disconnected from the originating gesture.
- * Misunderstanding *or* uniquely understanding the gesture based on hundreds of situational and unpredictable factors.
- * *Or even*, outright rejecting the original gesture.

The consumer (reader, student, audience) of the gesture affirms Barthes (1968/77) in his germinal ode to the death of the author, “that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is the neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (p. 142).

Making is failure and if not failure, at least it is a type of death, atrophy, or disappearance. Again, Camnitzer (2014) talking about art and its overlap with education states that the ultimate goal of the artist and teacher is to become unessential. To quote him at length here would be wrong, right?

I like to think of them [art and education] as the same activity taking shape in different media. Again, different problems require different formats. I believe that any communication is by nature pedagogical—one tries to persuade one way or another—so I don’t see any particular difference between what is considered art and what is considered classroom activity. I can make the same case for writing and curating. And all activities should be creative and help expand knowledge. So a noncreative curator or teacher is a waste of time, and a nonpedagogical artist tends to deal with self-indulgence and self-therapy and therefore isn’t very useful either. I believe in empowerment. This means that the mission of a good teacher or a good artist is to help society to make them unnecessary, because those who are presently consumers of education or of art should be equipped to learn or create on their own, without intermediaries. Pedagogy for me, in that sense, is not a training device but an enabling tool, a way of helping viewers reach certain conclusions, and ultimately helping people access creation on their own without my assistance. (p. 95)

*

Seeing the call for this special issue caused me to think about how failure—in education particularly—is talked about as either remediable or redeemable.

Remediable: *How do we curb or surmount failure?* (Meaning how do we achieve success?)
or

Redeemable: *How do we make failure useful?* (Meaning how do we turn our failures into successes?)

Failure discourse in education is consistently coopted by the neoliberal ghost that haunts almost all of education's institutional moves and intentions. Under the seemingly positive objectives of growth, achievement, and productivity—even art education—reifies the rhetoric of success through failure. The business literature around eventual and cumulative success from failure is substantial (Argote and Todorova, 2007; Myers, Staats, and Gino, 2014) and its capitalist leanings shine a light on how this enacted theory plays out in schools and their art rooms. At the same time conceptualist art posits failure as a standalone, perhaps unredeemable, entity that either doesn't exist, atrophies, purports chaos, wades in formlessness, exists in poor taste, dies, is immeasurable, or is wholly unproductive (list loosely derived from Bois and Krauss, 1997, p.7).

In a move of impossible opposition to that trend I decided to construct a paper for this special issue on failure that is a mere failure in and of itself. This paper can't be used for anything. If this paper is ever used for something, then it has failed at being a failure. If it does that, then I guess I have successfully failed.

*

The thing about failures—like this paper—is that they eventually get celebrated for their unorthodox quirkiness and then—through a conceptualist turn—get used and consumed as successes. The real failures of this special issue are the papers that won't be accepted because they were too usual, too boring, too expected, too unscholarly, dumb, or too convoluted. Let's hope that this paper falls into one of those groups and is *still* published.



*

The American regionalist poet Richard Hugo published a book of lectures on writing called *The Triggering Town* in 1979. I use his little book to talk to my students about subject-matter and how to avoid being married to one's subject, urgencies, or whatever it is an art student might think their artwork needs to be about at any given moment. Hugo's book is a series of admonitions and encouragements that are formalist at first, but ultimately prompt the young writer/artist to learn to say what they want to say—sometimes—without even saying it. The lectures prompt the artist—in my opinion—to create meaning through a certain degree of licensed nonsense or diversion of attention. In some ways Hugo encourages the maker to divert their attention in order to discover something of intention unintentionally.

The poet puts down the title: "Autumn Rain." He finds two or three good lines about Autumn Rain. Then things start to break down. He cannot find anything more to say about Autumn Rain so he starts making up things, he strains, he goes abstract, he starts telling us the meaning of what he has already said. The mistake he is making, of course, is that he feels obligated to go on talking about Autumn Rain, because that, he feels is the subject. (Hugo, 1979, p. 4)

Hugo gives the writer/artist permission to "jump ship" when it comes to their subject. He discourages tackling big themes. "Think small" Hugo says, "if you have a big mind, that will show itself" (p. 7). *The Triggering Town* is an encouragement towards a blind, chance-driven,

and easy form of collage. The author is prompted to place one thing next to another and examine the consequences, try to identify the vibrations, look at the uneventfulness, do not disregard the schizophrenia, and by all means give reverence to the casualness, the minimal, and the irreverent gesture.

