The Wheel

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Not This, Not That

Imelda Barnard

Sitting behind a desk and staring at the all-too-familiar computer screen, I imagine the myriad ways that I might begin this essay, all of the ideas which are scribbled in a notebook, destined to remain half-formed, despite the permanence of the pen stain. There are words underlined and written in bold to signify their importance, arrows linking one sentence to another. Words like 'getting lost'; 'deferral'; 'deliberate uncertainty'; 'interruption'; 'repetition'… Flicking back, I realise that I've forgotten my earlier notes, and so all of the new ideas I've since had seem immersed in a fog of older quotes and more seemingly pertinent thoughts. It's already composed of failed attempts and unrealised sentences, even before it has really begun.

Sitting behind a desk and talking directly to camera, a man describes a number of ideas for possible artworks, all of which never progressed beyond a pencil mark in a sketchbook. This 1979 work by David Critchley, entitled *Pieces I Never Did*, banally dramatises the gap between a written idea and its later, hoped-for manifestation as an artwork. Clearly rooted in a prevailing conceptualism, where the idea dominated over the production of an object, this failure to turn word into image exposes the material differences between these two modes of communication, questioning whether a work needs to be made in order to exist as art, whilst simultaneously framing the artwork as always incomplete. This litany of absent works finds echoes in a current project – aptly named *Unrealised Projects* – by Sam Ely and Lynn Harris (2003–present), which investigates the possibilities inherent in the unfulfilled.[1] Archiving project proposals submitted by artists, these half-formed ideas remain bound in language – pencil marks in sketchbooks – amounting to a collection of the almost-there-but-not-quite. This open-ended, wheel-like endeavour posits value in the unproduced, repositioning the modes of production usually associated with the artwork and unleashing the potential inherent in work that has no real beginning or end: work which, in many ways, acknowledges its failure before it even attempts to succeed.

This failure of realisation is, however, one that demands a different sort of critical engagement than that required by a completed work. Vividly embodying Roland Barthes' essay 'The Death of the Author' by engaging the viewer as a form of co-author, it also unhinges meaning, inviting the audience to 'intellectually actualise an outcome',[2] to create their own story. The move towards subjective criticism, encouraged by Barthes and works such as Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*, disputed the status of the critic as an infallible, authoritative reader. Since then, 'any interpretation of the work must be an imaginative figment, imposed at whim or under the hallucination of insight'.[3] Criticism as an 'imaginative figment' is, of course, pushed further when the work itself is a fictional construct with no tangible outcome. The negative connotations we might associate with incomplete projects – resigned defeat and suspended judgements – are instead replaced with a critical gesture that affirms open-endedness and the plurality of interpretation; failure is 'a boundary fraught with possibilities.'[4] That actual realisation is unnecessary presents the work as always only an attempt, signalling also the capacity for criticism to exist as a work in progress; the work is both endlessly incomplete, or alternatively, 'complete at every point in its development.'[5] This capacity for a work to *not be* references Giorgio Agamben's understanding of potentiality as that which is irreducible to actuality. While potentiality is a possibility that exists, it simultaneously does not exist as an actual thing. From this paradox Agamben locates potentiality as the existence of a non-being, a presence of an absence; it is a form of privation. In this way, potentiality is both the capacity to be and not be, so that it exists as an impotentiality: if potentiality was only the potential to be, then all potential would already have been actualised, so it would not exist in and

1   See: http://www.unrealisedprojects.org/
2   Interview by Simona Nastac, co-editor of web magazine 'e-cart' with Sam Ely and Lynn Harris about their 'Unrealised Projects', in *Failure* symposium publication (Berlin: Several Pursuits, 2010). See: http://www.severalpursuits.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/FailurePublication.pdf
3   Sally O'Reilly, "An Onion in Apple's Clothing", in Linda Quinlan, *Like Horses and Fog: Standing Outside History* (Cork: Crawford Gallery, 2008), 82
4   Joel Fisher, "The Success of Failure", in Mira Schor, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism* (Duke University, 2000), 161
5   Fisher (2000) 157
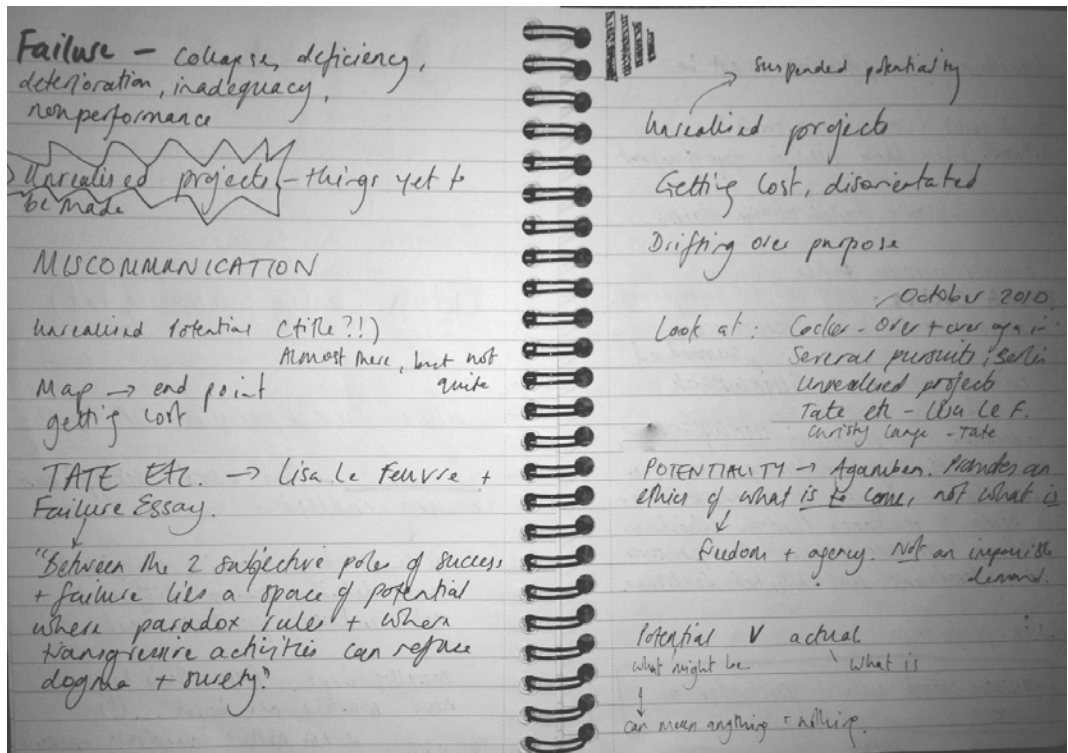
of itself. Thus, 'To be potential means; to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*.'[7] The apparent failure of the non-actualised is, in fact, full of potential, capable of both being and not being, doing and not doing.

This sense of suspended potential and resistance to one fixed point conjures failure as a circular motif, aligning it specifically with acts of repetition or wilful irresolution. Clearly invoking Sisyphus and his continuous task of rolling a rock up a hill only for it to roll back down, this endless act nevertheless rejects a simple reading of blind acceptance, functioning instead as a moment of interruption. Reconfiguring the Sisyphean myth as more than just a model of pointless action, Emma Cocker sees it as operating according to a cycle of failure and repetition, non-attainment and replay; this deferred loop privileges the 'latent potential of being not-yet-there'.[8] Referencing artistic practice from the 1960s onwards, the myth is pluralistically invoked to highlight its various shifts in meaning; from representing futility and resignation, to operating more as a resistant or flexible force that playfully refuses authority. Here we can insert Bartleby's famous 'I would prefer not to' as indicative of a subversive force that refuses to fulfil the law, and entirely emblematic of Agamben's potentiality. Consequently, works that inscribe failure into their fabric operate as generative or productive forces, emerging 'as a mode of resistance through which to challenge or even refuse the pressures of dominant goal-orientated doctrines'.[9] As Cocker further suggests, the Sisyphean paradigm of unresolved action – or a thwarted gesture – can be understood as a form of inexhaustible performance, suggesting the 'need to perform whilst deferring the arrival of any specific goal'. Rather than refusing to perform, they instead *prefer not* to reach resolution. By relentlessly performing, such works rally against a sense of disappointment located in the moment of completion, so that the struggle emerges as more successful than any desired finality. It amounts to a rehearsal space, a place of pause.

