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FOUNTAINS FAILURES FUTURES: THE AFTERLIVES OF PUBLIC ART

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In 2020, a national call for a Designed Living Environment / Gestaltad livsmiljö was made through a unique collaboration between Formas (a Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development), Boverket (Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning), Riksantikvarieämbetet (Swedish National Heritage Board), ArkDes (Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design), and Statens konstråd (Public Art Agency Sweden). The aim of the call was to highlight aesthetic perspectives and the role of public art in sustainable public architecture and design.

Ten interdisciplinary research projects on the role of public art were each awarded a four-year research grant. The Fountain: An art-technological-social drama is one of those projects, and the symposium Fountains Failures Futures: The afterlives of public art is a key part of our research process.

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WORKING PAPER

"Fail Your Rubblish Art!"

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Abstract

Different tropes of failure are introduced within the context of a research project on public art: “The fountain Fontänen: An art-technological-social drama” focussed on the defunct remains and perceived failure of a large public art work on the campus of Lund University in southern Sweden.

Keywords

failure; public art; techno-functional failure; institutional failure; ontological failure.

"Failure is our most important product."¹

1. Failing over themselves backwards.

LTH Fountain is a public artwork that is generally understood to have failed. Its enigmatic skeletal remains now stand amid Lund's university campus buildings as a dimly perceived relic from a bygone moment of techno-utopian modernism.



Image 1. Klas Anshelm and Arne Jones, LTH Fountain, 2020. Lund, Sweden. Photo: Maddie Leach.



Image 1. Newspaper clipping from *Expressen*, 11 October 1969. The caption reads: 'People are meant to sit on the benches under the fountain. But do as Lilian Johansson — bring an umbrella.'

Where to begin with thinking about failure? Some lean against the rub of another relic?²
 "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."³

¹ Quote attributed to R. W. Johnson, Jr., a former CEO, Johnson & Johnson, from 1954.

² A "rub of the relic" is a Hiberno-English colloquialism that derives from the tradition of using material contact with objects associated with holy personages or sites as a means to ward off evil and/or promote good influences. The expression is also used as a metaphor for sexual activity and masturbation.

³ This widely repeated quote from Samuel Beckett's late short prose piece *Worstward Ho!* is among other things an internet meme.

There is nothing quite so bleak in all of Beckett as there is to be found in the giddy enthusiasm of tennis players⁴ and CEOs, of arts commentators and educators, for Beckett's dereliction of hope: "Longing that all go. Dim go. Void go. Longing go. Vain longing that vain longing go."⁵

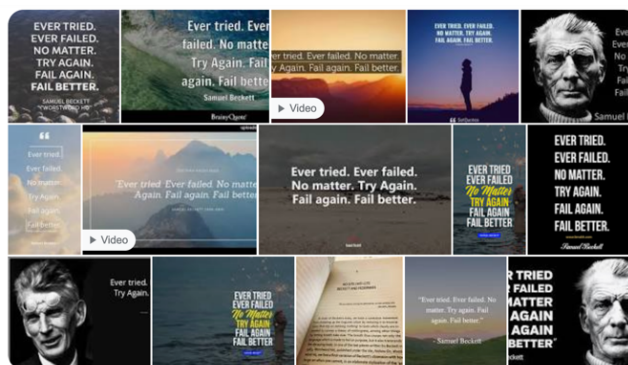


Image 3. Screen grab of Google image search return on Beckettian "fail again /better" meme.

Some read this as an injunction to the neoliberal subject's programme of self-improvement. Some read this as the valorisation of failure in the horizon of innovation: "It is, after all, through failures that learning and development can occur..."; and "Often, all too quickly, failure is subsumed into 'productive' rhetoric ... failure in service of development ... But what if we look at its beautiful uselessness; at its 'unproductive' elements?"⁶

There are a range of clichés like these that perform as readymade thinking about failure. These phrases are reprised again and again in well-meaning project groups, scrawled convivially across so many yellow paper patches. They make up a whole consultation industry of jotting graffiti upon walls littered with *Post-it Notes*. Legions of counter-hegemonic-Bartleby's scribbling optimistically about the full delicious goodness that may bloom and ripen out of failure.⁷

But what if – contrary to the contemporary recuperations of this tale of Wallstreet – failure is just that, *failing*? Not working, not performing, not delivering, not doing, not resisting, not redeeming, not a renegotiable temporary negation, but rather just awful, disappointed collapse without reconstructive hope? Not 'too big to fail,' but rather too total a failure to be

⁴ See Bhavishya Mittal (2020) "'Fail Again. Fail Better' – Stan Wawrinka Reveals the Inspirational Story Behind His Tattoo" <https://www.essentiallysports.com/fail-again-fail-better-stan-wawrinka-reveals-the-inspirational-story-behind-his-tattoo-atp-tennis-news/> (accessed 2/5/2023)

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Cameron Cartiere, & Anthony Schrag (eds.) (2023) *The Failures of Public Art and Participation*. Routledge.

