

Time of Lost Cases: Why Failing is More Contemporary Than Success?

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The discourse of modernity finds its justification in the history of victories: of democracy over non-democracy, liberalism over non-liberalism, capitalism over non-capitalism. The narrative of success strictly written into the structures of power is present not only in the mass-media, the educational system, or state institutions, but also in the art itself– which legitimizes the civilization progress towards the utopia. Any trace of failure, mistake, weakness, are being pushed beyond the limits of language. The discourse of power transforms the past without exceptions for the sake of control over the current situation. There for history is a story of winners and losers are left deaf and unnoticed in their contemporaneities for ever. As Althusser noted, “The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production”¹. For this reason failure cannot be recorded by no means, because it would prove inefficiency of the system. Only success will remain as a justification of the current conditions of production. Mass contentment and satisfaction serves as the guarantor of the safe *status quo* as the current success legitimizes everything that lead to it. Thus, the paradigm of winning became an organizing rule of the North Atlantic civilization.

Cultural institutions are under its influence as well, and contemporary art therefore sometimes resembles an arms race. Artists master their art in order to jump bars set high by their predecessors or themselves. The rule of competitiveness, so widespread in the post-industrial society, also becomes a model in the world of art. Because of this, painting, sculpture, or photography gain the character of sports disciplines where expert apparatus grants awards: cultural institutions decide who will be placed in the center, and who on the peripheries of the world of art. Success also has its economic aspect, which forces artists to constantly consider their market environment. The creator, as a producer and maker, becomes settled and judged in the context of tradition, other works, of the critical narrative, but also in the context of commodity exchange. These circumstances can serve as a trap for the art itself. It is in the interest of the artist to be placed and stay as close to the center as possible, and then retain the established position. However it is decided by the expert apparatus which influences the distribution of financial means: directly through awards, grants, and subsidies; or indirectly through their opinions which influence the market of potential recipients/buyers. Thus, contemporary art becomes both an element and the reflection of the neoliberal society of the 21st century.

The relentless rules of the market dictate however that every success is balanced by

1 . Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. Ben Brewster, accessed 15 August, 2017, www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm.

somebody else's failure. In the discussion over the global power balance the voices of the excluded groups are becoming audible more and more often: the disabled, racial, ethnical, sexual minorities and all the others who used to be disqualified in the historical race to success. The point of reference in their own narrative construction may become the failure itself – understood as the set of phenomena unspoken, silenced, or displaced from collective conscience in their entirety: phenomena which reveal the vulnerability, weakness, limitedness, and the inability of the Subject. This perspective opens possibilities for new forms of expression, which have until now been relegated to the peripheries of the world of art.

I

The concept of failure as a narrative-organizing rule is possible due to historical changes in the understanding of art that occurred in the 20th century. The key to understanding these changes is a close reading of the idea of *The End of Art* proposed by Arthur C. Danto, among other theoreticians. According to this American philosopher, the Modern narrative on art came to an end together with the birth of pop-art². When Andy Warhol exhibited the *Brillo Boxes* in 1964 in the Stable Gallery, he blurred the demarcation line between art and reality. Since then, every item shown by an artist had the capacity to become art. Of course, cases of using *ready-mades* were known before that; however, the context of Andy Warhol's gesture is crucial here. The revolution of the 1960s in the field of art was encrypted onto the entirety of civilization changes that had occurred in the post-war Europe and North America: changes such as the substantial improvement of living standards, loosening of class divisions, and the unification of life styles. Together with the liberalization and democratization of social structures, the world of art became open to all of those who until then had had no access to it – because of their limitations in regards to artistry (the mimetic paradigm) or intellectual level (the philosophic paradigm).

This revolutionary move by Warhol showed that art history told in a traditional way is only one of many possible perspectives. For instance, the choice proposed by Ernst Gombrich focuses on artworks deriving from European culture in the last 3000 years whose authors were mainly white men. From its early beginnings art was of elitist character. Aesthetically valuable objects produced by the representatives on non-privileged groups were appreciated rather as folklore and not as a result of artistic activity in itself. This rule is most vividly manifested through state institutions such as museums, where artifacts produced by foreign cultures are

² . See Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) 117-134.

would legitimize its functioning. Thus, the official narrative puts the stress rather on the success of the centers than on the failure of the peripheries. As Scott Sandage notices, the success becomes symbolically multiplied when it becomes embodied by the discourse; therefore, those who attained it cannot stop talking about it⁵. In an order thusly understood, the only correct means of communicating the failure is silence. The narrative of failure becomes audible when the propaganda of success becomes silenced.