Echoing this and clearly manifested in his catalogue *Unbuilt Roads: 107 Unrealised Projects*, Hans Ulrich Obrist comments that such works 'form a unique testament to the speculative power of non-action', contending that 'actual realisation is only one possibility'.[10] This potential form of resistance is thus opposed to linear modes of progress, surety and success. The fact that unrealised works can be constantly remade suggests that the world itself can also be continuously interrogated, that it is composed of infinite narratives. The incomplete imagines an unwritten future. Speaking specifically about manifestos and the way they are driven by the unfulfilled nature of the future, Obrist detects some of their utopian centre in unfulfilled projects. Utopian thought critiques existing social forms and tries to imagine new ones. The non-space of utopia is thus predicated on a time that is yet to happen, on a future that can only exist in the form of a fiction. If realised, however, the non-place of a utopia would cease to exist. This imaginary dimension lies at the centre of the 'unbuilt', and although not made actual, these works signal the capacity for the imaginary to be more than just a failure of articulation, more than merely impotent ideas. By virtue of their potential, they act as producers of alternative worlds, of imagined transformation, of an open system. According to Simon Sheikh:

> It is… a question of imagining another world, and thus instituting other ways of being instituted and imagining, so to speak. To say that other worlds are indeed possible. Secondly, the imaginary, as articulation, naturally has to do with the processes and potentialities of artistic production itself: to offer other imaginaries, ways of seeing and thus changing the world.[11]

This process of becoming, of not-quite-arriving finds echoes in the *Utopia Station* project (2003), which was articulated around the idea of the exhibition as laboratory, a constant work in progress. Based on a model of contingency and transformation, the non-place that the station occupied (the word itself conjuring the notion of waiting, of somewhere in-between) enabled an open-ended discussion, privileging shifting views and contributions, generating meaning in contrast to predetermined discourses. As such, it exists in the act of creation, framed by continuous movement, and thus situated in an unidentifiable space, whilst nevertheless moving towards somewhere else. It acts as a passage, a rupture between here and there. Rather than signalling a failure of progression, it acknowledges the circularity, the limitlessness of constant trial and error.

In similar terms, it is possible to transpose this idea of a non-place to the no-place of the archive, summoning an image of displacement by viewing the past as unfinished. Speaking about her work as a romantic fascination with human failing, Tacita Dean often focuses on past events that remain incomplete or abandoned. Through a method of archival restoration, Dean revisits these 'failed futuristic visions'[12] through an act of utopian imagining, with sites of past failure being transformed into reimagined moments of salvaged future potential. Although the word itself is associated with order, and creating moments of completeness, the archive is conspicuous for its vast instabilities; it is inescapably fragmentary and unfixed. As Dean shows, its claims for totality are misplaced, so that inherent in what has been remembered, said, archived, is what has been forgotten, silenced, lost. Temporally dislocated it survives both as an occurrence and a potential; it consists of what has been and what might be. Like the archive, both the artwork and art criticism are tied to all of their false starts and frustrated endings, as well as, somehow, being untied from their relationship to a material object. The failures of translation between preliminary idea and finished artwork, between originary artwork and critical text are moments of fragmentation full of the unsaid, undone and unwritten. Each partial document removes any perfect memory of the originary event, yet each dispersal acts as a line from which unexpected shapes are drawn.

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6   *Image:* Imelda Barnard, *Notes on Failure* (2011)
7   Giorgio Agamben, 'On Potentiality', in Daniel Heller-Roazen (ed.), *Potentialities* (Stanford University Press, 1999) 183
8   Emma Cocker, "Over and Over, Again and Again" (2010), 265–291 See: http://www.scribd.com/doc/38806030/Over-and-Over-Again-and-Again
9   Cocker (2010)
10   Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Manifestos for the Future", in *e-flux journal* #12 (New York: e-flux, January 2010). See: http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/104
11   Simon Sheikh, "Constitutive Effects: The Techniques of the Curator", in Paul O'Neill (ed.), *Curating Subjects* (London: Open Editions, 2007) 184
12   Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse", in *October* 110 (Boston: mit Press, Fall 2004) 14

Here we might draw parallels with The Tower of Babel narrative as both failed performance and symbol of the untranslatable. As found in Genesis, we are told that the earth was of one language, and that the people were punished for attempting to enforce their universality: God confounds their language and scatters them about the earth. According to Jacques Derrida's reading, they are punished for wanting to give themselves a name, to assure a universal genealogy, and the failure of the building's completion asserts the 'irreducible multiplicity of tongues', whilst also exhibiting 'an incompletion, the impossibility of finishing, of totalising, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics.'[13] Furthermore, this dissemination of language both 'imposes and forbids translation'; it is necessary and yet the relation between translation and original is incoherent, based as it is on difference. Derrida traces this idea by referring to the ambivalent nature of the word 'Babel', as both a proper name and a common noun, as well as the multiple translations of the story. Consequently, a 'proper' name remains untranslatable because as soon as it is translated it ceases to be originary. The failure of the tower, an emblem of the unrealised, 'marks the necessity for translation, the multiplicity of languages, the free play of representation… the collapse of the tower marks the necessity of a certain construction'.[14] As such, the constant deferral of the origin simultaneously defers any resolution, so that words touch their referents like tangents touch a circle. Ad infinitum.

Although the unrealised is predicated on a failure, it also asserts a model of openness, an interruption, a space to think. It accepts the impossibility of completion and finds value in the preliminary sketch, the road not taken, the utopian potential for meaning to be this or that. The potential to be one's own lack. In trying to reach an impossible conclusion, this text accepts its own dissemination: there is a freedom in acknowledging that the text might act as a practice space, a laboratory where ideas might be tried, tested, rejected. The essay – and by inference, criticism – is 'rarely constructed in linear terms but rather through endless loops and ellipses where the writing remains in a constant state of flux, always capable of being amended or modified.'[15] Each work is a preliminary introduction, hiding numerous unfinished works, and oscillating between finished product and draft.

> Every written work can be regarded as the prologue (or rather, the broken cast) of a work never penned, and destined to remain so, because later works, which in turn will be the prologues or the moulds for other absent works, represent only sketches or death masks.[16]

13 Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel", 218–227. See: http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic84298.files/Supplementary_readings/DERRIDA.PDF
14 Mark Wigley, "The Translation of Architecture, The Production of Babel", in K. Michael Hays (ed.), *Architecture Theory Since 1968* (MIT Press, 1998) 667
15 Cocker (2010) 226
16 'Preface', in Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*. Trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993)

Mending Wall

Seán O Sullivan

In a discussion with Slavoj Žižek published in 2005, Alain Badiou described a situation. Archimedes, he said, was a man of exceptional genius, a mathematician whose writings on infinitesimal calculus were not properly understood for twenty centuries after his lifetime. Archimedes had been a part of a Sicilian resistance that fought against Rome; he built war machines during the rebellion, and stayed in Sicily during its occupation. At the time he was in the habit of going to the beach to think, and while doing so, he would draw large geometric shapes in the sand. One day a Roman soldier arrived, who had been instructed to summon the mathematician into the presence of General Marcellus, who wanted to see what a rebel of this calibre was like. Archimedes ignored the soldier's request – he told him to wait and continued to draw his shapes in the sand. Over time the soldier became infuriated; he shouted, demanding obedience in the name of the law. But he was repeatedly ignored. The soldier was so angry that he drew his sword and killed Archimedes, whose body erased the drawings in the sand when it fell.[1]

This event presents an obvious moral difficulty, but why does Archimedes' death pose a philosophical problem? Simply put, there was an irreducible difference in each man's understanding of the event, and of the symbolic value of his own actions in it. The Roman Empire, represented by the soldier, who himself was a cipher for General Marcellus, assumed the right to coldly summon whomever it pleased. Archimedes on the other hand, had a particular set of theoretical concerns, and presumably saw the immanent requirements of his creativity as having an extraordinary importance. So the philosophical problem is not that the two understood the event differently. It is rather that they each experienced a 'different' event. Each was composed of two sets of symbolic requirements and actions, both events happened in the same place and at the same time. However, each man's behavioural expectations did not share a common bilateral thread that could mediate his difference. Without a measurable way of relating to what was happening, the soldier found it impossible to think his way out of the situation. He probably had no interest in math, or in the implications of not 'thinking the event'. From the soldier's point of view the event did not lend itself well to being thought about.

