Owning Failure: Insights into the Perceptions and Understandings of Art Educators

Abstract

Failure forms an important dimension of art and design and is inherent in creative endeavours. This article explores current literature on failure in the Art and Design context and offers a contribution through qualitative research drawing upon interviews with lecturing staff in a UK Art School. The findings from this research emphasise the complexity of the concept of failure. Three key themes emerged regarding respondents' perceptions of failure: failure as a process, as a means of learning, and as an issue in assessment culture. This research is exploratory in nature, and whilst the limitations of the small sample are accepted, the paper contributes to the dialogue and discussion surrounding the often emotive concept of failure.

Introduction

Samuel Beckett said, *'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better'* (Worstward Ho, 1983).

Richard Branson said, *'Do not be embarrassed by your failures, learn from them and start again.'* (Branson, n.d.)

Woody Allen said, *'If you're not failing every now and again, it's a sign you're not doing anything very innovative.'*

The aim of this paper is not to provide further prescriptions to illuminate ways in which to make failure useful, but rather to provide some analysis of what failure might mean in art and design and some reflection on the cultural and conceptual challenges for thinking about failure. We believe that understanding some of the

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modalities in thinking about failure can bring the complexities of the subject into a sharper focus.

Whilst failure is often conceptualised in terms of technical failure, the failures in the context of art and design that we are seeking to address, are those that are formed through judgements made by artists and designers, users and audiences. We focus on fine art and design, but the issue is relevant across all the arts. Drawing upon interviews conducted with lecturing staff at a UK Art School this paper will explore their perceptions of failure in detail.

Professor Anne Douglas *(forthcoming)* highlights the importance of the formation of judgement in making and experiencing art, saying,

> *'Individuals consciously exercise choice and judgement in its most heightened and skilled form in the making and experiencing of art. This is true for the artist in declaring a musical composition or drawing as a success or a failure, and also for the audience correspondingly experiencing the work as a process of completing or resisting and rejecting it.'*

It is important to note that Douglas gives equal status in the formation of judgements to the practitioner, whether they are the creator or performer of the work of art, and to the audience, those who in equal part make the work through their experiencing of it.

The formation of judgements may perhaps be regarded as the central purpose of the art and design school education, and the relationship with failure is, as we shall see, an important, if conflicted, part of the pedagogy of those institutions. This was confirmed by Jason, one of the interviewees, when he said,

> *'There is a quote from Dieter Roth. He reached the point in his practice where he deemed everything he did was of equal value; nothing as such was a success and nothing was a failure. Ever since I came across that, I've been fascinated by that notion because, again, it almost, in a sense, is the antitheses*

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of teaching and especially assessment; we're making value judgements on whether things are successes or failures.'

'In my teaching, I often point out to students that what has failed is just as important as what has succeeded. They will often be very focused on making something that they would describe as successful or good or etcetera. It's trying to move their understanding that a failure in itself can be quite a fascinating thing if given the right focus – the right sort of reflection on it.'

The statement by Dieter Roth is,

"It's important to exhibit your mistakes. Man is not perfect. Neither are his creations. I've given up using sour milk. Instead I use music. I sometimes fasten a tape recorder onto paintings or objects and have the music pour over the spectator/listener. This creates as certain effect: those who look at the art don't realize how bad it is when they hear the music. For the music is even worse. Two bad things make one good thing." (1978)

Two Tropes of Failure

Before moving into the detailed analysis of the interviews, it is important to highlight some key tropes that exist around failure. Firstly there are perceived differences between artists and scientists understandings of failure. Karl Popper (1974 in Le Feuvre, 2010, p179) assumes that failures are to be overcome as part of the scientific process. He defines the value of creative thinking in terms of the elimination of error and prejudice, saying that it represents,

'...a readiness to attack even those presuppositions which for less critical thought determine the limits of the range from which trials (conjectures) are selected; with an imaginative freedom that allows us to see so far unsuspected sources of error: possible prejudices in need of critical examination.'

This articulation offers a positivistic and linear reading of the relationship between failure and success, assuming that errors and prejudices need to be eliminated in the

pursuit of more accurate knowledge. Popper is focused on process but does imply a teleological orientation towards more accurate (or even perfect) knowledge.

