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The anxieties of control and the aesthetics of failure

Abstract
For many contemporary artists, failure has been an instrument of experimentation and self-expression, of investigation into existential questions and manifestation of utopian tensions. In this paper, I will discuss how some of the well-known strategies of experimental and avant-garde artistic practices with failure involve risky actions, challenging or impossible attempts, loss of control, and compulsive repetition of inconclusive acts. In those experimentations, the ideal model of an effective and successful action performance (in which a goal is defined through a clear intention, a plan and a well-controlled execution) is willfully sabotaged in its stages. In this regard, a distinction between failure and mistake will be highlighted: if failure could be traced back to the tradition of heroic or tragic defeat in front of adverse odds, mistake on the contrary means doing something wrong that one is expected to control. While failure negatively reflects our tension toward autonomy, the focus on mistakes is the expression of rigidity and heightened risk aversion in contexts where maximal efficiency and self-optimization are expected. This paper will argue that equating the category of failure with that of mistake is not faithful to the motives underlying those artistic traditions. In this respect, artistic experimentations in the "aesthetic of failure" can also be viewed as a critical response toward a general mindset defined by the anxiety of control and obsessive mistake avoidance that seems typical of our current times.

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Introduction

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail Again. Fail better" (*Worstward Ho*, Samuel Beckett, 1983). In recent history, this line from playwright Samuel Beckett became a popular catchphrase of managerial language and the motto of start-up entrepreneurialism, along with the appeal to self-optimization and resilience as a way of dealing with mistakes and failures. Training in the "art of failing" meant to empower the individual to unleash his creative potential, affirm his freedom and autonomy, liberate him from the anxiety of *not making it*, and the temptation of defeatism.

According to the famous analysis of Boltansky and Chiapello (1999), this new corporate language is directly inspired by the rebellious attitude of the artistic avant-garde and its anti-establishment shock techniques. Just as the avant-garde artist creatively innovated through the targeted provocation of dominant cultural codes, in the same way the strategy of breaking old paradigms seems to be functionalized as today's *disruptive* organizational strategy.

The purpose of this paper is not to go into this debate, but to point out how the ethics of failure is grounded on an "aesthetics of failure" that has been examined in the modern art tradition. On top of this, this paper aims to illustrate how the transformation of Beckett's famous saying into a corporatist motto loses sight of the more subtle elements of the question of failure and, ultimately, constitutes an essential misuse of this concept. For many contemporary artists, failure has been in fact an instrument of experimentation and self-expression through the investigation of one's own limits and the manifestation of utopian tensions, ultimately growing into an existential examination. This will lead to the clarification of the difference between failure and mistake as general philosophical categories, involving a reference to some contemporary debates around the role of individual responsibility and the *need of control* that comes with it. It will be argued that the blurring of that distinction in today's dominant thinking and the reduction of failure as a form of mistake constitute a critical departure to the "aesthetic of failure" explored by many art practices.

Failure and modernity

An aesthetics of failure in the context of artistic practices can initially be understood in two possible ways: 1) as a failed artistic operation, namely one that does not succeed, and 2) as a symbolic and conceptual thematisation of failure within the artistic practice (failure as content). The first meaning refers to the situation in which the artist is unable to meet certain aesthetic expectations, because s/he is ill-inspired, uncreative, or because s/he makes blatant errors in the execution, fails to control and master the expressive material, or is simply rejected by the public or critics. Relevant in this context are many cases of famous artistic failures that later turned out to be successes: basically most instances of innovation and challenge to the dominant sensibility that paved the way for the evolution of new styles and new artistic ideas. Art's outsiders such as the Impressionists, who first brought their work together in the *Salon des Refusés* after being rejected by the Jury of the Pariser Salon, are one notable example. While critics and the public mocked the *Refusés* at the beginning (1863), in the following editions of 1874, 1875 and 1886, participating in that exhibition became a sign of distinction and artistic innovation. A similar purpose was served by the *Society of Independent Artists*, an association collecting "failed" works, namely works with no awards or approval by juries, but who in turn rejected Duchamp's "Fountain" as unacceptable in 1917. Avant-garde provocation becomes the means by which failure – understood here as rejection by the public and institutions – becomes a device of attention. This is also true today: think of Christoph Büchel's (1966-) well-planned controversies, such as the deconsecrated church that hosted the Icelandic pavilion and was converted into a real mosque during the 56th Venice Biennale, or the *Barca Nostra* exhibition at the 58th Biennale, where Büchel showcased a real shipwrecked boat in which hundreds of migrants died. As for the mosque, it was deemed an improper use of the exhibition space and the installation was forced to close, yet in its failure, the work remains one of the most discussed and remembered episodes of that Biennale.

