

ETC



Errata

Number 98, February–June 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/68791ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

(2013). Errata. *ETC*, (98), 76–77.

Veering Away and Other Dumb Apparatus

Futility, of being unable to accomplish or affect anything against prevailing cultural and political paradigms, is evident as an ironic trope in the work of numerous contemporary artists. In Peter Land's video work, *Pink Space* (1995), the artist, dressed as an entertainer in a shiny, blue evening jacket, repeatedly tries to sit on a barstool only to fall off at each attempt. The work proposes the figure of the entertainer as a metaphor for the artist, whereby the performer's capacity to fulfill his role is thwarted due to his inability to take his place on the stool and establish a rapport with the audience. In notes on this piece, Land has written: "The work is about my feeling of failure in my attempts at establishing meaning on a personal as well as artistic level. The feeling that I am expected to say or do something meaningful; to interfere, but that the mental apparatus needed for such an act has collapsed or evaporated, and I'm left dumb."¹

Similarly, in their *Venice Biennale* installation, (and subsequent book) *Will Happiness Find Me?* (2003), Peter Fischli and David Weiss' hand-written questions document an anxious, inner monologue that borders on the pathetic. Whilst some of the questions are prosaic, such as "Should I make myself some soup?" others seem to reflect a specific apathy for the role of the artist, "Do I have to get up and go to work?" for example, or "Should I crawl into my bed and stop producing things all the time?" As a characteristic hallmark of failure, futility along with other signifiers such as deficiency, inadequacy, lack, collapse, formlessness and nothingness, has a pervasive presence in contemporary artworks. "What's the point of it, what's the point of it?" sings Martin Creed.²

In *Handrails* (2007), Shaun Gladwell's video work, a number of skateboarders repeatedly attempt to glide down the handrail ("safety" rail) above a flight of concrete stairs. In slow motion, we see each rider individually falter, stumble, flail and trip to his inevitable (and brutal) crash landing. Despite the flinch-inducing vision of bodies hitting concrete, the work is mesmerising. Like Gladwell's skateboarders, the viewer is held in a tense zone of relentlessness, embodying as witness, the physical and psychological assault of each fatalistic attempt. The work reminds us that any act of doing requires risk, pain and dislocation and that these are integral processes within human experientiality. The task appears in place for the riders but chance operations and human failure (of forgetting) allow for a descent into the unknown where boundaries are transgressed or collapsed. Writing on Gladwell's work, Blair French explains: "the likelihood of failure here is less something to be transcended than embraced as the necessary omnipresent twin of any will to action."³ Marcel Duchamp in his seminal talk *The Creative Act*⁴ alludes to the site of the attempt in the speculative space he describes as "the art co-efficient,"⁵ a disjunction that occurs between the intended idea and its actualisation or outcome, and/or between the outcome and what is expressed unintentionally. Concerned with the analysis and attribution of meaning of artworks that enter museums and galleries, "the art co-efficient" is unknowable, but for Duchamp it confirms that meaning and ultimately the creative act resides with the viewer as well as the artist. However, by privileging the studio as a site of interest, it is interesting to consider whether artefacts suspended in a partial state *en route* to actualisation, that is creative failures or evidence of the artist's attempt, contain meaning or knowledge that falls outside of Duchamp's equation. Seemingly analogous to the "mis-attempt" in skateboarding, artists intuitively recognize that undertaking creative work in the studio necessitates a kind of failure or dissolution of meaning in order for work to proceed. Importantly, failure manifests in the studio as the moment when material, forms and/or ideas buckle or resist, inevitably resulting in error, inadequacy or the literal falling down-ness of physical and/or aesthetic collapse. In this sense, failure can be viewed as the site of a pivotal action that arises from the attempt and can be described as a point of separation or the generative moment when the work veers away unexpectedly from the representation of an idea. In that moment, the work does not proceed towards the artist's imposed ideal but digresses into the unknown, into the realm of otherness.⁶

An important concern then for the artist is determining the criteria by which art becomes fully "art" and not "in-progress." One could argue for example

that "not art" works (i.e. the work, materials and processes undertaken in the studio) automatically constitute the realm of failure by virtue of the fact that the art contained within this category has not entered into the processes of legitimisation. In this context, the studio can be seen as an ambiguous space where works-in-progress, experiments and models (in fact all the processes unacknowledged as art) provide the evidence of one's attempts and inevitably one's failings.