In contrast Lisa Le Feuvre (2010, p3) argues that artists are inherently more comfortable with failure than scientists, inventors and entrepreneurs because process plays a more significant role, and the practice is less goal focused,

> *'Artistic practice and its surrounding discourses, though, operate somewhat differently: speculation here is not necessarily intent on reaching a goal, questions are no less powerful than answers and the production of ideas has no end point.'*

Where the Popper version of science assumes that failures and errors are to be overcome, and once overcome are irrelevant footnotes to history, Le Feuvre's version of the artists' practice keeps failure in play. That is not to say that this is a clear cut distinction: not all scientists subscribe to the Popper position, and not all artists, and certainly not all designers would subscribe to Le Feuvre's articulation.

Amongst others artists Dieter Roth (mentioned above), Jeremy Deller, David Hockney and Michael Landy have exhibited or otherwise made public their failures (see Figure One); other's failures (e.g., Hockney's *Fredda bringing Anne and me a cup of tea,* Photocollage, 1983 in which he incorporated the letter of apology from the Photo Lab where the images would have appeared in the photocollage); or provided an opportunity for others to acknowledge failures (e.g. Landy's *Art Bin* exhibited at the South London Gallery, 2010 into which people could place unwanted works of art).

(Insert Figure One: Deller Image)

But artists have also demonstrated an absolute understanding of the failure of a work. Alex Danchev (2012, p97) in his recent biography of Cezanne quotes Renoir saying that the painter sometimes came, *'...away disappointed, returning without his canvas, which he'd leave on a rock or on the grass, at the mercy of the wind or the rain or the sun, swallowed by the earth...'* Even if this is an historical example there can be no

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more absolute description of an artist's judgement on his or her own work than abandoning it in a field and walking away.

It is important to recognise that the practitioners' judgements, made by both artists and scientists, can interpret failures as specific points where an artwork or a theory must be cast aside or overcome and in retrospect can be seen as a point of learning. Yet there might be good reasons to place more weight on the position proposed by Le Feuvre, not to deny the existence of the failures that we walk away from but to maintain a critical relationship with the positivistic assumption that these form part of a narrative of progress. This point is articulated by Yoshua Okòn (2008 in Antebi *et al.,* 2008, p60),

> *'I think we can let go of the modern myth of progress – the grandiose meta-narrative of humanity gradually marching towards a better world; "the progress of mankind" - and maintain a relationship to failure just as long as we don't understand failure in the same absolute terms.'*

A second related trope we need to recognise is that the narrative of the artist embracing failure is one which has developed as part of the emergence of modernism. This narrative has been analysed by Paul Barolsky's paper *The Fable of Failure in Modern Art* (1997). Barolsky says,

> *'We think of art and failure together, however, precisely because their conjunction is one of the deep themes in the history of modernism, one of its commanding plots, especially in the writings of artists themselves, authors of imaginative literature who anxiously but tellingly return time and time again to the theme of the failed artist'* (Barolsky, 1997 in Le Feuvre, 2010, p24).

Barolsky highlights tropes within the narrative including the painting that is so overworked that it becomes meaningless, the artwork that is never completed (a blank canvas after a life-time or a poem which is just a title).

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'The unfinished canvas would come to be the very sign of art's failure and would appear again later in Moravia's novel The Empty Canvas, the existential story of an artist unable to fill the void in his life which was epitomized by the canvas, the very "void of unessential night," empty, silent, indifferent' (Barolsky, 1997 in Le Feuvre, 2010, p25).

Barolsky highlights how "doubt" and "anxiety" become central experiences for artists. He notes the doubleness of the narrative, existing both in the stories of artists written by 19th and 20th Century authors as well as in their own autobiographies.

'As in Balzac and James, the painter's art is the mirror in which the writer sees the reflection of his own flawed work. The painter clarifies the writer's self-doubt, his sense of imperfection, his inability to create a masterpiece' (Barolsky, 1997 in Le Feuvre, 2010, p26).

The heart of this narrative is the conflation of the failure of the work with the artist as failure. The failed work becomes less important than the image of the failed artist as something to be celebrated.

This narrative also seems to relate to another parallel narrative of the shift in the usage of the word failure. There appears to be a significant shift, at least in the US, during the 19th Century. The author Scott Sandage (2002 in Le Feuvre, 2010, p88-89) notes,

'...the concept of failure as something that defines your whole identity is a new thing. In terms of language, it doesn't exist at all before the Civil War: you will not find a sentence like 'I feel a failure' in American writing before 1860. … So about 1820, you begin to get that kind of literature about bankruptcy and failure. But there's a 180-degree shift in the way the word failure is used: from 1820 through the Civil War, or thereabouts, failure was used to describe people who met economic catastrophe, but the construction was, 'I made a failure', rather than, 'I am a failure'.'