   The second sense of failure concerns situations in which an artist purposely turns failure into the object of his expression. This meaning would not seem particularly original given that any representation of human defeat would fall into this category. Historically, almost every narrative has been a depiction of human endeavors facing the risk of defeat, where a protagonist goes through challenges, faces threats, and suffers the consequences of bad decisions and of his own character flaws.

Heroic challenges and tragedy are classic manifestations of it. Also in the context of current artistic practices, failure is a topic of numerous curatorial initiatives concerned with the critical issues of the present, like the perceived fallibility of ideological struggles and the nature of downfall in contemporary art-making. There are plenty of manifestations in which again the Beckettian statement makes its appearance: the exhibition *Try Again. Fail again. Fail Better* within the Momentum 2006, the 4th Nordic festival of contemporary art; the 2007 exhibition in Basel, *The Art of Failure*; and the 2013 exhibition *Fail better. Moving images* in the Hamburger Kunsthalle. As a final example, the auction *Bound to fail* at the New York-based Christie's Gallery was actually a commercial success, displaying a collection of works by contemporary famed artists on the topic of failure.

In these two understandings of the concept, a third possibility is left out, in which the artist does not passively suffer failure, nor does he represent it, but one in which he deliberately exposes himself to the risk of not succeeding. This is the case in which the artist experiments with the disruption of his own doing; he enacts the inconclusiveness of an action and the impossibility of a task. Through such gestures, he thematizes failure in the most direct way: not by telling it, but by showing it. As a synthesis of the two meanings, this third possibility is the product of a self-reflective process that has its origins in Romanticism and is subsequently developed in modernism and in contemporary artistic practices: failure as a formal characteristic of the work itself, as a condition of artistic making (and therefore, more generally, as the fusion of art and life), and not only as content that the artist represents with detachment. In modernist literature, we can see this in the provocation of traditional aesthetic canons, in the refusal of narrative and formal coherence, in its deliberate sabotage as an aesthetic tactic: Walter Benjamin had explicitly indicated in Franz Kafka the maximum expression of an aesthetics of failure[1]. Moreover, Theodor W. Adorno (1970) also sees in Kafka but especially in Beckett major examples of how modern art deliberately operates as sabotage through the merciless exhibition of its own fallibility and imperfection, becoming "anti-art". In the context of this discussion, and without wanting to identify the vast topic of negativity with the issue

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[1] "To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty, one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of failure. There is nothing more memorable than the fervor with which Kafka emphasized his failure" (Letter to Gershom Scholem, 1938).

of failure, I simply mention how Adorno emphasizes the difference between merely thematizing absurdity and failure, as Bertolt Brecht or the existentialists would do (think of Jean-Paul Sartre's "didactic plays"), and actually performing it in a genuine way. Beckett's works "are raised to the level of the most advanced artistic means" (Adorno 1984 [1961]: 119): negativity manifests itself on a formal level through the impossibility of narrating and of uttering meaningful sentences: "Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays and his genuinely colossal novel *The Unnamable* have an effect in comparison to which official works of committed art look like children's games – they arouse the anxiety that existentialism only talks about" (Adorno 1992 [1965]: 90). The existentialist position would also presuppose an integral and free subject who experiences the absurd, while in Kafka and Beckett the dissolution concerns the very subjectivity of the narrative subjects and of the artist himself, leading to semantic dead ends; in this dissolution the work of art cannot find a fulfilled form according to traditional canons. The aesthetics of failure in this perspective is not the mere representation of failure (as in the second meaning), nor the simple artistic "failure" (the first meaning), but concerns the enactment of the very impossibility to gain a perspective on this failure. Failure is *performed* rather than talked about; and in this, ultimately, lies its specific aesthetic value.