This unmoored state is evident in the recent works and practices of two Australian artists Ray Harris and Sarah CrowEST. Using herself as the central protagonist, Harris has produced over thirty video works that can be read as a series of test sites where she acts out and records seemingly futile actions as a means to investigate ideas surrounding lack, loneliness and desire. It is a strategy that is focused yet *ad hoc*, producing multiple new works that do not necessarily privilege one outcome over another but allows each "test" to further expand the artist's deeply personal sensibility.

In *Land Mind* (2010), for example, a ground level close-up of Harris's green-painted face is absurdly camouflaged within lush suburban grass. Occasionally a passer by treads onto her unblinking visage or seemingly "unnoticeable" body. A perverse act of mock invisibility, the work's title seems to allude to the



pressurised potential of any individual or interaction. In *Colour me Beautiful* (2011), she applies cosmetics with her eyes closed and the not-quite-right outcome demonstrates the pathos of attempting to fulfil expectations and the distorted projection of self that results. A similarly uneasy territory also is encountered in another work *Let me Go* (2011) in which the prostrate artist embraces a body length figure of moist dough against a backdrop of pink fabric. Increasingly, the viewer witnesses her frustration as the dough "partner" sticks to her face and body, and her writhing "engagement" becomes more anguished in its futility. At times uncomfortable to watch, the work speaks of the failure to be loved but also to have love received.

Perhaps the most darkly poignant of Harris's self-enacted tests is *constant ebb and flow* (2010) in which a woman (the artist) clutching a plastic bag of groceries rolls sideways down an inner city garden path. The sound of birds twittering and the darkening twilight reinforce the forlorn nature of this solitary pursuit. The internal logic here is more personal in that it is not the artist performing a pointless task to demonstrate that art itself is pointless but a more bleakly poetic and existentially pathetic one. The work does not succeed on an aesthetic level as the quality of the film and the too-dark lighting make it difficult to view as a filmic product. However, through the attempt and its documentation something else is set on its way: This is where the work has the opportunity to make "itself," unravelling exponentially out of the artist's control into the realm of the poetic. It is the artist/viewer's relationship with the unease (ambivalence) encountered in the futility and disappointment of the work's failure that allows new meanings to develop.

Similarly, Sarah CrowEST's current obsession with the creation of mounds is an

illogical tactic that encourages her to produce similarly shaped and awkwardly formed objects that are profound in their uselessness. Utilizing readily available materials, papier mâché, plaster, paint and found items, CrowEST's sculptural practice emphasizes a continuous process of boding things together.⁷ These forms can be viewed as determinedly in-progress as the artist's methods include accretionary processes that undo or agglomerate various features. This indefinite deferral of the moment of resolution suspends the work in an active phase of limbo, a liminal state that through a kind of ecstatic unresolvedness supplants the desire for resolution. Despite their apparent strangeness or improbability, CrowEST's forms offer up new creative and philosophical outcomes that reinforce the role of art practice as hypothesis. In this way the works, through their inadequacy or incompleteness, act as models or propositional tools in which use value as opposed to economic value is viewed as multifariously open-ended.

In acknowledging the critical role of the attempt as a methodological approach for generating work, one can see in the practices of Harris and CrowEST that the characteristic features of failure (deficiency, lack, futility) are not mutually exclusive in contemporary artworks, because the qualities pertaining to one may suffuse into another and an art practice or an art work may contain multiple signifiers of failure nuanced on several levels. Paradoxically, these processes and things in a partial state, such as misshapen experiments, incomplete attempts, notes, drawings, models, preliminary tests, waste or residual materials, serve to dislocate or dislodge intended outcomes. Formally idiosyncratic, *lumpen*, mysterious or still unrealised, they hover as fragments and/or traces of the yet-to-be-articulated.