⁷ "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" is a Herman Melville short story from the 1850s that unfolds the story of a 19th century legal office and the strange non-compliance of a copyist clerk who when requested and instructed to do work tasks responds with "I would prefer not to." The story has had increasing currency in criticism as the figure of Bartleby has been used in the context of formations such as Occupy Wall Street in the 2010s and as a signifier of a refusal of the capitalist injunctions to productivity, precarity and self-exploitation.

avowed as bearable or redeemable? Not an inspirational set-back that induces the heroic will to struggle on and *try try try* again harder. But simply the blank eternal-returning refusal of the world to cooperate with the vain projections of some other better world? Failure as an endless lurching from bad to worse and worser yet? What if it just gets worse?

A note of caution is required before rushing to embrace the world as only-ever a matter of failure. For if one's belly is full, if the roof over one's head is functioning half-well, and if there is a paper somewhere saying that one is in good standing with the state, perhaps one should be a little sceptical of the ease with which a grand ontological condition of failure may be asserted. Doesn't this all too easily give one well-served by current arrangements an alibi to withhold oneself from the Sisyphean struggle for improvement? Doesn't it afford the happy insight that one can refrain from the naïveté of struggle against the status quo and the irrevocable ways of the world, and so learn to reconcile oneself with one's full belly as it is – well roofed and well registered?

Perhaps there are other ways of thinking failure and other modes of failure yet to be itemised that lie somewhere between entrepreneurial failure as “an essential stage in the individual's progress toward lucrative self-fulfilment” and ontological failure as “the necessary defeat of every ... endeavour”?⁸

2. Another failure is possible

A broad family of concepts of failure may be drawn from across different fields of engineering and industry (including such varied concerns as instrumentation and control systems, materials science, and structural dynamics) that tend toward a specification of failure within variously mixed quantitative and qualitative descriptors. For example, there is the definition of failure provided by the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) as the “termination of the ability of an item to perform a required function.”⁹ Failure, in this sense, is always related to a required function and often specified in terms of a set of acceptable

⁸ Mark O'Connell (2014) “The Stunning Success of ‘Fail Better’ How Samuel Beckett became Silicon Valley's life coach.” *The Slate*.

<https://slate.com/culture/2014/01/samuel-becketts-quote-fail-better-becomes-the-mantra-of-silicon-valley.html> (accessed 2/5/2023)

⁹ <https://www.cemua.org/Glossary/F/Failure.aspx> (accessed 2/5/2023)

operational parameters. This construction of failure is contrasted with the term *fault*: “The state of an item characterized by inability to perform a required function.”¹⁰ Therefore, while a failure is punctual – an event that occurs at a specific point in time – a fault is durative, a state that will last for a shorter or longer period.

The *LTH Fountain* is seen by some to have centrally failed as an engineering structure. The performance requirement of the structure was that the water, held aloft of pylons and struts, flushing through a series of stepped basins, would cascade through the system in a way that would create a series of continuous flows, relayed through the structure without substantial leakage. It apparently could not perform this function when launched upon the world. This is one mode of failure that we might specify as *techno-functional* failure. Building upon this techno-functional conception of failure, the space is created for the ‘failure-is-a-lesson-on-the-way-to-further-innovation’ approach: “You can learn from success, but you have to work at it; It’s a lot easier to learn from failure.”¹¹ This quote from an executive from the American multinational conglomerate 3M is often cited in conjunction with an anecdote of innovation success rooted in initial failure.

The story tells of how, in an attempt to create a stronger adhesive for the aerospace industry, Spencer Silvers, a researcher at 3M, generated a weak adhesive that could easily be removed without residue. Although recorded by the company as a failure, a little over half a decade later, in 1974, Art Fry (one of Silvers’ colleagues) used some of the material from this failed adhesive experiment in conjunction with some yellow scrap paper as a bookmark in his hymnal book at church. Three years later, by translating this idiosyncratic usage into a product concept, 3M launched *Press’n Peel*. However, this new product did not sell well. In 1979 the company relaunched the product by issuing a large volume of free samples and renewing the product description. This marketing ploy generated sales success when more than 90% of the clients who had received the free samples made further purchases of the now almost universal *Post-it Note*. This is part of the folklore that underpins a whole sub-industry of consultation on innovation and the valorisation of failure.¹²

¹⁰ <https://www.emua.org/Glossary/F/Fault.aspx> (accessed 2/5/2023)

¹¹ This is a quote attributed to Lewis Lehr, Former CEO of the 3M Corporation in the folklore of innovation studies.