While describing the resistance movement of peasants in South-Eastern Asia, James C. Scott noticed that the weaker use different and less spectacular strategies while fighting the oppressive system, than is case of entities of equal rank⁶. What at first seems to be passiveness, ignorance, or even acceptance of oppression, can in fact be a hidden sabotage. For instance, such anti-activities can be manifested by slowing down the work tempo, or lousiness and negligence of duties. The situation described by Scott shows that weakness and failure are a resistance against the values proscribed by capitalist institutions. These values are supposed to ensure efficient and safe functioning of the system; they become a norm that regulates the worldviews. Whatever is placed outside of this horizon is supposed to be rejected. In the culture of North Atlantic, the recommended model proposes success understood in terms of self-development, capital accumulation, organization of private life in the form of a family, ethical activity, structured plans about the future. Any deviation from this path equals exclusion. José Muñoz considers the rejection of life pragmatism to be one of utopian strategies of queer culture⁷. If the goals offered by social structures are unattainable, and one could perceive the attempt of organizing homosexual desire within the frames of heteronormative institutions as such, then a different, alternative model should be found or created. The failure of queer is based on the fact that it will never attain its final realization and durability as heterosexual structures. The compensation is to be found in art. According to Judith Halberstam, “queer art is an enormous opportunity for using the social potential of disappointment and resistance against the reality of such rigorous standards of normalcy. “The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art,

⁵ . See Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2005), 9.

⁶ . See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1987), p. 29.

⁷ . See José E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

and for being”⁸.

One of the examples of rejection of the common sense pragmatism is to be found in *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh⁹. Renton, the main character of the novel, rejects the path of social development facilitated by institutions such as school, work, or family. He motivates his idleness by disagreement with the illusion of freedom promoted by capitalist propaganda. Having to choose between a job in a corporation, mortgage loan, and social benefits – he chooses nothing and succumbs to destructive joys of drug intake and nightclubbing with other disenchanting people. Within the capitalist logic, the moral life becomes opposed to the fall and decay, the order to banditry, control over sexuality to promiscuity, and consciousness to intoxication. Renton cannot allow himself to choose what is commonly preferred; therefore, he tries to revoke the system by his passiveness and apathy. His strategy somehow resembles the resistance techniques used by Asian peasants. The young Scotsman sacrifices his career, health, and other emblems of life fulfillment in order to sabotage the capitalist machinery. Here one can also notice some elements of fight against British colonialism. *Trainspotting* is set in the environment of Edinburgh clubbers who tend to associate the standards of economic efficacy with British society rather than with their own homeland. It is interesting that resistance against imperialism takes a form of self-weakening, unlike most of the post-colonial narratives, which strengthen their identity by turning themselves toward nationalism.

Another realm where the success dictate is clearly manifested is, according to Halberstam, sport. And although the idea of modern Olympic Games is referring to purely humanist values, what matters in the final stage of realization is who will win. The Olympic Games have themselves often been an arena of international struggle, whenever the conflict which could not manifest openly was sublimated as sport rivalry. If we look closely at the narrative organized around various tournaments, we shall see that what lies at its very center is the extremely oppressive mechanism of exclusion: the podium is reserved only for the first three results. Other participants form an anonymous mob of rivals offered – as a consolation prize – a hope for a future win. The severity of this division was captured by an Australian photographer Tracy Moffat. In her extremely interesting work titled *Fourth* the artist presented sportsmen from the Sydney Olympics at the moment of their realization that they have only managed to take a place excluding them from the podium. The position of a person whose distance from winning can be

8 . Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 88.

9 . See *Ibid.*, 90.

measured in seconds or centimeters is symbolically more difficult than that of those who have performed much worse and stayed far behind. It is always impossible to know – until the last moment – who will be granted the fourth place, and when the bitter announcement is made the failure of the loser is specifically exposed.

