

THE AMBIGUITY OF PLAY

Brian Sutton-Smith



QZ
541
S8



HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
1997

by contrast, can be a playfully irreverent game of denigrating those who are not present.

A list of activities that are often said to be play forms or play experiences themselves is presented below. The terms illustrate the great diversity of play phenomena, although they do not indicate the even wider extension of informal play through all other spheres of life. This list itself awaits both adequate description and adequate play theorizing, because the items that it contains are often typically called by other names, such as entertainments, recreations, pastimes, and hobbies, as if it would be an embarrassment to admit that they can also be called play. Each of these states of mind, activities, or events could be described as has I have described with travel and gossip, above. The boundaries between them are never as discrete as listing them here might imply. They are arranged in order from the mostly more private to the mostly more public.

Mind or subjective play: dreams, daydreams, fantasy, imagination, ruminations, reveries, Dungeons and Dragons, metaphors of play, and playing with metaphors.

Solitary play: hobbies, collections, (model trains, model airplanes, model power boats, stamps), writing to pen pals, building models, listening to records and compact discs, constructions, art projects, gardening, flower arranging, using computers, watching videos, reading and writing, novels, toys, travel, Civil War reenactments, music, pets, reading, woodworking, yoga, antiquing, flying, auto racing, collecting and rebuilding cars, sailing, diving, astrology, bicycling, handicrafts, photography, shopping, backpacking, fishing, needlework, quilting, bird watching, crosswords, and cooking.

Playful behaviors: playing tricks, playing around, playing for time, playing up to someone, playing a part, playing down to someone, playing upon words, making a play for someone, playing upon others as in tricking them, playing hob, putting something into play, bringing it into play, holding it in play, playing fair, playing by the rules, being played out, playing both ends against the middle, playing one's cards well, playing second fiddle.

Informal social play: joking, parties, cruising, travel, leisure, dancing, roller-skating, losing weight, dinner play, getting laid, potlucks,

malls, hostessing, babysitting, Saturday night fun, rough and tumble, creative anachronism, amusement parks, intimacy, speech play (riddles, stories, gossip, jokes, nonsense), singles clubs, bars and taverns, magic, ham radio, restaurants, and the Internet.

Vicarious audience play: television, films, cartoons, concerts, fantasylands, spectator sports, theater, jazz, rock music, parades (Rose Bowl, mummies', Thanksgiving), beauty contests, stock-car racing, Renaissance festivals, national parks, comic books, folk festivals, museums, and virtual reality.

Performance play: playing the piano, playing music, being a play actor, playing the game for the game's sake, playing New York, playing the fishes, playing the horses, playing Iago, play voices, play gestures, playbills, playback, play by play, player piano, playgoing, playhouses, playlets.

Celebrations and festivals: birthdays, Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, Halloween, gifting, banquets, roasts, weddings, carnivals, initiations, balls, Mardi Gras, Fastnacht, Odunde.

Contests (games and sports): athletics, gambling, casinos, horses, lotteries, pool, touch football, kite fighting, golf, parlor games, drinking, the Olympics, bullfights, cockfights, cricket, Buzkashi, poker, gamesmanship, strategy, physical skill, chance, animal contests, archery, arm wrestling, board games, card games, martial arts, gymnastics.

Risky or deep play: Caving, hang gliding, kayaking, rafting, snowmobiling, orienteering, snowballing, and extreme games such as bungee jumping, windsurfing, sport climbing, skateboarding, mountain biking, kite skiing, street luge, ultrarunning, and sky jumping.

The Diversity of Players, Play Agencies, and Play Scenarios

The ambiguity of play, as well as lying in this great diversity of play forms, owes some of its force to the parallel diversity of the players. There are infant, preschool, childhood, adolescent, and adult players, all of whom play somewhat differently. There are male and female players. There are gamblers, gamesters, sports, and sports players, and there are playboys and playgirls, playfellows, playful