Artful failures

Performed failures concern not only the category of the negative and the issue of meaninglessness or absurdity, but also the artists' attempt to self-reflexively elaborate the nature of the art-making process, the relationship between their freedom and the criteria of acceptability, and the pragmatic nature of the *misshapen* act. Typical examples in this context are artist's attempts that are designated to inevitably fail, of which there are numerous examples in the conceptual experimentations of the 60s and 70s of the last century. An example is Marcel Broodthaers's *La Pluie (Projet pour un texte)* (1969), a short film that shows the artist in the process of writing a text in his garden. However, the text can never be completed, since the rain that constantly pours down washes the ink off the page. Another notable example in the context of American conceptualism are John Baldessari's experimentations, such as *Wrong* (1967), a series of photographic images, most of them poorly executed, out of focus or unconvincing, violating the classical rules of composition.

Baldessari's intention was to show how artistic freedom should also question criteria of wrongness or rightness. The aesthetic of imperfection that belong to Baldessari's trademark is showed also in his series of photographic documentations where several attempts at accomplishing arbitrary goals are pictured: *Throwing three balls in the air to get an equilateral triangle* (1972-1973), *Throwing three balls in the air to get a straightl line* (1973), and *Throwing four balls in the air to get a square* (1974), selecting the *Best out of 36 tries*. The results are often imperfect so that the documented attempts could be considered almost-failures.

These may seem paradoxical examples, in which the work "succeeds" insofar as it tries to enact something bound to fail. In this respect, the case of Bas Jan Ader (1942-1976) is a remarkable example of the tensions and limits between real and enacted failure. In his small but notorious body of works, the so-called *Fall* series shows the artist in different risky situations of falling: in *Fall 1, Los Angeles* (1970) Ader is sitting on a chair on the roof of his house and then suddenly loses control, rolling in slow motion off the roof and into the bushes below, his shoes flying off. In *Fall 2, Amsterdam* (1970) the artist is riding a bicycle on a road near a canal and suddenly swerves into the water. The shorts are both humorous and tragic, a perfect representation of loss of control, of inevitable *falling and failing*: "When I fell off the roof of my house, or into a canal, it was because gravity made itself master over me" (Ader 1971). The works succeed by means of a controlled loss of control. Namely, by trying to perform the fact of not being the master of his own destiny, Ader stayed at the edge of catastrophic failure, but never crossed it. An edge that was yet fatally crossed in 1975, as Bas Jan Ader tried to traverse the Atlantic by sailing from the East Coast of the United States to Europe with a very small boat, as part of a project titled *In search of the miraculous*. He disappeared at sea and only the boat was recovered one year later, leaving his project unfulfilled, despite many suggesting to see this tragic event as the apotheosis of Ader's artistic work.

A different issue concerns truly failed works, which are regarded as failed because, for instance, they were ultimately discarded by the artist herself or by critics, without any later reappraisal by other observers. The contemplation of an entire body of failed works is what we see in projects such as Michael Landy's *Break down* (2001), in which he systematically destroyed all his belongings, generating more than five tons of landfill. Later, with *Art bin* (2010), Landy transformed the South London Gallery into a container, asking other artists to discard their works of art. The enormous bin becomes, in his words, "a monument to creative failure".

Along an analogous path, Jeremy Deller, an artist who has often reflected on the imperfect and unpredictable character of artistic achievement and sees failing as an intrinsic and inevitable component of every making, presented during his retrospective *Joy of people* (2012) a section entitled *My failures*. In his own words: this is "a section of works that I wish I'd been able to make but wasn't able to"[2]. Similarly, Cesare Pietroiusti features in his 2015 exhibition *Lavori da vergognarsi, ovvero il riscatto delle opere neglette* (*Works to be ashamed of, that is, the redemption of neglected*) works that were never exhibited, works that were started and never finished or were discarded because they were considered unsuitable or were mere derivative copies of other artists' pieces. Their display, by showing not only the polished side of the artistic process, but also all the imperfections and the dead ends of this endeavor, functions as a magnifying device of the inner workings of the processes of art-making.

