**BA Thesis**
**Chance, sabotage and failure.**
**The three likeliest muses.**
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# Chance, sabotage and failure.

## The three likeliest muses.

"If you want to be a grocer, or a general, or a politician, or a judge, you will invariably become it; that is your punishment. If you never know what you want to be, if you live what some might call the dynamic life but what I will call the artistic life, if each day you are unsure of who you are and what you know you will never become anything, and that is your reward."[1]

So said Oscar Wilde in his typically double-edged and glaringly Victorian manner, when summing up the struggles and consequent freedoms that await those who decide to pursue the life of an artist. Most who make a choice to work as artists – be they visual, musical, theatrical, writers, directors, performers – are bound by an unsigned contract with themselves to produce relevant art (relevant to at least themselves, but hopefully in a broader context too), and to continue to do so. It's the first rule of making art: make art and make it good. There are some, engaged in this perpetual pledge, who seem to be able to continue making relevant and honest works their entire careers and naturally become saddled with such epithets as 'genius', 'master' or 'virtuoso'. The success of others' may come from being in the right place at the right time with just the right idea. But most of the time, any success (in the form of creative satisfaction, rather than fame or fortune) comes from hard work and the daily challenge of figuring out and reimagining exactly 'who they are or what they (don't) know'. First and foremost , the artist makes art for themselves, and the interests, associations and obsessions that drive that work comes from within.

The view of the artist in the post-Enlightenment world was one filled with romance and mystery. The construction of the romantic figure of the artist (as 'utterly alone,' 'unassimilable within bourgeois social order,' 'uncomfortable in his own existence'[2]) was typically one left alone with his 'genius', tortured yet set free by his muses as he paced the floors of his studio, struggling with the bounds of creativity. Creating art is an ego-driven process realised by the decisions made by one source, one hand, one head (ego as defined as the 'I' or self of any person; conceit or self-importance; or in the psychoanalytical sense " the part of the psychic apparatus that experiences and reacts to the outside world and thus mediates between the primitive drives of the id and the demands of the social and physical environment."[3]). Pretty potent stuff indeed.

## Bedroom, boardroom, bathroom.

Every artist has to deal with the act of creating work in their own distinct way at different – yet specific – times. British novelist Martin Amis talks of the environment of the artist in the studio from his personal experience: "I write every weekday. I have an office where I work. I leave the house and I'm absent for the average working day. I drive three quarters of a mile across London to my flat. And there, unless I've got something else I have to do, I will sit down and write fiction for as long as I can. As I said earlier, it never feels remotely like a full day's work, although it can be. A lot of the time seems to be spent making coffee or trolling around, or throwing darts, or playing pinball, or picking your nose, trimming your fingernails, or staring at the ceiling."[4] Conversely, American artist Bruce Nauman used the experiences of an artist in his studio to form the basis of much of his early works and to question the very nature of what constitutes art and the making of art. In his photo series *Cold Coffee Thrown Away (1966-67)*, "Nauman depicts the basic life of an artist trying to understand what it is an artist does,

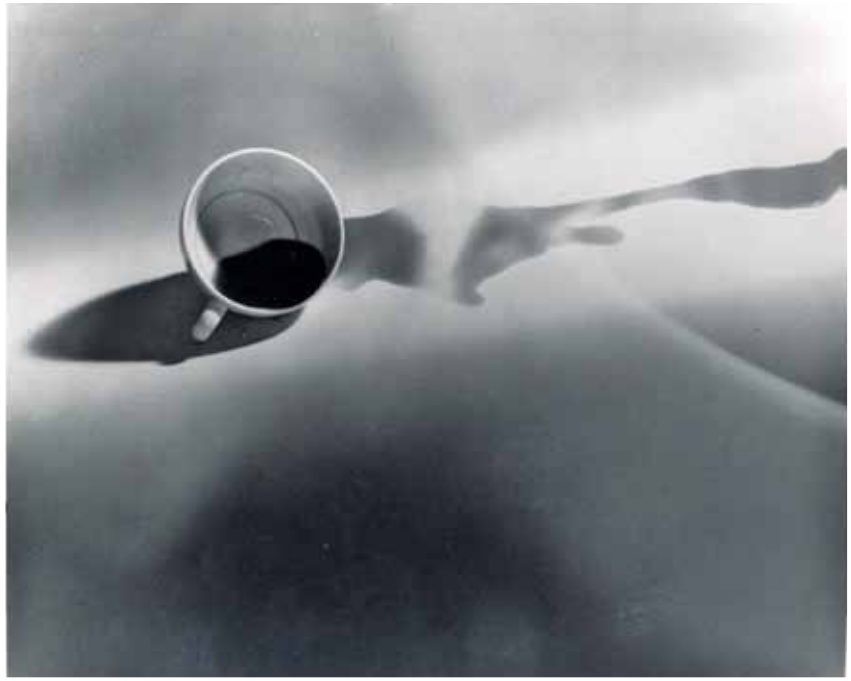
1 *Quotes About Artistic*. goodreads.com. http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/artistic (accessed 22 October, 2016)