There are a number of interesting acts within this situation, I will address one in particular: going to the beach to reflect and draw geometric shapes. Archimedes described it to the soldier as a "demonstration". Perhaps a more useful word for it would be a *ritual*. Ritual is an interesting, and rather old concept. It describes an act that is performed for a symbolic purpose, but which is not particularly rational. Beyond the obvious examples, such as weddings or funerals, societies accumulate all sorts of rituals. For example, handshakes, anthems and prosecution each have an ostensibly concrete role, but their gestures are fastidiously steeped in cultural histories. These traditions carry significant symbolic value, and understandings of their anthropological rationality will naturally fluctuate based on the observer's cultural standpoint. Kenneth Pike delineated this difference in 1967. Departing from the words 'phonemic' and 'phonetic', Pike described "emic" and "etic" accounts of cultural behaviour. The former coming from inside of a cultural society, the latter being a culturally neutral record.[2]

In 1914 the American poet Robert Frost published his second book of poetry entitled *North of Boston*, the collection included a poem entitled *Mending Wall*.[3] In it, Frost chronicles a man's thoughts and his exchanges with his neighbour as they work to repair the wall that separates their respective properties. Frost's career was marked by a forthright style of poetic writing. He could elegantly conceal rich threads of subtext within his command of plainspoken New England colloquialisms. *Mending Wall* presents a good example of this talent.

1   Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophie und Aktualität. Ein Streitgespräch* (*Philosophy in the Present)* (London: Polity Press, 2009) 6
2   Kenneth Lee Pike (ed.) *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of Structure of Human Behavior* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967) ii
3   Robert Frost, "Mending Wall", *North of Boston* (London: David Nutt, 1914) ii
4   *Image:* Gustav Courtois, *Death of Archimedes* (undated). See: http://math.nyu.edu/~Crorres/Archimedes/Death/DeathIllus.html
5   Lawrence Raab, *Touchstones: American Poets on a Favorite Poem*, Robert Pack and Jay Parini (eds.) (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996) 203

It is written in blank verse – its words have no rhyming structure, and as a chronicle of a man's thoughts, the poem sounds convincingly similar to a conversation. For example: "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / what I was walling in or walling out / and to whom I was like to give offense." Not the kind of highflying constructions that you might expect from a man who won four Pulitzer Prizes – the pun in "offense" is playful enough. But you do get a sense of what Frost's man is thinking as the two go about their annual repairs. The narrator cannot see the need for this work; he facetiously mentions that his field only grows apple trees, which will never cross into the neighbour's garden to eat the pine.

It is important to note that the poet is not a character in the poem. Frost is *behind* the story, but not inside it.[5] He constructs a situation where the narrator doubts the sensibility of annually rebuilding the wall, and admonishes his counterpart for not also questioning the ritual. Our narrator apparently sees himself as an intellectual in this moment, having realised the irrationality of repairing the wall. In a later part of the poem, he describes the neighbour: "Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top / In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed / He moves in darkness as it seems to me, / Not of woods only and the shade of trees." The invocation of the words 'darkness' and 'savage' is significant – superficially we can imagine that the narrator is disparaging the old farmer, that he is exasperated by the man's ability to work on the wall without questioning its existence. But at greater depth the words summon an age of archaic rite – the *old ways* of the father, proverbially speaking. Frost deliberately avoids establishing the two as equals; their repairs are revealed in the narrator's thoughts, who does not allow his neighbour a perceptive capacity that might match his own. It is for us the readers to deduce that these two may well be equal in more ways than the narrator allows. However, we are not privy to the realisations of the neighbour, for he is not *our* man.

Indeed, the neighbour stays mostly silent for the duration of the poem; he is, we presume, content to work without having to justify the act to himself. That silence signifies his evasion of the narrator's cognitive dissonance. In a particularly telling moment, our man mourns his neighbour's silence saying: "Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder / If I could put a notion in his head" – his sentiment reinforces some suspicions of our intellectualising fop – he might be worth keeping out of the field. Nonetheless, because of his authorial

position, the narrator *is* the one with whom we empathise; in reading we become party to his mischief. He is not necessarily a nasty character – hyperactive might be a better description. His complaint appears ethical; after all, he is working too. In fact, it is our man who actually notifies the neighbour when the time of year has come to begin their repairs. On the opposite side of the wall, the neighbour works without much expression, thus he is estranged from our judgment. The reports of his actions are coloured by an important fact: he is an *other* with whom our man differs. He breaks his silence on two occasions, each time to offer a proverb that his father taught him, and the narrator notices his satisfaction when invoking it:

"*good fences make good neighbors.*"

In 1914, directly before the publishing of *Mending Wall*, the idiom "good fences make good neighbors" was a rarity in English-speaking countries. But its inclusion in *North of Boston* as the sole expression from the neighbour planted it in the American colloquial lexicon, where it took a firm root. However, it is relatively easy to point to cases where the saying has been profoundly misunderstood. For instance, in 1989 the New York Times reported on a case in Montpelier, Vermont where the phrase and its poem were cited in a civil case between two neighbours who argued over the responsibility of maintaining the wall between their two fields.[6] I suspect the two had not imagined that Robert Frost was a maker of metaphors. In appeal after appeal, the plaintiffs, defendants, lawyers and judges misread the poem's point about difference, mostly arguing that the idiom in itself constituted cultural evidence of legal precedent supporting the idea that people in Vermont should fence their fields in. The issue of the wall eventually reached the State Supreme Court, where the old farmer's famous refrain was again misunderstood in the case's final settlement.[7] It is worth mentioning here that Robert Frost regarded *Mending Wall* as a poem "spoiled by being applied".[8] And so, let us leave aside the possibility that a proverbial act might set legal precedent.

In a 2009 lecture, Dr. Clark Closser described a "conventional" interpretation of the poem where the reader empathises with the narrator, our man, because his neighbour cannot understand him.[9] The "conventional" position, advanced in my memory by Aaron Sorkin, argues that "good fences make good neighbors" is intended as a totally ironic statement – that boundaries are what alienate 'us' from each other.[10] In later life Frost returned from a trip to Russia, where he found that the poem had been, shall we say, edited to suit the country's prevailing political colours. Its famous opening line – "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" – was left out entirely. Frost remarked on the politicisation of the work: "I could have done better for them, probably, by saying: Something there is that doesn't love a wall / something there is that does."[11] My empathy is with the neighbour, partly because of his silence, and partly to outweigh this "conventional" reading, in favour of one that recognises an irreducible difference. The influence of *Mending Wall* does present a broader cultural question to consider. The old farmer's refrain entered the lexicon of English language as a literal phrase. It was shorn of any irony by the time that the wider public had taken in Frost's poem. This could be interpreted as simply the effect of a catchy saying on a country whose Great Frontier had recently come to an end. However, it does present a distinct philosophical position on the part of 'a public'. Somewhere between the book's publishing and the phrase taking root in idiomatic English, it was decided by *someone* that the neighbour was right on the money and the narrator was not – that the urgent requirement of rational activity trumped the immanent requirement of creative betterment.