Through these examples of experimentations, we see failure as a *disconnection between intention and action*, between desire and reality (see Macrì 2017: 65). This allows a critical re-discussion of the idea of the artist/maker as the one capable of masterfully bringing a creative intention into reality. As a matter of fact, creative activity in its pragmatic dimension is an exemplary case of performed action: a subject, in this case the artist, starting from an inspiration, defines a goal and formulates an intentional plan of action based on the knowledge and the expertise as how to achieve the goal. Thereafter, the artist masters the execution of the action and leads to its completion in the final product, the artwork, and to its successful delivery toward an audience which is in the condition to appreciate it. Since art-making is marked by the ideal of mastery and control in which all these stages are carried out seamlessly, exercises of *loss of control* and pragmatic manumission can occur at every step of this performative chain, starting from the formulation of the intention, to its execution, up to its final fulfillment[3]. The Dadaist explorations on automatisms, to make an example, act through a radical subversion of intentional control, drawing inspiration from the psychoanalytic suggestions on slips and missed actions, understood as an error of conscious

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[2] https://www.jeremydeller.org/MyFailures/MyFailures.php

[3] This schematic description of an ideal course of action principally takes completed artworks in consideration. This of course does not exclude the fact that uncompleted artworks could still be aesthetically fulfilling. From this perspective, some may say that Michelangelo failed in completing the *Pietà Rondanini*, which was left unfinished, but is still an aesthetically remarkable work.

control that ultimately reveals the underlying "truth" of the unconscious drives. Likewise, the stage of controlled action execution is disabled in all experimentations that make use of chance processes, like in action painting or in the use of random operations in music (ex. Marcel Duchamp's *Erratum musical* of 1913 and John Cage's work).

The willful violations of pragmatically fulfilled action coincide with the numerous well-known experimentations in the artistic history of the 20th century as a manifestation of creative freedom. The relationship between failure and freedom has been a central motif since Romanticism and Romantic art, whose peculiarity is the fact that "the subjectivity of the artist stands above his material and his production, since it is no longer dominated by the given conditions, [...] but holds in its own power, and subject to its own choice" (Hegel 1975: 602). Later, Nietzsche's statements that life is founded and strengthened thanks to error, and that error is a necessity for the very definition of humanity, will ultimately inspire the beginnings of the avant-garde: the impulse to free oneself from the constraints of "correctness" as a form of affirmation of individual autonomy. More specifically, the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century also thoroughly explored the negation of the objectuality of the artwork by means of operations aimed at deforming, deconstructing, destroying the object. Following Adorno: "The perennial revolt of art against art has its *fundamentum in re* [...]. If it is essential to artworks that they be things, it is no less essential that they negate their own status as things, and thus art turns against art" (Adorno 1984 [1970]: 28): from Rauschenberg's *Übermalungen* in the 50s (and his *Erased de Kooning drawing*, 1953) to the more explicit "Destruction art" of the 1960s. Such interventions investigated the performative dimension of deconstructive actions, such as cutting (Lucio Fontana's canvases), dissolving (the chemical experimentations by Mark Boyle and Joan Hills; Ulay's *Fototot*, 1976), blowing up (several works by artists such as Arman, Jean Tinguely, Kendel Geers, Michael Sailstorfer), burning (Alberto Burri, Yves Klein, Annea Lockwood), and shattering (Robert Smithson's *Map of Broken Glass*, 1969). The well-known trend toward the dematerialization of art in the 1960s (Lippard, 1969) and, more generally, conceptual art, with its the tension toward the (almost) total disappearance of the object and the denial of its aesthetic presence, are foremost manifestation of the "revolt of art against art". We could include in this list all self-damaging performative operations that involve the artist's body (Gina Pane, Chris Burden, Vito Acconci), but also more recent attempts to include the public itself in the destructive process, like in the 2011 installation *Gewicht des Sehens*

(*The weight of vision*) by Antonia Low, in which the floor of the exhibition pavilion is covered entirely by mirrored glass and the public, walking on the scaffolding that rests on this fragile surface, inevitably brings about the gradual destruction the work.