¹² See Richard Sandomir (2021) “Spencer Silver, an Inventor of Post-it Notes, Is Dead at 80”. New York Times. (13/5/2021) <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/13/business/spencer-silver-dead.html> (accessed 2/5/2023)

We might contrast the techno-functional failure concept, and the entrepreneurial models of generative failure predicated upon it, with the Beckettian mode of failure that was encountered earlier. Beckett thematically and formally rehearsed a relentless flow of figures of failure, through various plays on negation and the worsening of circumstance, in lines such as:

No. Naught best. Best worse. No. Not best worse. Naught not best worse. Less best worse. No. Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say that best worse. With leastening words say least best worse. For want of worser worst. Unlessenable least best worse.¹³

One could read this as a kind of techno-functional failure of language, its inability to perform, its inability to meet some requirement to disclose the world or to speak *Being* adequately. However, this worrying at speaking *nothing*/speaking *Being* has been construed by some as a pre-given failure inbuilt into the luckless desire to speak the *naught* of *Being* by any means whatsoever.

One commentator has prefaced this citation as follows: “‘Naught,’ then, is the term of impossibility in *Worstward Ho!* The unburdening crawl of the text moves toward the nothing but can only stop at its threshold as the ‘unnullable least’ invades.”¹⁴ Read in this way, this mode of failure might not be so easily comprehended within the *techno-functional* failure definition cited above and would seem to have little to offer in schooling the entrepreneurial drive for insight and a return on investment. Let us call this an instance of *ontological* failure, indicating not the failure of language as instrument to describe and disclose being as such, but rather the always-already-failed-condition of a mode of being that seeks to give account of, or give orientation to, *Being* by any means, as in Beckett’s: “Vain longing that vain longing go.” This might be parsed as something like the inevitable refusal of the world to cooperate with itself.

In contrast to this ontological failure, we could introduce a related but substantially different genre of failure pertaining to biography and psychology. Within the personal development, therapeutic and coaching industry we have a taxonomy of failure that pertains to individual growth and that includes such categories as failure of the will, abject failure, glorious failure and so forth. Abject failure is proposed as “the type of failure when people lose

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Arka Chattopadhyay (2012). “‘Worst in Need of Worse’, and the Trajectory of Worsening, Samuel Beckett.” *Today / Aujourd'hui*, 24(1), 73-87.

something that feels essential to them.”¹⁵ While glorious failure is “the type of failure where you give something your all, but you fail in an epic blaze of glory.” These are different species of personal failure, and they take us into a space that neighbours the entrepreneurial retrieval-of-success-from-failure. The difference here though is that the work that fails or succeeds is the work of the subject upon the subject, the work of self-improvement, something that is central to the neoliberal abandonment of the individual to its impoverished and atomized *freedom*. There are other near neighbours here also. For example, there is the proposition that one who “understands the differentiation between right and wrong” and “elects to do wrong on a conscious level for their own benefit” has enacted a specifically *moral* failure.¹⁶

Stepping away from this focus on individuated failure and a set of discourses pre-occupied with allotting responsibility to failing individuals, we have a range of institutional failures. When liberal democracies are seen to incubate intensified wealth inequity, ethnonationalism, migrant scapegoating, climate change response reluctance, and so forth, there is a clamour of denouncement of what are termed institutional failures.

These are often catalogued as (i) law and policy failures (e.g. perverse subsidies), (ii) market failures (externalities in the use of public goods and services), (iii) organizational failure (e.g. lack of transparency and political legitimacy in decision-making) and (iv) informal institutional failures (e.g. break of collective action norms due to erosion of trust).¹⁷

Not caught within this taxonomy, however, is a more profound figure of institutional failure, which is something like the failure of an inherited institutional paradigm to match the actualities of unfolding worlds. When a commentator responding to the Covid-19 crisis and racially based extra-judicial police killings, writes of “an inability to adapt our safekeeping institutions to the realities of the 21st century”, he is pointing to a paradigmatic institutional failure, not just an operational one.¹⁸

This proposition of paradigmatic institutional failure has also arisen within the extraordinarily expanded field of contemporary public art. My former colleague Andrea

¹⁵ <https://everydaypower.com/types-failure-experienced/> (accessed 2/5/2023)

¹⁶ <https://fherehab.com/news/addiction-isnt-moral-failure/> (accessed 2/5/2023)