There is one vital aspect of *Mending Wall* that I have as yet avoided discussing in detail. A careful allusion to ritual in the poem, which Frost will not make directly, but which is the crux of the piece. His taciturn manner

6   Associated Press "Vermont Fence Ruling Sustains Poet", *The New York Times* (New York: The New York Times Company, 9 November 1989) C:13
7   Wolfgang Mieder, *"Good Fences Make Good Neighbours": The History and Significance of an Ambiguous Proverb* (University of Vermont, Delivered 2002)
8   Raab, (1996) 203
9   Dr. Clark Closser, *Robert Frost: Lecture Nine of ENG 351 – Survey of American Literature 2* (Missouri State University, Delivered 2009)
10 Aaron Sorkin and Eli Attie, "Red Mass", *The West Wing* (Los Angeles: NBC, 9 October 2002)
11 Raab, (1996) 203
12 *Image:* World-Telegram, *Robert Frost, half-length portrait, seated, facing left* (Washington D.C.: The Library of Congress, 1941)
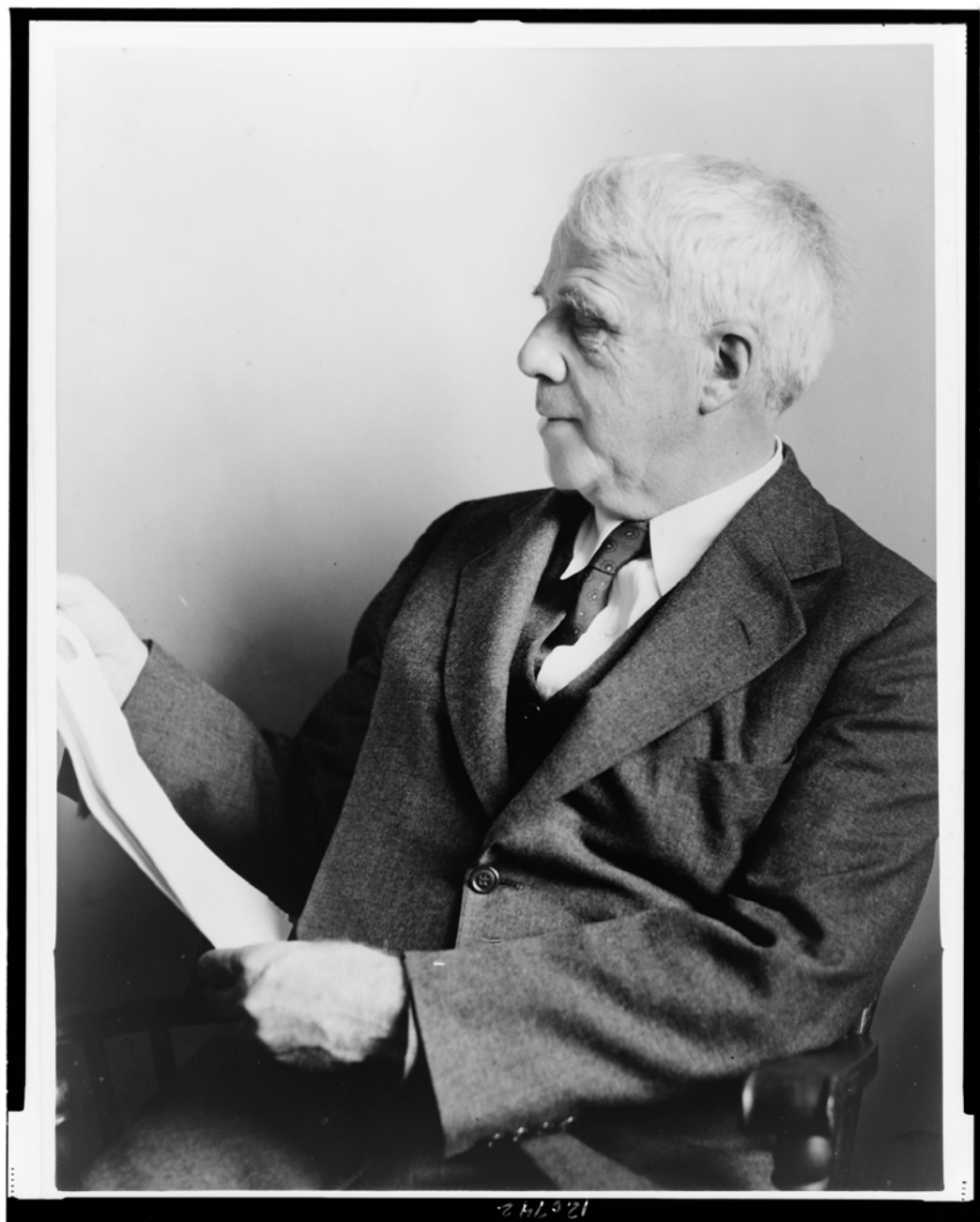
was understood by George Montiero as an implicit rejection of Modernists such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, who were inclined to wear their own mythic influence more visibly.[13] The Roman god *Terminus* protected boundary markers. His annual festival *Terminalia* arrived in early spring, offering an opportunity to celebrate and reassert local boundaries and landmarks. This deity seems unusual for having a close association with mundane matters of the physical world. Frost spells out his own influence most distinctly with:

> *And on a day we meet to walk the line*
> *And set the wall between us once again.*
> *We keep the wall between us as we go.*
> *To each the boulders that have fallen to each.*
> *And some are loaves and some so nearly balls*
> *We have to use a spell to make them balance:*
> *"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"*[14]

Later on, the poet writes: He moves in darkness as it seems to me, / Not of woods only and the shade of trees. This darkness that Frost alludes to is not simply an indictment of the old farmer, rather, it moves us back through time to where the vestigial ritual of boundary making began. Monteiro explains: "Even on New England farms in this century the ways of the savage continue, it would seem, no matter how transformed, no matter how radically attenuated."[15] Their ritual does not have any mysterious technology in it; instead it lays claim to the value of simple acts – acts that have an exhaustively (or allegorically) established purpose, such as repairing a wall, or drawing in the sand. It is tempting to imagine how the poet might have gone on to *tell the event* in the context of a quite abstract mythic rite. Robert Frost was inclined to stop writing before the full story was divulged.[16] Perhaps he felt that a full telling would take the enjoyment out of his work.

Oddly, there are certain African tribes who accept proverbs as valid evidence in litigation – a tendency that might qualify the Vermont civil justice system's earlier ethical acrobatics.[17] It is certainly possible to imagine the paradoxical havoc that might be caused when transplanting a proverb into *this sort* of ritual. But our man persists with his rational escapade, trying to joke and cajole the neighbour into thinking that the old wall is no longer needed. He conjures up images of elves and trees eating trees, to which the neighbour makes no response. He talks about yelping dogs, outdoor games and cows that aren't there. He talks about mischief, and tosses clever puns into his intonations. And still the neighbour wears his fingers rough with work. "He will not go behind his father's saying, / And he likes having thought of it so well He says again, / "Good fences make good neighbors." Asked whether "in *Mending Wall*, his intention was fulfilled with the characters portrayed and the atmosphere of the place," Frost replied: "I should be sorry if a single one of my poems stopped with either of those things – stopped anywhere in fact. My poems are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless."[18] To his philosophical credit, the old farmer closes the discussion with a proverb rooted in the old world. His defence comes from a well-worn standard. He would not be tripped headfirst into the darkness. This is ironic considering that it is he who stands accused of moving "in the darkness". What was most impressed upon the poet is that men continue to need marked boundaries, even when they cannot find a way to justify their existence.[19] The task of rationally justifying an act whose value is chiefly symbolic is nearly impossible. Frost knows this. And Frost *is* dark, and there is something infinitely more 'dark' in him when he chooses to wear the disguise of playfulness and idealisation while concealing his true *boundless* question. His question resists answering, and makes the silent man so much more unsettling than our noisy comic.

13 George Montiero, "Unlinked Myth in Frost's Mending Wall", *Concerning Poetry* 7:2 (Fall 1974)
14 Frost (1914) ii
15 George Montiero, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988) 128
16 Closser (2009)
17 Montiero (1988) 125
18 Robert Faggen, *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 41
19 Montiero (1988) 129

Fail Lure

Adrian Duncan *with* Marta Fernandez Calvo

Instead of writing a direct text on failure, I will harness a conversation between Marta Fernandez Calvo and I, that is ongoing and that preceded this project. Marta is a Spanish artist living in Dublin. We meet up most Wednesdays and talk about various ideas emerging in our practices and potential projects we might undertake alone, together and/or with others. Marta's English, though very good, is not perfect and by me having no Spanish at all, there are moments of confusion, or slippages in understanding when we communicate. *Failure* and conversely, the idea of *success* is a subject that comes up often, and it seems appropriate in the light of the discussions involved in *The Wheel* to include something of our own conversations.