Understanding this shift in a wider cultural context, how it forms part of a larger narrative of the emergence of individualism, particularly in Anglo-American culture,

and what role in particular the artist plays in this narrative, is vital for if the shift from the failed work or project to the failed person is to be fully understood.

It is worth briefly noting that failure can be evidence of success particularly where it demonstrates and exposes conflicts in values. Beyond the two tropes – the one of the positivistic linear failure to be overcome in moving towards more perfect knowledge and the other failure as a badge of great artistry – there is failure which highlights difference. Lauren van Haaften-Schick (2012) highlights the important history of cancelled exhibitions, where artists' work has been excluded or whole shows have been cancelled because the work is perceived to question aspects of power and authority in the institutions of art, e.g. Hans Haacke's cancelled retrospective at the Guggenheim in 1971. Van Hafften-Schick notes that the retrospective,

> *"...was canceled [sic] when it was discovered that some of the works in the exhibition revealed illegal and unethical real estate practices by businessmen thought to be linked to trustees of the museum."* (2012)

Here the artist's provocation of the institution of art and its economic entanglements is so successful that the artist is ejected from the institution. This form of mythologised failure is more complex than the modernist narrative because it reveals more about the real conditions of the operations of art.

Methodology

The researcher conducted interviews with eight teaching staff at an Art School in a UK University in 2011. The research aimed to understand both the Lecturers' perspectives on their own creative practices and their role in the Art School. The interviews covered a wide range of topics and were semi-structured in nature allowing respondents to expand on topics that were of interest to them. As part of the interview each respondent was asked to discuss failure and each elaborated on what failure meant to them. As such, they were asked a specific question, "Tell me about a failed work? (Why was it a failure?)".

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The interviews were transcribed and then shared with the respondents for checking, editing and their approval of the use of the transcripts. All respondents have been given a pseudonym. The transcripts were then coded to gain insight into the respondents' perspectives on, and interpretations of, failure. Through the coding process different aspects of failure, as perceived by the respondents, became clear. Indeed coding the data revealed a range of topics from the conceptualisation of failure as business failure to a technical failure to failure in assessment with the reasons for failure including a lack of motivation, over-ambition and part of the process. Once the data was coded responses were collated and grouped together in each code. This presented the data clearly and enabled the research team to analyse the data and through constant comparison clear themes emerged.

Findings on Failure

Through analysis three major themes and a number of minor themes emerged. The major themes included the questioning of the concept of failure, specifically considering if failure is an end-point or part of an overall trajectory; the potential to learn from failure; and the role of failure in assessment. Each major theme will be explored in turn.

Questioning the Concept of Failure

One key theme was the questioning of the concept of failure with respondents raising the question, "Is failure an end point or part of a trajectory or experiment?" Indeed Andrew, Margaret, Tim, Jack and Mark all pondered this question exploring the concept of failure. Here Andrew re-conceptualised failure as an experiment which is part of the creative process,

> *'Maybe they're just experiments. Failure, perhaps, becomes a bit more strict about it.'*

Andrew also drew attention to the need for failure as part of the process in creating art,

> *'Maybe we've just got different kinds of failure: failures which are just part of the process of producing something – breakages.'*

Mark took a holistic approach questioning his practice, rather than individual pieces of work, as he considered if his practice was achieving as he wished. Consequently he stated,

> *'Sometimes, I'm not sure if the word 'failure' is the right word. I wonder if the word 'failing' is?'*

The change from noun to verb clearly emphasises the transition from a thing to an action or process.

The ongoing nature of the process was identified by Tim, who discussed how work that could be perceived as a failure, turned into something else and, *'...ended up being what was required'*. Jack posits a similar idea arguing,

> *'There are pieces that I've made over the years that I've not been pleased with, but they've always been 'not a failure' because they've stepped onto something else.'*

Whilst Margaret cites Pujol, referencing his argument, that success is the ability to continue making art and if you rethink success then you must rethink the term failure. This perspective prompted Margaret to conclude that failure, *'...isn't a useful term, I think'*. Thus the theme that emerged was the questioning of the concept of failure particularly its definition as a terminal or end point. Querying the end point that the term failure implies, turns attention to how failure is part of the ongoing process, part of experimentation or the overall trajectory in creating art.