¹⁷ <https://www.ipbes.net/glossary/institutional-failure> (accessed 2/5/2023)

¹⁸ Derek Thompson (2020) “Why America’s Institutions Are Failing”. *The Atlantic*. (16/6/2020) <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/why-americas-institutions-are-failing/613078/> (accessed 2/5/2023)

Phillips has been developing a critique along these lines for some time. An early version was presented as a keynote paper in Malmö as part of the Contemporary Art Days (2015) symposium “Between Dissent and Discipline: Art and Public Space.”¹⁹ The idea of paradigmatic institutional failure seems to be operative in claims such as: “the concept of the public is Anglo-European and has a substantial place in the history and geography of colonisation and its uneven, violent and always continuing correlative process of decolonisation”; and the “concept of the public has been politically, structurally and economically discredited over the course of the last 100 years.”²⁰ More recently Phillips has developed this argument further in an interview in the volume *Collectively Annotated Bibliography: On Artistic Practices in the Expanded Field of Public Art* edited by Judith Wielander and Matteo Lucchetti. Drawing upon the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva she asserts that: “The public domain is a ‘colonial (juridic, economic, symbolic) architecture[s]’.”²¹ Phillips proceeds to argue that:

The public domain so famously demanded by Habermas for its purported discursive freedom is not free; or, is only free for the consecrated subject. The dialectic of public–private produced by the political concept of the public domain (with its museums and galleries, coffee shops and concert halls...) is not only regulative ... but violent as a double negative: those who are not subjects (which may also include the non-human) are not banned from the private and the public domain, but they can only exist there as object.²²

This is not just a matter of a failure of the concept – and institutional elaborations – of *public* as manifest in failures to include all within its proposed universal reach. Rather this is the failure of the institutional paradigm of *public* because its universalism is precisely its violence.

In addition to the Beckettian elaboration of a literary practice premised on what I have termed ontological failure above, there are whole series of different aesthetic failure terms to be found. From the proposition that: “the aesthetic of failure can be defined as the way artists

¹⁹ <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/28952/between-dissent-and-discipline-art-and-public-space-in-malm/> (accessed 2/5/2023). A version of the text was later published in the (2018) volume *Public Enquiries: PARK LEK and the Scandinavian Social Turn*.

²⁰ Andrea Phillips (2018) “Forgetting the Public” in M. Wilson et al. (eds.) *Public Enquiries: PARK LEK and the Scandinavian Social Turn*. Black Dog Press. 169-172.

²¹ “A Conversation with Andrea Phillips by Visible – Judith Wielander and Matteo Lucchetti” in J. Wielander and M. Lucchetti (eds.) *Collectively Annotated Bibliography: On Artistic Practices in the Expanded Field of Public Art*. 193-199.

²² Op. Cit.

reflexively quote and misuse the programmed aspects of their medium”²³; to the specific construction of *graceful* failure: “When technology fails it can fail miserably and it can fail gracefully, and if it is graceful enough failure might not be noticed or even appreciated as success.”²⁴ There are two different registers of aesthetic characterisation at work here: On the one hand, there is an elaboration of failure as a kind of aesthetic practice of negation (one of the ways in which Beckett is more typically read), and on the other hand, there is also an aesthetic framing of modes of failure. These aesthetics of failure are not explicitly invoked in the initial construction of the *LTH Fountain*. However, they can be seen to be brought into play by the subsequent folklore and parsing of the remains of the work among those who encounter “Döda fallet” (the dead falls) in the decades after its inauguration.²⁵ Among these aspects of the aesthetics of failure are aspects of the comic.²⁶ This comedy is not necessarily a transmutation of the agony of failure into the transcendence of reconciliation, acceptance or the overcoming of adversity by dint of strength of character or personal growth. It can also be the comedy of the unredeemable and the absurd.

3. After all those failures, what then?

In rehearsing some varieties of failure, I hope to open up the possibility of analysing the specific terms within which the *LTH Fountain* has been accused of failure and also to consider how it might be read against the very different economies of failure that this incomplete taxonomy of failures has hopefully indicated.

²³ <https://medium.com/@pedro.pinto/the-dynamics-and-aesthetics-of-failure-an-introduction-a9208c0993fa> (accessed 2/5/2023)

²⁴ <https://mushon.com/blog/2009/05/05/fail-gracefully/> (accessed 2/5/2023)

²⁵ There are several nicknames like “Döda fallet”(the dead falls) “Laxtrappan” (the salmon stairs), and "Fontana di Träti" (an elaborate pun on the 18th-century Trevi Fountain in Rome) that jibe at the work and its mishaps.

²⁶ “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that... Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world.”

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