and play terms. The word *rhetoric* is used here in its modern sense, as being a persuasive discourse, or an implicit narrative, wittingly or unwittingly adopted by members of a particular affiliation to persuade others of the veracity and worthwhileness of their beliefs. In a sense, whenever identification is made with a belief or a cause or a science or an ideology, that identification reveals itself by the words that are spoken about it, by the clothes and insignia worn to celebrate it, by the allegiances adopted to sustain it, and by the hard work and scholarly devotion to it, as well as by the theories that are woven within it (Burke, 1950). Authors seek to persuade us in innumerable ways that their choice and their direction of research or study is sound. These identifications of theirs, and their persuasiveness, implicit or otherwise, are the intellectual odor that is to be known here as their rhetoric. It needs to be stressed that what is to be talked about here as rhetoric, therefore, is not so much the substance of play or of its science or of its theories, but rather the way in which the underlying ideological values attributed to these matters are both subsumed by the theorists and presented persuasively to the rest of us. As the term is used here, the rhetorics of play express the way play is placed in context within broader value systems, which are assumed by the theorists of play rather than studied directly by them. Having said that, however, it must be admitted that it is still almost impossible to suppress the desire to ask the question: "Yes, all right, but what is play itself?"—an impulse that the reader needs to stifle for now, though it will not go untrifled with before this work is played out.

It follows that all the sciences, physical and social, whatever their empirical virtues, are presented here as being maintained by rhetorical means, whether these be seen optimistically, for example, as the "scientific attitude," or somewhat more cynically, as the way in which disciplines, through controlling a knowledge base, enhance their own political power (Foucault, 1973). In what follows, the rhetorics that are the focus of this work will be called popular ideological rhetorics, and where necessary, these will be distinguished from what are called scientific or scholarly rhetorics, as well as from disciplinary rhetorics and personal rhetorics. The popular rhetorics are large-scale cultural "ways of thought" in which most of us participate in one way or another, although some specific groups will be more strongly

advocates for this or that particular rhetoric. The larger play rhetorics are part of the multiple broad symbolic systems—political, religious, social, and educational—through which we construct the meaning of the cultures in which we live. It should be made clear that I do not assume these value presuppositions to be necessarily in vain or negative, nor to be without considerable value to those committed to them. In fact, it is impossible to live without them. The issue is only whether, by becoming confused with our play theories, they set us in pursuit of false explanations or false grandiosity. One promise of such an analysis as I propose is that, by revealing these rhetorical underpinnings of the apparently diverse theoretical approaches to play, there is the possibility of bridging them within some more unifying discourse. *The Recovery of Rhetoric* (Roberts and Good, 1993) offers much optimism for the possibilities of a more genuinely interdisciplinary organization of any subject matter, not excluding that of play. However, opinion has to be reserved on the integrating promise of rhetorical analysis until there is an examination of the present popular rhetorics specific to play and their interaction with the scholarly studies that have arisen around them. It is just as possible that the rhetorics, when explicated, will be revealed to be themselves a deceptive gloss over other, far more fundamental cultural disagreements. For example, play's supposed frivolity may itself be a mask for play's use in more widespread systems for denigrating the play of other groups, as has been done characteristically throughout history by those of higher status against the recreations of those of lower status (Armitage, 1977).

Seven Rhetorics

The seven rhetorics to be presented in this work are characterized as follows.

The rhetoric of play as progress, usually applied to children's play, is the advocacy of the notion that animals and children, but not adults, adapt and develop through their play (Chapters 2 and 3). This belief in play as progress is something that most Westerners cherish, but its relevance to play has been more often assumed than demonstrated. Most educators over the past two hundred years seem to have so needed to represent playful imitation as a form of children's

socialization and moral, social, and cognitive growth that they have seen play as being primarily about development rather than enjoyment.

The rhetoric of play as fate (Chapter 4) is usually applied to gambling and games of chance, and it contrasts totally with the prior rhetoric. It is probably the oldest of all of the rhetorics, resting as it does on the belief that human lives and play are controlled by destiny, by the gods, by atoms or neurons, or by luck, but very little by ourselves, except perhaps through the skillful use of magic or astrology. This rhetoric enjoys only an underground advocacy in the modern world. It is no longer a widespread and conscious value system among the intellectual elites, though it remains popular among lower socioeconomic groups. It contrasts most strongly also with those modern theories of leisure that argue that the distinguishing feature of play is that it is an exercise of free choice.