It should be nevertheless clear that these classic examples of decon-structive actions are not themselves exclusively associated with error or failure, as they make destructive actions or dematerialization a new mode of creation. However, they are closely associated with the possibility of loss of control, and thereby with the risk of unintended outcomes. In certain cases, we are dealing with a subjective exploration of one's own limits, a manifestation of impulses that we also see in the existentialist reflection about the relationship between freedom and the inadequacy that is intrinsic to human action. A crucial point here is the fact that anxiety about the risk of failure in the artistic process is not attenuated by an open attitude towards the idea of *creative* error but is actually intensi-fied by it. If, in fact, everything is acceptable in the art-making process, then the lack of criteria of correctness creates a disorienting void: there is no longer a canon, nor a school within which to position oneself, nor a group's poetic, as was still the case in the historical avant-gardes. The mere exercise of avant-garde *boutade* by means of provocation for its own sake is not a viable long-term solution either. The artist is left alone in the total and free control of his expressive means (and his "freedom" to bring about mistakes), but this control does not rest on more clearly definable criteria of success.

This is the anxiety that notoriously transpires, for instance, in Bruce Nauman's early studio works, in which the artist is engaged in acts that are either obsessively repetitive, or outright impossible, like his 1966 piece *Failing to levitate in the studio*, which documents his levitation efforts (sustained, not without humor, with the help of a pair of chairs) that are obviously doomed to failure. The common conception of the artist as endowed with a demiurgic and superhuman capacity is thereby led to the absurd. The anxiety deriving from enacting intense effort is mostly evident in his videotaped performances, in which the artist engages in repetitive and controlled actions (*Stamping in the studio*, 1968, *Bouncing in the corner*, 1968); those movements are, like many later video works by him, presented in obsessively repeated loops, without a beginning or an end and therefore lacking a diegetic dimension. The impression of both anxiety and severe self-control is "a feeling that Nauman indeed wanted to represent because it mirrored how he felt at the time, not knowing how to proceed as an artist now that traditional

routes such as painting and sculpture had become artistically impossible" (van Rossem 2017). As in Beckett's works, to which Nauman feels a profound affinity, the action is reduced to indefinite meaningless repetitions, inconclusive gestures that lead to nothing and in which the subject is imprisoned without possibility of escape. Failure here includes also the last stage of the pragmatic chain of actions, namely the successful viewer's fruition: the *Slow angle walk (Beckett walk)*, 1965, lasts more than an hour and is projected in a loop. How many viewers, we might ask ourselves, usually watch the entire film? This is what probably happens in many artistic experimentations exploring the extreme cinematic slow-down or its total stasis (Remes 2015), as in Andy Warhol's anti-films which can last hours (*Sleep, Empire*, 1964) or in Douglas Gordon's *24 hour Psycho* (1993), in which Alfred Hitchcock's movie is appropriated and slowed down to the point of lasting a whole day. In these operations, the full fruition of the work by the viewers is inevitably thwarted and made almost impossible.

The total subtraction from the public gaze marks the breakdown of the expressive and communicative nature of art, like in Daniel Buren's *Closed show* (1968), in which the gallery doors of the artist's exhibition are sealed or in Robert Barry's *Closed gallery piece* (1969), an exhibition to which the letter of invitation reveals that "during the exhibition, the gallery would be closed". Similarly, Maurizio Cattelan's early works resorted to the *boutade* of the non-exhibition, as in his first solo show at a gallery in Bologna, in which the artist eluded the obligation to exhibit his works by leaving only a "come-back soon" sign (*Torno subito*, 1989), and *Una domenica a Rivara* (1991), where Cattelan escaped the building that was supposed to host his exhibition by leaving 12 meters of knotted sheets hanging from the window. In *Another fucking readymade* (1996), Cattelan showcased wrapped works stolen from a different exhibition in an adjacent gallery in Amsterdam. As curator Nancy Spector reveals: "The theft was a 'survival tactic': it usually takes him six months to produce a new work, but since he had been given only two weeks for the show, he decided to take the path of least resistance. It was the quickest and easiest thing to do". The jester attitude of those stunts would be actually the manifestation of a deep-seated anxiety of failure: "my early work […] was really about the impossibility of doing something. This is a threat that still gives shape to many of my actions and work. I guess it was really about insecurity, about failure. We can have a chapter here called Failure" (Spector 2003: 26; Spector 2011).