The text below will take the form of a recent email correspondence between Marta and I. The correspondence was conducted in a very loose *question and answer* format, to the point where sometimes a question is a not even directly answered, but it does effect/affect the response. We have discussed the form of this text and think it of note to point out that over the course of the email correspondence itself, our interaction was text and image based only. What also might be important to point out here would be that at the end of the correspondence, we met up and edited the text for ease of reading and played with its chronology, i.e. that the responses as shown here to you are not necessarily in relation to the preceding question, and that this a structural contrivance we are happy to lay bare.

Adrian Duncan:

Marta, you mentioned to me a few months ago, that during an exhibition install in South Africa, you said to Dorothee Kreutzfeld (the artist you were working with) that: *Success is something that happens elsewhere…* What did you mean by that?

Marta Fernandez Calvo:

(thinking – before writing or starting to…) I really like this – every time funnier – idea of having to succeed. To stand the failure, to be proud of… It talks a lot about a physical posture. Failure really requires one. The right photo has to be shot with the light on your face but the backlit photo is more comfortable… (writing)

It was a metaphor, nearly a joke, made under the pressure of our big installation at the Johannesburg Art Gallery last November. With *Promenades, Sunsets and Balconies* we were ending a two year collaboration developed along very different countries and contexts. In a way, it meant for us the impossibility of setting where success could reside in a conversation, a promenade, a view…

In the Blind Spot, my solo at the Joinery, Dublin, last October, is a clear example of this. The elements in the installation were taken from the urban and social structure of Stoneybatter, as a starting point/departure. And these elements really contained something of high risk, or potential of failure, because they involved people from the neighbourhood, so, at the end, success could be something as simple as, a neighbour opening the door to me, or that the neighbour would leave you their flower pots (which I asked for) for the duration of the exhibition, or that somebody in the audience feels that tension between both of the concepts happening there.

(2 disjointed sentences) How far you could go and how far you actually go? Don't worry about success as this is happening (for sure) somewhere else could be the subtitle of the installation at the Johannesburg Art Gallery or *In the Blind Spot* at The Joinery.

Adrian Duncan:
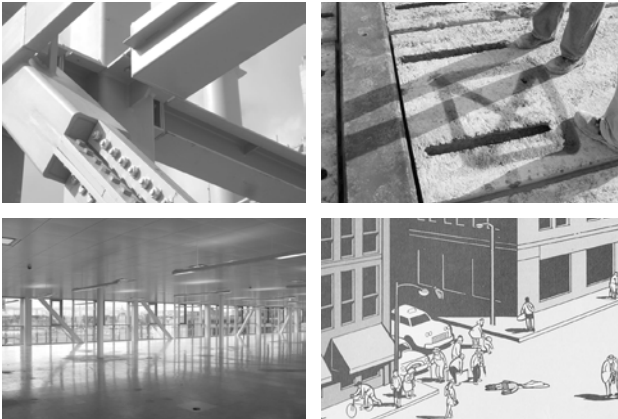
Aporias and Homo Ludens

When I worked as an engineer (and still do), the idea of failure was generally associated with the integrity of specific elements in a structure, i.e. would a beam, under a certain load [1], bend too much? Twist? Shear? Break? If each element was a success, the building, at least, would not fall down, or, that it would have a physical posture. In the design of these buildings, you also include for the *unforeseen*, and from that nebulous and unknown world you create a worst case scenario in the world you are designing, and apply it to each specific element within the building, and the building as a whole. The design is based on empirical experience, statistics and fear, and these result in redundancy, which makes buildings look needlessly fat and rigid.

The premeditation of design, the faith in reason and empirical evidence greets failure, rightly, as something that has gone wrong. And the perpetrator of this failure should be crushed publicly … and proportionately and reasonably, and reasonably publicly and proportionately reasonably and reasonably proportionately and from that, proportionately publicly…

However, when the failure emerges from idiocy:
• The happy animal should be forgiven.
• The joyful animus should be smiled upon.
• The ecstatic clod of unforeseen matter should become the victim of a love most dear. And should be poured into a pot to hold and feed another hysterical bloom.

So, which has more potential, which one can we talk about? The failure of the faithful or the failure of the fool?

> [1] *Load – (from Newton's Second Law: F=ma)*
> *or   Force = mass x acceleration.*
> *or   Mass (kg) x gravity (9.81'm/s/s)*
> *or   Kg x m/s/s*
> *or   Newtons*
> *or   Weight.*

That is to say, by *Load* I mean *Weight*.

1   *Image:* Adrian Duncan, *Two Doors* (2008)
2   *Image: Boats*, "Obama's Failure's In The Gulf Oil Spill Cleanup" (11 Jun. 2010). See: http://www.republikid.com/2010/06/obamas-failure-gulf-oil-spill.html
3   *Image:* Adrian Duncan, *Joint* (2007)
4   *Image:* Adrian Duncan, *Problem with a Joint* (2007)
5   *Image:* Adrian Duncan, *Joints to the Sky* (2007)
6   *Image:* Detail from *Jimmy Corrigan The Smartest Kid on Earth*, (Chicago: C.S. Ware, Pantheon Books, 2000)

Marta Fernandez Calvo:

[Email body: Your text describing failure and success in relation to engineering… it made me think so much about a straight forward-agreed exercise to test both concepts in art practice… trying to think of the arts – from my own experience in the last few exhibitions – while reading your text I just felt that I would make/build up a question from every sentence you said.

I thought if arts could be engineering but walking backwards towards an equivalent final result (and I keep wondering).

I suppose that in a way they share the process – with the difference that most of the time art can (or should) stay there. Anyway, you are familiar with both of the processes... so what..

How far do I have to go (engineering) to make it strong-durable 'to make it' so it can fail vs how far should I go (arts) to keep-maintain the strength-potential – this could not even happen...

'to keep it' - already contains a processual element going on… a process justifying a concept (more of a circular movement) a problem justifying a structure (a linear movement)]

It feels like everything that is affirmed in engineering could be asked in arts. Affirmations (in engineering practice) become questions (in art practice). I am turning all into a question. How arts can be read in relation to engineering? Is it just walking backwards? But ironically images work in the same direction… relate to each other so straight forward / there's a very straight forward counterpart. Arts walk backwards while being a process and suddenly turn to show an arrival point or conclusión… when having to formalise. In which moment do both lines take / turn in the same direction? THE UNFORESEEN / lo no calculado o no previsto in the arts… performative component / engine… that I find is very strongly linked to installation as an improvisación, reaction, instinct… UNFORESEEN SUCCESS; THAT WOULD ME MINE. (THAT'S HOW I WOULD UNDERSTAND MINE). IS FAILURE SOMETHING THAT HAS GONE WRONG? (FOR ME OR FROM AN ARTISTIC POINT OF VIEW). HOW COULD IT (GIVE ME AN EXAMPLE) GO WRONG? WHO SHOULD WE BLAME / (congratulate?) FOR IT? WHO IS (could be) THE PERPETRATOR OF THE FAILURE IN AN INSTALLATION? WHO PERPETRATES THE FAILURE IN THE EXHIBITION SPACE? WHO IS GIVEN THAT POWER? IS IT THE ARTIST WHO DECIDES? IS IT POSSIBLE TO SET UP THE CONDITIONS FOR A FAILURE WITHOUT CONTEMPLATING THE DIALECTICS OF SUCCESS?