The rhetoric of play as power (Chapter 5), usually applied to sports, athletics, and contests, is—like fate, community identity, and frivolity—a rhetoric of ancient hue. These four all predate modern times and advocate collectively held community values rather than individual experiences. Recently these ancient rhetorics have been given much less philosophical attention than the modern three, progress, the imaginary, and the self, though they are more deep seated as cultural ideologies. The rhetoric of play as power is about the use of play as the representation of conflict and as a way to fortify the status of those who control the play or are its heroes. This rhetoric is as ancient as warfare and patriarchy. It is an anathema to many modern progress- and leisure-oriented play theorists.

The rhetoric of play as identity, usually applied to traditional and community celebrations and festivals, occurs when the play tradition is seen as a means of confirming, maintaining, or advancing the power and identity of the community of players (Chapter 6). Chapter 7, in turn, deals with the place of the rhetorics of both power and identity in children's play. Because so much twentieth-century attention has been given to children's play as a form of progress, I have found it valuable to present a more balanced rhetorical advocacy of the character of their play from the point of view of these other rhetorics, power and fantasy, both in Chapter 7 and later in Chapter 9 on child phantasmagoria.

The rhetoric of play as the imaginary (Chapter 8), usually applied to playful improvisation of all kinds in literature and elsewhere, idealizes the imagination, flexibility, and creativity of the animal and human play worlds. This rhetoric is sustained by modern positive attitudes toward creativity and innovation. Chapter 9, on child phantasmagoria, attempts to moderate some of this idealization by indicating the large amounts of inversion and irrationality that are also a typical part of play's flexibility. The rhetoric of progress, the rhetoric of the self, and the rhetoric of the imaginary constitute the modern set of rhetorics, with a history largely elaborated ideologically only in the past two hundred years.

The rhetoric of the self (Chapter 10) is usually applied to solitary activities like hobbies or high-risk phenomena like bungee jumping, but it need not be so proscribed. These are forms of play in which play is idealized by attention to the desirable experiences of the players—their fun, their relaxation, their escape—and the intrinsic or the aesthetic satisfactions of the play performances. Here the central advocacies of the secular and consumerist manner of modern life invade the interpretations of play and are questioned because of their twentieth-century relativity.

The rhetoric of play as frivolous (Chapter 11) is usually applied to the activities of the idle or the foolish. But in modern times, it inverts the classic "work ethic" view of play, against which all the other rhetorics exist as rhetorics of rebuttal. But frivolity, as used here, is not just the puritanic negative, it is also a term to be applied more to historical trickster figures and fools, who were once the central and carnivalesque persons who enacted playful protest against the orders of the ordained world. This chapter is placed last in this work because of its largely reflexive character, as commentary on all the other rhetorics. Historically frivolity belongs with the ancient set that includes fate, power, and identity.

I should note that although each of these rhetorics is discussed in the singular, there are multiple variants within each category, so that it might be more proper to speak of the plural *rhetorics* throughout. To repeat, each is called a rhetoric because its ideological values are something that the holders like to persuade others to believe in and to live by. Much of the time such values do not even reach a level of conscious awareness. People simply take it for granted, for example,

- ORLAN, *Carnal Art* (2001) Produced and directed by Stephan Oriach, 75 minutes, Myriapodus Films, 35 mm.
- Rose, Barbara (1993) "Is it art? Orlan and the transgressive act," *Art in America* 81, 2 (February): 82-7.
- Wyschogrod, Edith (1990) *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zovilé, Pierre (1998) "Refiguration-self hybridation: a collaborative work in the cyberspace," 14 October, <<http://www.isea.qc.ca/webcast/montreal/zovile.html>> (10 October 2001).

READER CROSS-REFERENCES

- Carlson – on performance art
- Goffman, Gabler, Kaprow – the self presented as art
- Turner, Bell – connecting ritual and performance
- Mason – a different kind of ritual
- Butler – the performance of the female body
- Grotowski, Strasberg, Harding, Barba – the commitment of the performer's whole self to the performance

Part IV

PLAY

To play means to do something that is neither "serious" nor "real." Yet play is nonetheless important, for it demands risks and promises rewards that may have consequences for our everyday lives. We play to escape, to step out of everyday existence, if only for a moment, and to observe a different set of rules. We play to explore, to learn about ourselves and the world around us. Play may be formal and organized, as in a professional football game, or informal and unpredictable, as with children in a park. Play can be competitive or cooperative, goal-oriented or open-ended. Play may involve an erosion or inversion of social status (as in the Trinidad Carnival). It may involve lying and deceit (as in a confidence game). Often the thrill of risk is itself the reward for playing, as in gambling, sky-diving, and other activities which pit the player's skill and determination against the vagaries of chance.