Mistake, failure and "system error"

As we mentioned earlier, avant-garde experimentalism and freedom from aesthetic constraints condone "mistakes", or even support them, but this does not free one from the risk of failure, which remains a peculiar obsession in contemporary art. To make this point clear, it is important in this context to distinguish the notion of failure, i.e., not managing to accomplish something, from that of mistake, i.e., doing something wrong. The two notions have many points of contact and semantically overlap[4], but I would like to focus on the following crucial difference: while in both failing and mistaking the subject loses control over a course of action, only mistake (at least, in its true meaning) presupposes that the subject should in principle be in control. Plainly told, if I cannot play the piano, I cannot make mistakes in performing a Chopin piece on it, I just *fail* to do so. Only from a certain assumed level of proficiency, it is possible to attribute the possibility of making mistakes. While the error could be the product of a mishap, a slip, an oversight, a momentary lack of attention, however, it is considered a mistake because it is contingent or accidental, not systemic or permanent: when I make a mistake (something "escapes" my control) it is assumed that, in similar circumstances, I will be able to avoid making it again (unless the error does not prove to be "productive" and is therefore chosen as a preferable course of action). Only against the backdrop of controllability (and thus mastery) can errors be made, and only against a set of normative assumptions of how things are supposed to be done, something that was not done as expected can be then regarded as a mistake.

This does not mean that, on the contrary, failure concerns just uncontrollable and impossible actions for the subject, but as many of the art examples we saw above illustrate, failure distinguishes itself by the idea of failing *despite* controlled and careful effort. This idea is crucial in any cultural tradition, lying at the heart of any *quest*-based narrative and tragedy, that is, any representation of human deeds and actions driven by a desire, an intention, and effortfully oriented toward a goal attainable by overcoming obstacles. The individual fails at the moment in which a goal she has set for herself, or that she has been assigned, ends up being

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[4] Mistakes can cause failure (by committing many mistakes in a task, I ultimately fail in fulfilling it), but they are neither sufficient (I can make mistakes, but nonetheless succeed in a task), nor necessary (I could make no mistakes whatsoever, but still fail at the end).

unfulfilled, but she can also fail when not committing any trivial error, since failure can be the product of circumstances beyond her control or, from an existentialist perspective, because it is simply the signature of any human endeavor. A hero *tragically* fails because of bad luck, unfavorable odds, higher powers (malignant gods) or own deep character flaws: rarely do we have tragic narratives in which the protagonist simply commits a mistake, if not as a manifestation of character flaw. Bad outcomes done to mere mishaps or distraction could not be the basis of tragic stories, but rather of comedies.

A mistake is in fact a situation in which one makes x instead of y – where y was supposed to be done – as a consequence of carelessness, weakness or wrong beliefs. An error presupposes the existence of a course of action that is regarded as correct and expected to be chosen. This presupposes that an error could be avoidable in principle, and that otherwise a person could and should have prevented it. Conversely, if an individual *cannot* act correctly – prevented to do so by unsurmountable events that overwhelm him (or by a character flaw he cannot overcome) – then one cannot properly speak of mistake.

It has to be noted that in this attempt at conceptual clarification of the notion of mistake, the possibility of productive or creative error is not ruled out, for example, in all cases where error leads to fortuitous accidents, serendipity, breaking out of old patterns, and allows for innovative experimentation (Bertinetto 2016). The generative idea of proceeding by "trial and error" is hereby preserved. But we want to focus on the most direct meaning of mistake, the one that associates it with the idea of something one should not have done or, once committed, would not do again as a consequence.