If the fragment as a creative site operates beyond what Maurice Blanchot correctly identifies as "a tradition already established and attained,"⁸ it is interesting to speculate on how the fragmentary in studio practice could critique accepted notions of adequacy, perhaps through failing to live up to expectations of completeness. But also by remaining in the state of in-progress, of resisting conclusion or resolution, the fragmentary or failed attempt remains in a paradoxically charged state, hovering between fulfillment and depletion. By not being able to meet the need to satisfy "the concepts of unity, totality or continuity"⁹ in its unfinished or interrupted form/s, it is able to contest the "infinite space" of the work. This is not to say that the fragment or failure as a methodology should be perceived as an absolute, or a formula with specific outcomes. Rather it is the recognition that as an exemplar of failure, fragments (or perhaps failings) as the evidence of attempts retain inherent generative abilities with operative potential. As Blanchot suggests in *The Infinite Conversation*, rather than material that is "left aside" as waste, or merely "fallen utterances," the fragment exists in an energized state of readiness, always open to the possibility of being further "worked upon."¹⁰

However, de-emphasising individual works as profound or masterful also facilitates a kind of self-release from the expectations of monumentalism and/or of traditional art environments. It suggests a more fluid (even holistic) system where each work, including works-in-progress, mis-attempts and the residual waste of attempts, finished objects as well as failings, can be seen as having equal weight, that is, worthy of thoughtfulness regarding their creative potential. It seems then to be more inclusive (and expansive at the same time) to think of an art practice (the "work") as a series of humble speculations, or acts of reframing.¹¹ Each attempt then can be viewed as just one idea or offering, in an endless continuum of offerings.¹² Each is able to provide a valid propositional component within a more comprehensive and inquiring art practice. This might be a more open-ended way of thinking about the integrity of art works and of artistic practices generally, as Bruce Nauman suggests "individual works point at this from different directions, so when you experience a body of work over a long period of time, you get a little more understanding of what an artist is."¹³

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Notes

- 1 Peter Land, *dear reader-some notes about my work* <http://www.nicolaiwallner.com/artists/peter/peter-text.html>, accessed July 7, 2006.
- 2 See Martin Creed's performance of 'What's the point' at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGev4P-q17I> accessed June 10, 2012.
- 3 Blair French, 'Return to Earth' in *Shaun Gladwell: Videowork* Artspace, Sydney, 2007, p. 12.
- 4 See Marcel Duchamp, *The Creative Act* sessional talk given at Convention of the American Federation of Arts, Houston, Texas, April, 1957. Published in: Robert Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp*. Paragraphic Books, New York, 1959, pp. 77, 78.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Martin Heidegger suggests that "It is due to art's poetic nature that, in the midst of what is, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual." Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper Collins, New York, 1971, p. 70.
- 7 Sarah CrowEST's nom de plume on her Mound Activity blog is 'Mistress of Bodge'. <http://moundactivity.blogspot.com.au/> accessed June 10, 2012.
- 8 Maurice Blanchot, 'The Absence of the Book' in *The Infinite Conversation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis; London 1993, p. 348.
- 9 *Ibid.* p. 58.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 This is a key aspect in Martin Creed's practice, for example, where he suggests you "could think of the work as just being like a frame for looking at the other stuff that isn't the work" and "It's just as nice to look at other stuff that isn't the work." Dazed Digital, *Inside Art: Martin Creed*, interviewed by Freire Barnes, July 9 2007, www.dazeddigital.com. Creed also deliberately numbers his works in chronological order to confirm ideas as part of an overall "contribution". See *Numbers Instead of Words*, published in the book "No.1" Mathew Rosenzweig and Francesca Richer, D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., New York, 2005, excerpt available online at <http://www.martincreed.com/words/numbers.html> accessed July 20, 2012.
- 12 I am grateful to the artist George Popperwell for imparting this term and the sentiment behind it.
- 13 Bruce Nauman in an interview with Christopher Cordes, 1989 in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words* (Janet Kraynak ed), The MIT Press, Los Angeles, 2005.