Adrian Duncan:
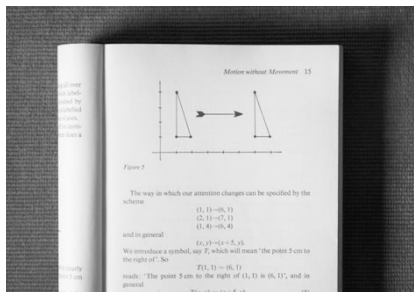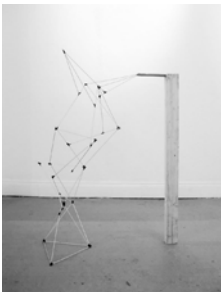
Blame and Walking Backwards

When you are talking to someone and you learn the meaning of a new word, especially in a different language, you get a strange feeling. That word gives you a sensation, that you will never fully feel again. Now you know the word, and until it is used again, by someone else in an unforeseen manner, it will

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7   *Image:* Dorothee Kreutzfeldt and Marta Fernández Calvo, *Geraneum*, 'influx, reflux, reflex' installation detail, (Sala Parpalló, Valencia-Spain, Sept 2009)
8   *Image:* Adrian Duncan, *Heat Structure* (2011)
9   *Image: Detail from Modern Concepts of Mathematics*, Ian Stewart (Harmandsworth: Pelican Books, 1975)

not surprise you. You think you know everything there is to know about that word until some abysmal idiot uses it differently, or wrongly, or *naïvely* and you are revisited by a variation of that first feeling. In this unforeseen act of trickery, your words have been ruptured. You are surprised, confused, for a moment you do not remember, you are not in control, you are lost.

Do you blame the utterer for this? Do you blame yourself? You can't blame yourself … you must blame the utterer … because the utterer has spoken to you!

> At the end of this interaction you know:
> *a.* a new word
> or
> *b.* a new meaning to a word you thought you knew
> and from this
> *c.* that your initial understanding of the word was not complete
> *d.* that the utterer is not your friend
> *e.* that you don't know if the new understanding is something you believe in?

Your state has changed, but all of the sensation you endured is gone. The sensation is now a waste.

But what if it was a case that as you walked past some strangers and you *overheard* a new word being spoken? Or if you *overheard* a word you know, being used in a different, wrong or naïve way? Who do you blame then? And how do you blame them? Where does that sensation go? What is the new state?

I think in the exhibition space that everything is overheard. I think that there is a new state created for the listener, but the terms and the process of hearing is different, like walking backwards, things appear from where you happen to be going, not necessarily from where you might want to go. And if you do not know where you want to go, then, when you get there, there can only be success. And if you find someone else there, who is to blame? Who has created this situation?

Marta Fernandez Calvo:
To tell you only if it's the right time:

> When a body encounters another body,
> or an idea another idea,
> it happens that the two relations
> sometimes combine to form
> a more powerful whole,
> and sometimes one decomposes the other,
> destroying the cohesion of its parts.[10]

ps. this is not necessarily an answer but something that I really want to tell you NOW. in this moment of the conversation.
ps2. faith?
ps3. waste?
ps4. BOTH SAME DOESN'T MATTER.

Have you ever heard about the term 'inframince'?
Some Duchamp... always!

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10 Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988) 14
11 *Image:* Dorothee Kreutzfeldt and Marta Fernández Calvo, *Half Built House*, Half built council house in the Karoo desert. Research material from 'influx, reflux, reflux' (Richmond, South Africa, 2008)

An Attempt at Failure

Emma Dwyer

In a conversation about this publication with the other writers, the question of originality in writing, in ideas and language arose. There was a feeling of pessimism in writing about failure. Failure has become an almost clichéd concept in contemporary art discourse. How do we write about failure when failure has been defined and all has been said by others before? I suppose, even saying *it* has all been poetry said before is clichéd. Is a reiteration of a concept or theory failure? How can one be original and is originality our intent when we write? I believe the very act of writing to be a demonstration of failure. This belief, it became apparent in the aforementioned conversation, was a residual thought evoked by a piece of writing Imelda had written which I had almost forgotten.[1] This concern with originality calls for the previously unarticulated, unspoken, unwritten, but is perhaps something that only occurs when we repeatedly fail to define that which we are speaking about, when we allow it to remain ambiguous.

> *Ever tried. Ever failed. No Matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.*[2]

Repetition and failure are tenuously linked. If we constantly repeat we constantly fail. Writing is a repetitive act, truly repetitive, the same words, phrases, metaphors, language, style, replicated, again and again, over and over. No two pieces of writing will be identical but they will always be, knowingly or unknowingly, a reiteration of what has come before. That repeated act of failure I equate with the act of writing. We continue to write, we continue to define, we continue to repeat, we attempt to succeed yet somehow fail. The failure occurs before we begin, it is in our attempt at originality. Writing itself is uninterrupted, the act, I sit, I write, I go back, I edit, I write, what interrupts is my own being, my distraction, my refusal to write, realised in every quote, reference, and so on. This is 'an uninterrupted line that inscribes itself while interrupting itself'.[3] The trajectory of the word is such that it is always uttered elsewhere, repeated, while never moving from the first point of its articulation.

> *I do not really speak, I repeat, and weariness is repetition, a wearing away of every beginning; and I not only efface, I increase as well, I exhaust myself in pretending to have still the strength to speak of its absence.*[4]

Being in language – it is always a weary repetition. This circle, the going round and round of conversations, interrupts itself in its own cycle; going back over itself it is interrupted. Blanchot suggests in order to be weary one must reflect upon this weariness, or indeed simulate reflection – I may have affected that simulation here. I cannot be sure because I am too weary to return. I am too weary to be this self-reflective, I'm not attempting to say anything new, or at least purport an argument, I have negated that, have I not? If I continue on in this weary way, I am making failure inevitable, but that is not the point I am trying to convey. I am trying to grasp the impossible. That absence, that is impossible.

The impossibility in writing is that it may interrupt itself but it never ruptures language, discourse or perceived truths. The rupture I talk of is not a big explosion, where I take the words mash them close together and then explode them until their letters bleed off the edge of the page, no, the rupture is in what remains invisible. Like in poetry, the impossibility of language is central to its integrity. Poetry answers the question

1   Imelda Barnard, 'Art Criticism and Writing as Failure: "That is not what I meant at all."', *Circa* (Dublin: Circa Art Magazine, Oct 2010) 27
2   Like many before me, in an attempt to define productive failure I reiterate this quote from Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho*, (London: John Calder, 1983) 7
3   Blanchot's description of discourse, be it written or verbal. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, (trans.) Susan Hanson, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) xxvii
4   Blanchot – again he continues to infiltrate my writing, and thought, in fact he is present throughout this text – introduces *The Infinite Conversation* (1993) with a dialogue between him and his other. The phrases from this dialogue precede many of the thoughts in the essays which follow. They are repeated throughout and in every utterance they become infinite. The weariness apparent in the conversation for me surmises writing as a whole.

of the whole by illuminating the invisible – the between. The rupture of language is that subtle meaning found in the interstices between words, between texts, between these that are part of the great circle, but never acknowledged, for once they are acknowledged they disappear. Those interstices are not the legitimate spaces on the page, or the pauses in a conversation, they are the always moving, floating, unarticulated, interruptions. It is when we allow them to remain invisible that writing ruptures and disappears, if we try to define these invisibilities they themselves disappear. The element of ambiguity essential to any definition of, I reluctantly say, a whole.

To return again to something that makes itself apparent throughout my writing, dialectic reason sees two binary elements as constitutive of the whole or the truth. Thus failure and success are the perceived whole, or the only two conclusive outcomes for an act or intention. Dialectics is meant to achieve something affirmative by means of negation, I'll negate failure in order to succeed. On the other hand negative dialectics works to free dialectics from these affirmative traits. Negative dialectics uses the strength of the dialectical whole to disintegrate the fallacy of that very whole. If I keep on repeating in order to oscillate between success and failure, while never actually achieving either, I have undone the dialectic that contains me, I have negated it as a whole. So through negative dialectics writing can realise autonomy. To be negated there has to be an absent third presence, that which negates. It is that allusive, indefinite and ambiguous presence in the perceived whole of writing, its act and formation.