In performance studies, play is understood as the force of uncertainty which counterbalances the structure provided by ritual. Where ritual depends on repetition, play stresses innovation and creativity. Where ritual is predictable, play is contingent. But all performances, even rituals, contain some element of play, some space for variation. And most forms of play involve pre-established patterns of behavior. Hence, as Schechner writes, "one definition of performance might be: ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play" (2002: 79).

One of the first modern scholars to analyze play was the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. In "The nature and significance of play as a cultural phenomenon" (1950 [1938]), Huizinga presents the argument that play is an intrinsic element of human culture. "Law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science," he writes, "all are rooted in the primeval soil of play" (page 120). In "A theory of play and fantasy" (1972), Gregory Bateson examines the role of play in communication, and of communication in play. Play involves "real" words and actions that are paradoxically "not-real" because they are "framed" within the context of play. Bateson seeks to understand how people do and do not recognize such "frames" and paradoxes as a means toward a greater understanding of the human psyche. The essay concludes with the recognition that such paradoxes are necessary for further development – we need to play in order to adapt, survive, and evolve. Play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith, in "The ambiguity of play" (1997), offers a counterpoint to Bateson by casting a critical eye on how the rhetoric of play infuses scientific and cultural discourse. Exploring concepts such as "the play of the gods" and "the universe at play," Sutton-Smith

asks whether the seemingly infinite expansion of the term "play" to all aspects of existence is appropriate or desirable, and what its implications may be for the study of play. Finally, artist Allan Kaprow describes the relationship between play and experimental art in "Just doing" (1997).

REFERENCE

Schechner, Richard (2000) *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, London: Routledge.

THE NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF
PLAY AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

Johan Huizinga

Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing. We can safely assert, even, that human civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play. Animals play just like men. We have only to watch young dogs to see that all the essentials of human play are present in their merry gambols. They invite one another to play by a certain ceremoniousness of attitude and gesture. They keep to the rule that you shall not bite, or not bite hard, your brother's ear. They pretend to get terribly angry. And – what is most important – in all these doings they plainly experience tremendous fun and enjoyment. Such romplings of young dogs are only one of the simpler forms of animal play. There are other, much more highly developed forms: regular contests and beautiful performances before an admiring public.

Here we have at once a very important point: even in its simplest forms on the animal level, play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a *significant* function – that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something. If we call the active principle that makes up the essence of play "instinct", we explain nothing; if we call it "mind" or "will" we say too much. However we may regard it, the very fact that play has a meaning implies a non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself.

Psychology and physiology deal with the observation, description, and explanation of the play of animals, children, and grown-ups. They try to determine the nature and significance of play and to assign it its place in the scheme of life. The high importance of this place and the necessity, or at least the utility, of play as a function are generally taken for granted and form the starting-point of all such scientific researches. The numerous attempts to define the biological function of play show a striking variation. By some the origin and fundamentals of play have been described as a discharge of superabundant vital energy, by others as the satisfaction of some "imitative instinct", or again as simply a "need" for relaxation. According to one theory play constitutes a training of the young creature for the

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

INTRODUCTION//012

DISSATISFACTION AND REJECTION//022

IDEALISM AND DOUBT//066

ERROR AND INCOMPETENCE//114

EXPERIMENT AND PROGRESS//164

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES//226

BIBLIOGRAPHY//231

INDEX//233

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS//239

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.

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

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

The thinker Paul Ricoeur considered in detail the processes of memory and recollection, noting that perfect memory, like Gonzalez-Torres' *Perfect Lovers*, is replete with both error and perfection. Ricoeur describes memory as always being at the mercy of the powerful forces of distraction and influence from other experiences held in the mind. 'Pure' memory is simply the act of recollection; memory influenced by imagination is an engagement.¹⁸ This is demonstrated in Renée Green's return to the site of Robert Smithson's work *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970): Green's *Partially Buried in Three Parts* (1996–99) directly addresses remembered and forgotten history. Her multipart installation interweaves interviews with local residents, activists, her family members and artists, about their 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 incapacities 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.