A further aspect of the difference between failure and mistake is the emotional nature of these experiences. In failure we have a complex affective range that can embrace anger and disappointment, which are the feelings taking hold when something was supposed to occur but did not, but also grief and melancholy. Failure is in fact also intimately connected with a sense of loss (to *lose* means both to suffer a loss, as when something goes missing, and to fail), and grief binds us to the past, becomes part of the narrative defining our history and thus our identity. While failure is linked to a tragic (and sometimes heroic) sense of defeat and grief, on the contrary the affective quality of a mistake is more mundane and fleeting. Failure could become *sublime* (also aesthetically), when the subject is put in front of unsurmountable odds (I can say to have "tried my best" and still failed), while mistake, presupposing the subject's

control, is rather linked with a sense of shameful embarrassment. On one side, "You made a mistake" sounds less serious than "You failed". However, while we consider failure a possibility that may be inherent in our actions (as are human activities such as games or sports, which are essentially defined by the possibility of failure), a mistake is on the contrary something that weights more on the side of self-responsibility. A mistake could be even more shameful than failure and the anxiety toward the responsibility of avoiding it could be more excruciating, as is the case of a football player causing his team's defeat because of an oversight, like an own-goal, and not because of the supremacy of the opposing team. "You made a mistake" means therefore also: we expected you to avoid doing that error, since you are supposed to have the capacity and the knowledge to do so.

According to the terminology of the behavioral sciences, a "systematic" error, i.e., something that the subject cannot in principle avoid committing, is not really a mistake, but rather a bias, over which we do not have control and cannot otherwise avoid by choice, being it a tendency inherent in the structure of my decisions and actions. In this sense, a bias is more similar to a state of intrinsic failing. In a nutshell: error is the result of *contingency*. The absence of contingency would instead be a state in which for structural reasons, environmental con-straints or individual's intrinsic flaws, breakdown ends up occurring as a persistent tendency, it is a "system error", which is instead a condition more akin to failure.

As a matter of fact, I can also speak of an error committed by an inanimate system, for example when I speak of a genetic "transcription error" (which, among other things, can be evolutionarily advantageous) or an error in a computer operating system: in both cases it is defined as such because it is contingent with respect to the structure of the system. This consequently presupposes a normative assumption about how the system should *normally* work. Similarly, we presuppose how a subject should normally behave if the accidental causes of its mistake were removed. Failure and mistake are not to be considered as two discon-nected categories altogether, rather we can see a continuum between those two poles, depending on whether or not we attribute to a subject a counterfactual controllability – and therefore responsibility – of the contingency that generates the failure/mistake. This is an issue which is widely debated also in the context of legal theory (Simons 1990): an individual who commits an inadvertent mistake – for example, dropping a vase from a balcony and injuring a bystander – may be held culpably

reckless, but if the cause of the mistake is systemic – because the balcony sill has a faulty construction, causing the damage – it is no longer a contingent mistake caused by the subject's act, but rather a *systemic failure*.

The anxiety of control

If failure could be traced back to the tradition of heroic or tragic defeat in front of adverse odds (failing *despite* effort), *mistake* on the contrary means doing something wrong that one is expected to be able – at least in principle – to control. However, it is the problematic tendency in conflating the two notions that give us some clue in understanding the curious transformation of the "aesthetic of failure" into the corporate catchphrase pointed out at the beginning: the fashionable "Fail again. Fail better" rhetoric. In the latter, failure is seen as a desirable and positive stage of growth and resilience, which is out of place with the idea of failing *despite* effort and the complex affective elaborations that loss and defeat carry with them. The reason lies in the fact that in this interpretation, *failure is conflated with mistake*, or failure becomes mistake, since its value lies in the information we can extract from it in order to correct and overcome it in the future. But "failing again" is not understood in Beckett as a suggestion for a positive improvement in order to overcome the error, it is rather, if any, a *staying* in the failure, not going beyond it; in the Beckettian perspective one can only keep on failing, one is caught in the cycle of "not succeeding", with no way out and despite all efforts: "I'll fail worse again, fail still worse again" (*Worstward Ho*). Consequently, the aesthetics of failure investigated and implemented by the above-mentioned avant-garde experimentations is diverted into a reinterpret-tation of failure as a stage that needs to be overcome for the sake of self-optimization. In today's dominant interpretation, failure is something that needs to be effectively taken care of, in line with a so-called "solutionist" worldview (Morozov 2013), which holds that for every human problem or crisis it is always possible to deploy an efficient (and mostly technological, medical, and political) solution. The past is not something we have to linger on, but something from which we extract information useful for improvement. Failure, in a word, becomes akin to mistake, something that needs correction.