Franz West's collages show the potential extreme of what I'm referring to here. This collage is made by placing a mass-produced—perhaps “big-box” store—smiley-face sticker on a green piece of paper and what appears to be a found, torn, piece of paper at that.



Where are the cues or the education that comes from making this type of collage? There is a debunking of labor and especially labor's connection to worth. Does spending more time on something, the making of an artwork for example, make its value or quality increase? Is it better? Does practice always make perfect or does it sometimes create a kind of insanity based on recalcitrance and ignorance? Has the line of failure in art moved to the point where there are no longer failed artworks? Is everything potentially “interesting”? Do artworks that nudge the ethical line (e.g Santiago Sierra) leverage their ambivalence to become the greatest, most compelling works of art or are they flat out failures of humanity?

I don't grade art.

*

So for this failed essay I've taken my cue from Matthew Goulish—one of the founders of the Institute of Failure (<http://www.institute-of-failure.com/>)— and created a series of microlectures very similar to the ones he published in 2000 as *39 Microlectures: In proximity of performance*. Goulish's microlectures can be read in any order and I borrow that device for this essay. I have

broken up their placement in this paper with asterisks and not numbers to highlight the possibilities of a disrupted chronology. Please skip around. I shuffled them after I wrote them, so they're not in order anyway.

*

Goulish's (2000) failure list contains:

accident, mistake, weakness, inability, incorrect method, uselessness, incompatibility, embarrassment, confusion, redundancy, incoherence, unrecognizability, absurdity, invisibility, impermanence, decay, instability, forgetability, [and] disappearance. (p. 124)

Through Matthew Goulish's introduction to the world of failure I now think that I can study whatever I want for as long as I want to study it. I learned diverted attention from Richard Hugo and I learned prolonged attention from Matthew Goulish. When I was a younger teacher I aimed to present Goulish's pedagogy of prolonged attention (even to banalities) to my students. This mode of working initiated some incredible adventures and findings. The students and I lived school together. We rarely thought of it as school. We were bad at school, but we were good at life. We sought after that by leaving the building as much as possible. We brought the outside in as much as we could.

*

In 2002 I taught a course at Northside College Prep High School (NCPHS) called "F". The class was based on a class Matthew Goulish taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). His class, *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Failure* was a popular course at SAIC when I was a student there, but I never took it. At the same time I had been intrigued with how a teacher could take a seemingly discarded, anathema, and counter-intuitive topic—particularly in a school—and write an entire curriculum around it. I never contacted Goulish about his class but I borrowed the concept.

"F" as a course was important to the NCPHS community because the school had always had a culture of success. It wasn't just that the kids were good testers, which they were, and that the faculty was everything you could ask for from a vibrant, engaging, caring group of people (which we were); it was that everything about the school led to genuine spiritual, intellectual, physical, and creative success. During the time that I was at the school it was a well-rounded and nurturing community and it was actually those exact characteristics that allowed me to teach a class about failure. I wanted to take it to the extreme though. I wanted to see if we could explore unredeemable failure too. Could a failure occur and not be a "teaching moment" or a "new beginning"?

Once the students were in the class we aimed to reach the edge of "failure". To see if we could find failure that was neither redeemable nor remediable. We looked at lying and cheating, rejection, broken-heartedness, melancholy, depression, the unaesthetic, malfunction, decay, death, hell, extinction, and laziness. We looked at the paradoxical value of .300 batting averages

in baseball. We thought about lack of planning, examined Hitler's paintings, read about agony, and studied quitting. Failure was a mere entity that we could study. We made it valueless in order to deploy it for our own purposes, even if those purposes had no defined ends. Somehow we called this art.

*

I bring out my failure license on purpose. It's not that I forgive myself if I fail and it's not that I recognize the potential of failure. I purposefully cause things to fail because I'm looking for the edge. Where is the edge of art? For a few years now the edge of art has been at the academy. Now read carefully here, I'm not saying that the academy is at the edge of anything. I'm saying that when art touches up against the academy it meets one of its potential ends. I've been trying to get my presentation, *For Art's Sake, Stop Making Art* accepted on the National Art Education Association conference program for over two years now. Each year I reconceptualize and presumably strengthen my proposal and every year I get a rejection letter. I'll keep trying to submit it hoping—at this point—that it never gets accepted. *For Art's Sake, Stop Making Art* is a jab at what it means to have “made” things in our world and what it might mean if we can make “things” in the world that reverberate in other ways. I wonder if we can make “art” that is less aggressive than an object? Will this be the ultimate failure of art education?