The Potential to Learn from Failure

The concept that failure is not an end point but part of the ongoing process links closely with the second major theme. This is the potential to draw learning and insight from failure. In fact the respondents stressed the learning that they had gained from failing and how this was a positive outcome of failure. For instance, Barbara

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discussed how a business failure led to success through encouraging her to take stock and explore other career paths leading to a career in education and consequently, *'...that failure incurred a success'*. Similarly Louise discussed failure in terms of having an academic paper rejected and whilst she was disheartened noting that,

> *'At that point I just felt, "I can't do this", and then it was, "Yes, of course I can do this." I suppose that was a kind of learning thing.'*

Louise utilised the critical feedback and developed a paper that was subsequently accepted. Reflecting on the initial failure and criticism she concluded, *'...ultimately, it was very good.'*

The theme of learning from failure was continued by Andrew, who commented on his own practice,

> *'If I saw myself in the light of all the failures that I've made – I'm much more of a failure than a success – but then, I've learned much more from those failures than the successes.'*

Whilst Margaret, contemplating failure in her practice noted,

> *'Plenty, or probably everything that I've made I thought, "Oooh, that could be better…" but nothing that hasn't taken me somewhere else; nothing that I haven't learnt loads from.'*

Similarly Tim stressed the potential for other, stronger, ideas to emerge from the remains of a project that failed to reach fruition. Whilst Jack stressed the potential for continuous learning stating,

> *'I see failure as a positive thing. If you get something wrong that then means you've got to do it differently, or better, or find another way to do it. I would say, "What is a failure?" Failure is a constant companion, just sort of there with me that I respond to and nourish.'*

It is this reflection on failure that Jason encourages amongst students and to do this he emphasises how what has failed is just as important as what has succeeded. Indeed Jason relates how,

> *'It's trying to move their understanding that a failure in itself can be quite a fascinating thing if given the right focus – the right sort of reflection on it.'*

Thus the theme that emerged was the rich learning that failure provided, the insight that respondents gained from failure and the possible benefits for future endeavours.

The Role of Failure in Assessment

The final major theme that emerged was the role of failure in assessment, how this related to passing or failing the course and the ramifications on the learning process. Here Jason quotes Dieter Roth who reached a point in his practice where everything he did was of equal value and nothing was a success and nothing was a failure. This concept had an impact upon Jason, causing him to ponder the teaching and assessment approach, and conclude that,

> *'...we're making value judgements on whether things are successes or failures.'*

Here Mark considers the value of hierarchy inherent in the grading system noting,

> *'I question whether the whole grading thing is really just a sham... I don't know. I don't like it.'*

Similarly Andrew drew attention to the detrimental effects of conceptualising failure as a pass or fail assessment arguing that,

> *'...we create situations of passing and failing which, I think, is really detrimental.'*

Whilst Margaret discussed the implications in the classroom context,

> *'...so, if you can have a discussion whereby you say that failure is OK and that it might even be a good thing, then the student is only going to say "Yes, but what will that mean if I actually fail? I can't fail my assessment."… It is really, really difficult. I think the whole assessment process makes it difficult to have a proper discussion about failure.'*

The staff were clearly concerned that students easily connect any reference to failure in the creation of a piece of work with failure of the unit or course. The inherent

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power relations within the teaching and student body contribute to this, but the issue remains to be addressed.

Two minor themes related to this issue also became apparent. The first was how failing the course assessment becomes perceived by students that they are a failure, as Andrew discussed,

> *'Failure is really complicated because it is a thing that we ascribe to products and it is a thing that we ascribe to people as well, and there is a real tendency within learning to see those judgements as being not just about the things that you do, but about oneself - so you're not just a student that's got a 'B' for their essay, but that you're a 'B' student, or a 'C' student, or a 'D' student, or whatever it might be – a failing student. I think this is partly, really, seriously damaging.'*

A related theme is how this may produce a fear of failure which inhibits progress, as Margaret emphasised,

> *'I keep finding myself having this discussion with students when they get afraid of making something. I think it is because they think they will fail to meet whatever criteria have been loaded on it before they even start.'*

This draws attention to the role of failure in the assessment procedure and how this can have a detrimental impact by inciting fear of failure and inhibiting creative practices amongst students.