> *Writing, the exigency of writing: no longer the writing that has always (through a necessity in no way avoidable) been in the service of the speech or thought that is called idealist (that is to say, moralizing), but rather the writing that through its own slowly liberated force (the aleatory force of absence) seems to devote itself solely to itself as something that remains without identity, and little by little brings forth possibilities that are entirely other: an anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed way of being in relation, by which everything is brought into question … a writing that could be said to be outside discourse, outside language.*[5]

Consider art criticism, or writing about art, a conversation in which art and critic are opposed. There is an exchange between the two, a back and forth repeated oscillation. It is through this shared dialogue that we learn of the absent unknown. To speak, or indeed write, is an attempt to articulate and pursue the indefinite, which in the case of art must remain so. This discourse between art and writing is discontinuous it ruptures language and the unity of one with another. It is in the space of the interruption that the unknown must remain, albeit in an absent state. The dialogue in which the unknown remains requires a relation of infinity: the infinity of never being unified. The relations of *a* to *b*, of artist to critic or art to language, should be constructed as a curvature so that they can never be direct, symmetrical, or reversible. This asymmetry cannot form a dialectical whole.[6] However, writing as we practice it does not allow for this relation of infinity. Writing about art – critiquing art – is an attempt to define or represent through language an ambiguity that is necessarily beyond it, and to keep continuous the circular exchange apparent in dialogue. Like in poetry art has an intangible truth that never settles, moving in the interstices of what is defined, constantly donning a new disguise, never allowing itself be one absolute truth. We – as writers – attempt to interpret and define that which resists such definition. We don't allow for the invisibility of the inarticulable. The relationship between art and writing if it is this infinite type is a conversation that doesn't seek to answer questions, to define meaning, interpret worth, state whether it is a success or a failure. Neutral, anonymous, interrupted, haunting.

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5   Blanchot, in the Note to the Reader in *The Infinite Conversation* (1993) xxi, equates writing with an intangible truth and the responsibility of writing is thus the undoing of the very circular discourse that maintains the appearance of defined, false truths.
6   Blanchot explains the relation of infinity referring to the relation between master and the student, I have taken this concept and shaped it to suit my trajectory of thought. *The Infinite Conversation* (1993) 6
7   Another snippet of the dialogue shared at the beginning of *The Infinite Conversation* (1993) xiv
8   Blanchot (1993) 17
9   Blanchot (1993) 13

How will we manage to disappear?[7]

If the 'meaning' of art is always allusive our dialogue with it should reflect that. We need to enter into a parallel discourse. Language beyond language, discourse outside discourse, those impossibilities that Blanchot postulates, necessitate our departure from that which we know. We need to go unnoticed. Silence here is crucial. We could disappear by negating the act of writing, choosing not to write, but would we not still be present in our refusal? Is silence not part of the same dialectic as writing? If we write nothing at all our absence is our heavily felt presence, it is not a disappearance. This act of refusal does not rupture language, it does not rupture writing, and above all, it does not maintain an infinite relation between art and writing. It is another weary act that halts any conversation. A conversation is made up of intermittent gaps, pauses and silences as much as it is made up of words and language. This is where we can disappear to, those infinite spaces between what is being said. Those spaces between absolutes, where things are left unsaid, for one to infer, this is where an unattainable truth occurs.

The being that questions is necessarily ambiguous, ambiguity itself questions'[8]

We arrive at art not to know but to wonder. Rather than attempt to answer art perhaps we should question, allow ourselves to fold into the work through inquiry. Any language, or conversation, where questioning is pertinent is already interrupted, and never unified. Questions open up a new space of possibility where being unfolds, where one things shifts and changes irrevocably from that which it was before:

> Questioning is the movement wherein being veers and appears as the suspension of being in its turning. Hence the particular silence of interrogative sentences. It is as though being, in questioning itself – the "is" of the questioning – had abandoned its part of resounding affirmation, its decisive, negating part, and had freed itself, even where it emerges foremost, from itself: opening itself, and opening the sentence in such a way that, in this opening, the sentence seems no longer to have its centre in itself but outside itself – in the neutral.[9]

In inquiry, language achieves that impossible position beyond itself. The neutral, the ambiguous, that is how we write when we negate the definites found in answers and formulations of truths. The answer terminates the question and terminates the possibility opened by these silent or absent sentences. The person who questions negates any definite, the person who questions undoes any definite. The writer who constantly questions, remains neutral and disappears, yet disappears into the circular, repetitive loop of writing.

We disappear before we appear in the circulatory repetition of quotes, references, clichés, old metaphors, residual concepts and so on. The infinite relation is retained thus, in our ambiguity, our non-individuality, our negation of originality. We can never form a unified whole with that which we write about. We can never impose a supposed truth if we ourselves remain ambiguous. This is why all writing is failed, productively failed, as it repeats, reiterates, over and over, again and again. Constantly maintaining that infinite relation by never allowing a truth be static, by relying on dialectics to form a conceived truth, never really achieving the answer to the question, the question that precedes all writing the question of the whole. I am aware that I have synthesised a dialectic, that of thesis and antithesis, that of the question of failure but I have negated it on the whole rather than answering the question I set out in the beginning. I've allowed my self proceed with an argument only to fold it in on itself at the end. Our success in writing is our disappearance in oscillation, the very thing that I equate with failure.

Holding on to your Shadow

Rebecca O'Dwyer

A starting point for a this text was initially put forward in the form of a question; *What is the ethical defensibility of criticism in the wake of failure?* The question was abruptly sidelined, but its slightly naïve proposition still begs consideration. For it seems to be a two-pronged question, offering in itself more questions than its solution might. It certainly throws up two problems; first, the ethical demand, which may or may not accompany the practice of criticism; and second, the entire premise of failure, which may or may not also reflect back on this first, ethical presupposition. The question is phrased defensively; criticism is almost personified, backed up against the wall and desperately striving to defend its value in the face of failure. It struggles, perhaps vainly, in counteracting this supposed failure. But what is failure, and how can the ethical dimension of criticism be measured in tandem alongside notions of success and failure?

I will diverge slightly at this point, for I suspect these questions are somewhat gargantuan for this piece. The ethical dimension is what I will engage with here, more specifically, the ethical validity pertaining to the practice of criticism. This investigation will take the form more of a series of thoughts than linear hypostheses: what does it mean to be a critic, and what kind of ethical responsibility does this entail? Additionally, how should the critic be treated, even in, as the question suggests, the face of failure? Is the critic exempt from ethics and if so, how must she be considered ethically? These are simply some questions which have plagued me for some time now; the question need not even have been broached. For to be a critic is to accept, in a sense, the inability to create anything new. It is to be vaguely parasitic, albeit soothed by a kind of hand-me-down creativity. I am not sure how comfortable I am with this. And yet I know the scope for creativity – parasitic or not – is great, and often illumimnating.

I am currently reading Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, and look set to do so for some time to come. One of the five books contained within this tome is entitled *The Part about the Critics*, and deals with the actions of four superficial, nepotistic and utterly careerist academics – Pelletier, Espinoza, Norton and Morini – in their search for the willfully elusive author Archimboldi. The author is flavour of the month on campuses across Europe, and the four critics take it on themselves to attempt to wrangle him from deliberate anonymnity. Their reasons are clearly self-serving; more than merely attaining Archimboldi his recognition, the critics – most particuarly Pelletier and Espinoza – desire more than anything the chance to unmask the author and unveil him before the world, catapulting themselves into Ivy League posts in the process. Their lives seem so vacuous and immoral, incestuous and vapid. Archimboldi is nothing but mere fodder for their own ambitions: ethically, their actions are repugnant. There are many, but there is one dizzying passage in particular that struck me more than all others. In it, another critic, Amalfitano, attempts to describe to the others the peculiar shape of the Mexican academic, specifically a man named El Cerdo (The Pig), for whom academicism is merely a matter of political duty. El Cerdo is a state-sponsored intellectual, whose activities – loyal or incendiary, conservative or liberal – are enabled by a seemingly benign government; a government that, "adds layers of lime to a pit that may or may not exist."[1] It is worth quoting at length from Amalfitano's labyrinthine monologue;

> Literature in Mexico is like a nursery school, a kindergarten, a playground, a kiddie club, if you follow me. The weather is good, it's sunny, you can go out and sit in the park and open a book by Valéry … and then you can go over to a friend's house and talk. And yet your shadow isn't following you anymore. At some point your shadow has quietly slipped away. You pretend you don't notice, but you have, you're missing your fucking shadow, though there are plenty of ways to explain it … But the point is, your shadow is lost and you, momentarily, forget it. And so you arrive on a kind of stage, without your shadow, and you start to translate reality or reinterpret it or sing it.[2]

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1   Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, (London: Picador, 2009) 121

I think the prospect of losing one's shadow is never far from the critic's mind. For the four critics, the search for Archimboldi is simply the desperate attempt to reclaim it. Amalfitano continues to say;

> Sometimes he thinks he sees a legendary German writer. But all he's really seen is a shadow, sometimes all he's seen is his own shadow, which comes home every night so that the intellectual won't burst or hang himself from the lintel. But he swears he's seen a German writer and his own happiness, his sense of order, his bustle, his sense of revelry rest on that conviction.[3]

All of this he relates to the four critics, who in their reluctance to see themselves in this light – shadowless – fail, or refuse, to understand; "I don't understand a word you've said",[4] to which Amalfitano responds, "Really I've just been talking nonsense."[5] Although it is clear that he has *not* been talking nonsense: the critics fail to understand what he has described because he is talking about them; Amalfitano negates his own comments because he knows he is talking about himself.