There's a story about John Cage being taken to hear Handel's *Messiah*. At the conclusion of the concert, his companion—rather frustrated at Cage's lack of emotional reaction to the famous hallelujah chorus—asked him rather annoyed, “Don't you like being moved?” To which Cage legendarily responded with his typical wry wit, “I don't mind being moved, but I don't like to be pushed!” (in Lindenberger, 1994, p. 153). Is there a key in the types of ineffectual phenomena that Cage studied and tried to put in the world that might take us away from art as manipulation to another more lived—dare I say “natural”—type of art? Cage's work is noted for being influenced—like the works of many other mid-twentieth century artists—by Japanese aesthetics, philosophy, and religion (see Baas and Jacob, 2004; Munroe, 2009; and Larson, 2012) but I think that one might look at some of Cage's most unbearable work and understand it better in light of this anecdote about not wanting to be “pushed” by art. I use the term “unbearable” only to point to something that Cage himself identified in the work and that had to do with making choices. The generating of Cage's work by chance—or (looked at another way) controlled failure—brought forth artworks where the observer or audience is forced to make choices about what to pay attention to and what to ignore. Take for example the cacophonous *Musicircus* of 1967, which consisted of multiple musical acts doing their sets simultaneously over each other. As is encased in the name of the piece one of the inspirations for this piece came from the three ring circus, an experience where three simultaneous acts were being performed and the spectator was forced with the decision to look at one ring at the exclusion of the other two. What Cage's work highlights here is that inattention is merely another form of attention, one that is conditioned by the “nature” of things. Much more recently the British polyglot artist Martin Creed (2014) put it more bluntly when he quoted the German painter Gerhard Richter as saying that he wanted his work to be “stupid like nature” (§ 3). Creed has made this claim about his own work although he also observes it in artists (e.g. Bob Dylan) whom he has a kinship with, where formlessness, unpredictability, and failure are prominent and ultimately unresolved.

*

Image credits (in order of appearance in this paper):

1. *Massage 3*. Bob Stockfield, Courtesy: National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health.
2. *Massage 1*. Bob Stockfield, Courtesy: National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health.
3. *Plant pathologist Rick Bennett examines fungi that may be used for biological control of pernicious weeds*. Scott Bauer. Used under fair use license, United States Department of Agriculture image databank: <http://www.ars.usda.gov/is/graphics/photos/k4652-1.htm>
4. *Photograph of the West Search Room with Empty Library Shelves, 01/06/1936*. Created by General Services Administration. No known copyright restrictions.
5. *Yanks trudge through snow from Humpange, Belgium to St. Vith. Soldiers are with the Co. Co. 23rd Armored Bn., of the 7th Armored Division*. The U.S. National Archives, created by Department of Defense. ca. 1974-5/15/1984. No known copyright restrictions.
6. *Untitled: Sticker and paint on paper*. West, F. (1977-80). Copyright (per The Franz West Foundation): The legal successor of the artist.

*

References

- Argote, L. and Todorova, G. (2007). Organization learning. In Hodgkins, G. P. and Ford, J. K. (Eds.). *International review of industrial and organizational psychology*, 22(1), pp. 193-230.
- Baas, J. and Jacob, M.J. (2004). *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Barthes, R. (1968/77). *Image Music Text*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bois, Y.A. and Krauss, R. E. (1997). *Formless: A User's guide*. New York: Zone Books.
- Camnitzer, L. (2014). *Luis Camnitzer in conversation with Alexander Alberro*. New York: Fundacion Cisneros.
- Camnitzer, L. (2007). *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of liberation*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Creed, M. (2014, June 18). Why I love Bob Dylan. *The Guardian*. Retrieved on November 15, 2014 from <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/jun/18/martin-creed-why-i-love-bob-dylan> .
- Goulish, M. (2000). *39 Microlectures: In Proximity of performance*. Oxon, UK: Routledge.
- Hugo, R. (1979). *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co..
- Larson, K. (2012). *Where the heart beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Lindenberger, H. (1994). Regulated Anarchy: The *Europeras* and the Aesthetics of Opera. In Perloff, M. and Junkerman, C. (Eds.). *John Cage: Composed in America*, pp. 144-66. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- McEvelly, T. (2005). *The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post-Modernism*. New York: McPherson & Company.
- Munroe, A. (2009). *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1960-1989*. New York: Guggenheim Museum.
- Myers, C.G., Staats, B. R., and Gino, F. (2014). "My Bad!" How internal attribution and ambiguity of responsibility affect learning from failure. Working Paper, Harvard

Business School. Retrieved on November 15, 2014 from
http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/14-104_59aab8f4-6050-403c-bb0e-c91728b95f02.pdf

Tomkins, C. (2013). *Marcel Duchamp: The Afternoon Interviews*. New York: Badlands Unlimited.