Failure as a condition in which to linger is frowned upon also in its affective aspects. Recent debates point out how excessive grief and sense

of loss, as well as thinking too much about what was failed and lost, is a fundamental human experience that has been progressively pathologized in contemporary psychiatry and the corporate world, as it is not compatible with social expectations that require an individual to rapidly return to a well-functioning state. Loss and failure need a quick "fix": lingering on and becoming attached to past drawbacks should be over-come without affective residuals (Brinkmann 2018). *Failure as mistake* places us rather in a state of concentration on the particular, of focusing on the detail, on the avoidance of errors that needs to be corrected. If failure-originated grief, sense of tragedy and melancholy are past-oriented emotional states, the affective connotation of future orientation is anxiety, the need to increase control and avoid mistakes. Anxiety of control and obsessive mistake avoidance paradoxically go hand in hand with the modern "Fail again" culture, insofar as the individual is urged to embrace errors, for which she is anyway responsible, as they are useful for her personal growth. From this perspective, the artistic practices discussed here, which reflect on, describe or perform failure, constitute a warning against reducing the category of failure to that of mere error. Failure can be structural, the result of social or political circumstances, or it can be an existential condition that cannot be shrugged off through a process of self-optimization. Artistic experimentations around the "aesthetic of failure" keep a critical attitude toward the general mindset defined by the anxiety of control and obsessive mistake avoidance that seems typical of our current times.

Some concluding, general remarks: in an era of postmodern liquidity, as Zygmunt Bauman would call it, the individual is indeed endowed with an unprecedented freedom that nevertheless places him in a state of disorientation and burdens him with full self-responsibility. In other words, the individual, being free, is also responsible – or guilty – of the mistakes he commits. This is, for example, Renata Salecl's (2010) conclusion when she speaks of the "tyranny of choice", i.e., the condition in which the thought of self-determination only amplifies the oppressive sense of being solely responsible for one's own failures, keeping the subject from looking for the "system errors", namely the wider reasons that extend beyond the individual and the scope of his actions. Maximum freedom (to commit errors) coincides with maximum responsibility (to control the errors autonomously) and the individual is committed to the micro-management of his own mistakes. The culture of "putting oneself out there", of trying and failing, of making mistakes and learning is coupled with a constant anxiety of failure/mistake. Freedom is overturned into a hidden drive for

constant self-exploitation and the resulting state of "burnout" (Han 2010; Sennett 1998).

The "aesthetics of failure" of the conceptual operations of the 1960s – with their absurd and dead-end acts – provocatively anticipate the paradoxicality of actions doomed to failure, while trying to bring this condition to a visible representation. Such performers are reminiscent of the characteristic protagonists of modern-day working conditions that are frequent objects of social commentary: as in Ken Loach's movie *Sorry we missed you* (2019), the protagonist is inevitably led to make mistakes under the pressure of unrealistic performance expectations of his work-schedule. He is in a condition of *failing despite effort*, like in the self-defeating performances of the conceptual artists previously examined, yet here there is the difference that failure is not acknowledged as such, but is deceptively reframed as personal mistake.

Performed failure as an aesthetic strategy is therefore by no means a celebration of mistake as a practice of one's own resilience or as a training ground for self-optimization, but tries to put the impossible into action, at least within the paradoxical limits of its performability. It stands as something that cannot be overcome and erased, a condition that must be acknowledged. Failing as an aesthetic category acquires a redeeming existential quality, with a significant human and social message, yet a message that, as we have seen in its contemporary misinterpretations, likewise remains exposed to the risk of not succeeding.

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