III

The models of exclusion typical for the discourse of success are also present in art. They function according to several criteria, with the economic - understood as access to the means of production - being one of the most crucial. Preparing a full-length movie which would circulate in the official realm is directly linked to the budget that would allow hiring a team of qualified specialists in various disciplines. The source of financing such actions is rarely limited to private funds. The money often comes from state funds, or is given by various firms and corporations which form their own demands regarding the project, such as the condition of profitability. Another criterion for presence in the discourse is artistry and the artisanship of the author, or his proficiency. In order to be able to perform the simplest piece of classical music, one must be trained for a specific amount of time in order to attain technical ability, allowing the person to perform or create a work. The third criterion is the intellectual one. Access to the contemporary world of art is often connected with a specific discursive background, which enables one to read meanings settled in tradition and other disciplines of human activity. These criteria can be reduced to an economic denominator. All in all, the acquisition of artisanship and theoretical tools is a form of work, and as such it can be seen as a ratio of money value to time sacrificed to attain the ability. The capitalist system owns structures which facilitate and regulate participation in the world of art: the denominated criteria can only be fulfilled through acquisition of means available within this system. If the process shall be completed according to the recommended model, the result should be positive. For art it means reaching the audience, being acclaimed by the expert apparatus, and the profit of the creators. Of course, participation in the structures does not guarantee the preferred outcome; however, deviations, aberrations, or, in the worst case, failures of any kind, remind outside the rhetoric of capitalist institutions. Hence, whatever has no space in the discourse of success becomes expressed by the art of failure.

An example of artistic toying with above mainstream criterion can be found in the project of Sana el-Azzeh-Siekierska, *LiTut Project*. The author asked children attending schools worldwide to take photographs of their closest environment. The cameras were sent to Mauritius, Sechelles and Palestine. Most of the examples from the Middle East concentrate on the conflict between

the Arab states and Israel. Thus, the narrative of Western media is full of dramatic scenes of war maneuvers which would serve as material for war movies. However, the works made for El-Azzeh-Siekierska's project concentrate on landscapes and portraits of family members. Children were focused mostly on everyday life artifacts, excluding war activities, which – to a distant observer – seem to be more attractive than pictures of a desert, or a group of laughing teenagers. Whenever we decide to commemorate a picture, it seems important to us, and worth memorizing. The lack of aggression scenes or war images can be a result of child's supersession of the trauma. *LiTut Project* is also worth mentioning in regards to the technical aspect of the photographs. There were often blurred, burnt or badly framed pictures. Sometimes, the young artists would accidentally cover the image with their own finger. Those pictures, according to the criteria of artisanship mastery should be excluded from any professional circulation. Here however they attain additional meaning, underlining the uniqueness and authenticity of presented perspective.

The rule of competence has been delimiting the borders of art for several centuries, making this world inaccessible for certain groups. Some of these limitations were caused by genetic predispositions. The change in this matter occurred in the second half of 20th century with the demolition of historical narrative. The Warsaw Theatre 21 co-created by artists with autism and trisomy of 21st chromosome undertakes the subject of social exclusion of people with inherited intellectual dysfunction in various realms of everyday life. One of their shows: *Falls. Episode 2 (Upadki.Ocinek 2)* talks about the mechanisms of oppression in the realm of finance and banking. The actors are granted money for a trip to Mongolia where they stay in *all inclusive* hotel. The money they possess guarantees to each of them to use all the facilities offered by the complex, however a problem occurs when the protagonists are to perform their first financial operation. In a series of self-ironic scenes and monologues the actors show their problems with differentiating value of particular bills, or with performing the most basic arithmetic action. Finally, the trip results in failure. The weakness and inability become a component of everyday experience of the excluded in their everyday struggle against their limitations. The theatrical medium forms a chance to communicate this situation while sustaining the subjectivity of the participants.

Capitalism divides its participants into the winners and losers. The narrative on art, just as any other historical narrative, is being told by the winners. However, together with the decomposition

of the dominant discourse, the formerly excluded ones become audible. The 20th century “explosion” of aesthetics contributed to the extension of the notion of the art itself. Thus, the representatives of eternal peripheries become deponents of artistic means necessary to articulate own perspective. The queer theory seems to be especially important for this recognition, as it perceives failure as an alternative to the dominant narrative.

The rules of free market force us to chase the ever-changing ideal of life fulfillment. Any moment of stoppage or slowing down in comparison to the overall tempo means disqualification from the global race for success. In these circumstances the art of failure can be seen as a relief valve, a reservoir of models and strategies used for taming crises. The win is usually a result of multiple attempts, which often end up far from the imagined effect. Ignoring the moments of weakness, exhaustion, or even boredom, becomes a manipulation of dangerous consequences. The art of failure gives a chance to bring back the fullness to our existential experience. It allows people to expand the image of contemporary reality, include elements which have been so far placed outside the frame and record it for the upcoming generations.

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