<u>Conclusion</u>

To summarise, the findings from the research indicate that failure is a multifaceted and complex concept. The interview process has shed light on this issue enabling respondents to discuss the concept and reflect on how it has impacted on their own creative practices.

Interviewees clearly articulate their own incorporation of failure(s) into their thinking about their practices. They are troubled by the word failure and seek to modify it,

either by introducing other words such as "breakages," "experiment" or by turning it into a verb ("failing"). The absoluteness of 'failure' doesn't tally with their experiences even when something like a business is wound up.

As practitioners they are focused on process and see the evolution of ideas manifest in artworks, designs or research activities rather than the individual objects, installations or papers. It is interesting to note that firstly the interviewees were all prepared to speak about failure and secondly, none articulated fear in relation to failure. One might posit that they have ceased to a greater or lesser extent to be afraid of failure.

In drawing attention to the ongoing nature of the creative process and re-conceptualising failure as part of this process, rather than as an end or terminal point, the respondents lessen the negative impact of failure. We need to be cautious in relation to the use of process as a 'get out' from absolute failure for two reasons. Firstly because failure, the abandonment of a particular work, whilst it might be part of a larger process, is still absolute. Secondly because the conceptualisation as 'process' is in itself the introduction of a management language into the arts, rather than a fully practice-based articulation of failure as a necessary part of making art.

The role of failure in producing learning also emerged as a key theme and emphasises the potentially positive aspect of failure. This is an important, though not art specific, point which speaks to a wider need to be willing to acknowledge and discuss failure.

Nonetheless, failure in relation to students and their learning in the Art School is problematic. The underlying relationship between failure and fear is central, where it wasn't amongst the staff. Here failure (of a work) is often conflated with failing the course or personal failure which must be avoided rather than understood as an inherent part of the creative process from which learning can be derived. A number of the interviewees specifically note the difficulty in discussing failure with students. They report a slippage in the discussion from a piece of work which might not be particularly successful to failing the test, module or course. At least one interviewee

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suggested that art schools should cease to assess students. Notably this is the practice in the highly regarded Cranbrook Academy of Art in the US where a grading system is not used.

Failure seems to slide between different scales: a failed piece of work which might be important as a point of learning slips into the failed assessment which in turn slips into the failed person. There is a further scale highlighted by Sholette (2015) when he highlights,

> *'...the majority of professionally trained artists make up a vast surplus whose utter redundancy is the normal condition of the art market. ...we are "pre-failed" artists, as artists we are like an inert mass of dark matter that invisibly anchors the bright constellation of €47.4 billion industry in art and antiques...'*

These slippages seem almost seamless, and mirror the earlier observation about the change in the use of the word failure in the US in the 19th Century.

Current theorising of art school pedagogies by Susan Orr, Mantz Yorke and Bernadette Blair (2014) proposes a 'reverse transmission' model, emphasising the role of the student as the holder of the knowledge, *'...the students' view that it is they (not the lecturers) who explain their ideas and their work to their lecturers'* (p41 author's emphasis). The authors go on to say *(ibid)*,

> *'Some of the students in this study put forward the view that they are the experts of their own practice and they seek to share their work with lecturers in order to get feedback that might strengthen the work or extend its potential.'*

It is clear, given this interpretation, that it is essential if the student is the expert in their own practice that they become confident in taking risks and accepting failure as part of the process. It is also clear that this pedagogical model leans towards the conflation of a failed work and a failed person, particularly if the student is the only expert.

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This poses questions on how we facilitate failure in an educational and/or life-long learning context where the prevailing culture may avoid discussion of the concept, and where the pedagogical models elide the difference between the failed work and the failed person.

We might consider the extent to which the problematic narrative of failure in particular as articulated by Barolsky (1997), and exemplified both in the conflation of failure in a work with failure of the course, and failure of the work with the person as failure, does not and almost cannot map onto collaborative practices and co-creative processes. It's not that collaboration and co-creation cannot involve failures, but the narrative of the anxious and doubt-driven artist just doesn't have meaning in a context where responsibilities are shared.

There are limitations to this research including the small sample of respondents derived from one UK Art School. However the research is exploratory in nature and as such offers a starting point for further investigation. The findings of this early stage research encourage discussion and debate of current educational practices regarding failure. Thus the article aims to highlight some of the nuances, stereotypes and challenges in talking about failure to support further discussion and open up dialogue on a concept which is inherent in the creative process but is often overlooked as it is a challenging and emotive concept.

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