But the prospect of losing one's shadow must, I believe, hold some correlation to the field of ethics. How should a critic or intellectual behave in order to hold on to one's shadow? Implicitly, success cannot retain it; Pelletier, Norton, Espinoza and Morini are experts in their field, and yet Amalfitano, whom they pity as a lowly academic in a disconnected university, seems the most close to retaining, or at least winning back, his shadow. Therefore, failure, at least in an ethical sense, appears as success. Amalfitano is the only one who articulates his own futility, though he cannot fully accept it.

That passage will stay with me for a long time. I don't want to lose my shadow; more than that, I abhor the idea of a career spent trying to recapture it, even if that career is successful.

How then should the critic, the intellectual, call it what you will, act in order to retain that shadow? There must, it would seem, be an ethical dimension that diverges from notions of success and failure. Edward Said, in his study *Representations of the Intellectual*, says, "there is no such thing as a private intellectual, since the moment you set down words and then publish them you have entered *the public* world."[6] This world, this 'public' world, is an inherently ethical one, from which no field is exempt. Therefore, to act as an intellectual is not to estrange oneself from the world, to sling shit from an ivory tower, but to insert oneself into an entirely ethical relation. Said goes on to say that there is not a purely public intellectual, as, "there is always the personal inflection and the private sensibility, and those give meaning to what is being said or written."[7] So the intellectual, and I use this word loosely, is always caught in a bind somewhere between public and private, autonomous and subservient. That is his lot; to retain his shadow within this space is a task of herculean proportion.

Another thought: Michel Foucault talks about the practice of *parrhesia*,[8] a Greek concept roughly translated as 'fearless speech'. For me, this articulates well what the ethics of criticism might entail. Foucault outlines five conditions for *parrhesia*; frankness, truth, danger, criticism and duty. One must be open and relate everything that one is thinking, one must speak the truth and in so doing must put oneself in a position of danger; *parrhesia* should also take the form of criticism, and the parrhesiastes should be free to do otherwise i.e. he should not do so under duress, but feel obligated to engage in *parrhesia* out of a sense of inherent moral duty. Two of these conditions, criticism and danger, are of most interest to me. Criticism, more pointedly criticism

2 Bolaño (2009) 121
3 Bolaño (2009) 123
4 Bolaño (2009) 123
5 Bolaño (2009) 123
6 Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, (London: Vintage Books, 1994) 12 [emphasis added]
7 Said (1994) 12
8 Joseph Pearson (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Fearless Speech*, (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2001) 11–20
9 *Image:* Rebecca O'Dwyer, *Proscenium*, 2011
10 The Smiths, "Ask", *Ask* (RT194, Rough Trade, 1986)
11 Jacques Derrida, "Difference" (1968) in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 49
12 Bolaño, 122
13 Michel Foucault, *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interview and Other Writings 1977–1984* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) 326
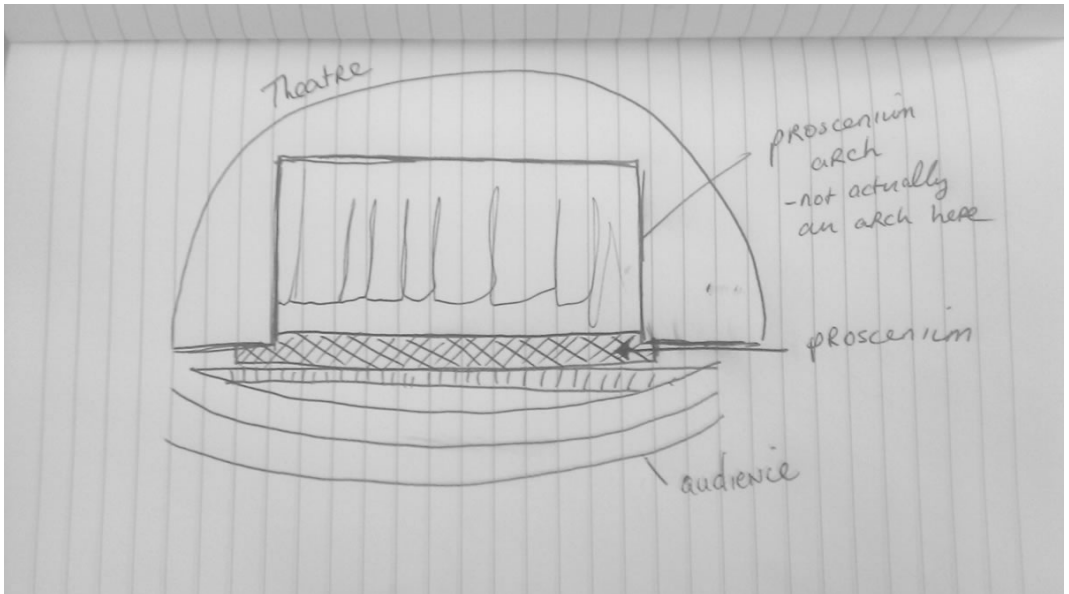
from a position of *inferiority*, ushers in the threat of danger, which is central to the parrhesiastic act. The person engaging in *parrhesia* must not be in a position of superiority with regard to the addressee; thus by so doing he invites retribution from above. Looking back to Bolaño, it could be argued that Amalfitano is a kind of parrhesiastes, albeit of an essentially reluctant sort. He obliquely denounces the other critics from a position of inferiority, in so doing inviting danger – whether that be of a reputational, verbal or indeed physical kind. Additionally, he invites danger upon himself; the subtext of his monologue is that this is fundamentally an indictment of his own existence. However, Amalfitano's *parrhesia* never gains ground: when he describes it as 'nonsense' he discredits the truth of his words, in so doing halting any personal threat of danger.

Right now, I am sitting in a darkened flat on an unseasonably warm spring day, considering the pitfalls of my chosen profession. I cannot help being reminded of that line from the Smiths; "spending warm Summer days indoors, writing frightening verse, to a buck-toothed girl in Luxembourg."[9] And yet to consider the ethics of criticism is an essential task, if only to find that it be of minor importance. The act of criticism *is* essentially bound up with failure; the failure pertaining to all signification, the failure to really get at the thing which you consider. With regard to art, this is even more acutely felt and thus, even more closely aligned with failure. But all of this has been said before. Yes, "impoverishment is de rigueur",[10] but the *ethics* of criticism need not, by that logic, be situated here; ethically, there might still be hope. Returning to Bolaño, Amalfitano's monologue goes on to describe a proscenium,[11] where he situates the intellectuals, and implicitly, himself.

Upstage there is a cave or mine, from which unintelligible noises rush forth. The intellectual, because he faces the audience, cannot see where these noises come from; neither can the audience. All the intellectual can do is, 'translate or re-interpret or re-create them'.[12] Without seeing where these noises come from, the critic or intellectual can never truly present them; he must re-present, which is basically flawed. This is the failure of writing; straining to make out rumblings in the dark, whilst at the same time trying to keep your eyes facing outward, towards the audience. To present those noises faithfully is to embrace failure, but to embrace failure is to accept the threat of danger – be that reputational or otherwise. In short, it is an ethical form of failure; a failure that might usher in a form of criticism, as Foucault marvellously put it, of 'scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms.[13]