2 Alberro, Alexander and Stimson, Blake. *Institutional Critique, An Anthology of Artists' Writings*. (MIT Press Books, 2009) p9

3 Dictionary.com. http://www.dictionary.com/browse/ego (accessed 22 November, 2016)

4 Riviere, Francesca. *Interviews. Martin Amis, The Art of Fiction No. 151*. theparisreview.org. http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1156/the-art-of-fiction-no-151-martin-amis (accessed 21 November, 2016)

what defines them beyond the basic structure of being in a studio expected to create. He stated in an interview in 1980: 'After I got out of school … I drank a lot of coffee, so those photographs [are] of coffee thrown away … [and] of hot coffee spilled.' The images show the trace of the artist yet do not go so far as to explain the circumstances of the situation: the how and why of the spilled coffee cup – was it out of frustration, anger, or was it a pure accident that he captured on film?"



*Bruce Nauman - Coffee Thrown Away Because It Was Too Cold, (1966-67/1970)*

And what of the studio that contains such complex beings and houses such divergent activities? How does this intimate space function within the fickle parameters of creating and accommodating inspiration? As canvas, as study, a bedroom, a boardroom or a bathroom, the iterations are endless. Perhaps more solidly, the workspace, as it is, has remained the place where ideas are realised, tested, amended (and amended and tested and tested and amended), exhibited and even sold. In his article ' The Function of the Studio', Daniel Buren paints the function of the artist's workspace thus:

"What is the function of the studio?

1. It is the place where the work originates.
2. It is generally a private place, an ivory tower perhaps.
3. It is a stationary place where portable objects are produced.

The importance of the studio should by now be apparent; it is the first frame, the first limit, upon which all subsequent frames/limits will depend."[5] Buren continues, "In the studio we generally find finished work, work in progress, abandoned work, sketches – a collection of visible evidence viewed simultaneously that allows an understanding of process."[6] This understanding can be twofold: one, of the viewer – or potential buyer – and the other of the artist. The studio can embolden the workflow, can present a physical timeline of branches and ideas, can influence and can even literally become part of the work itself while the artist explores the avenues of their thoughts. With his films *Stamping In The Studio*, *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)* or *Bouncing In The Corner I* (to name just a few), Bruce Nauman illustrates the complex relationship between artist and workspace. John Baldessari's irreverent and yet ingenious *I Am Making Art* is another strong example of an artist utilising the boundaries of the workspace for the boundlessness of creativity. And, as it happens, both artists repeatedly preach the necessity of being in the studio and working. Just keep working and things will follow.

5 Buren, Daniel. *The Function of the Studio*. Front Matter, October, Vol. 10 (The MIT Press, Autumn, 1979), p51

6 ibid. p56

*John Baldessari - I Am Making Art, (1971)*

It's a simple rule, really. If time is spent thinking and engaged in an accommodating environment, then it stands to reason the work will inevitably present itself. Through the delving into a particular idea, with specific materials, perhaps input from other artists or external factors, and also spending valuable time away thinking things through, the fluid act of creating can become more concrete. The imagined becomes visible and the artist can tap into inspiration from within that was previously hidden. Or they are exposed to influences from without that suddenly present themselves.



## The relinquishing of control.

This thesis aims to look at these above-mentioned situations, where, in the 'just keep working and things will follow' method mentioned above, artists looked to other means to achieve results in the making of art – perhaps defined as a less ego-centric or more external model. For whatever reason, throughout history (and undoubtedly in a contemporary context), artists have made decisions that, in effect, absolve them of making decisions with regards to the final product of the art. It may have been driven by an obsession with mathematics combined with a wariness of contemporary fads and movements; a gleefully conscious turning over the process to outside influence; or dogged persistence at cracking an established rule so unattainable that the pure idea and repeated attempts are the success of the particular work. Ultimately, it's the act of relinquishing control to determine an outcome; of introducing conflict and encouraging mistakes; or planning an outcome so 'doomed to fail' that, in its failure, the success of the art is achieved.

Also of particular interest is how and why certain artists made *deliberate choices* to relinquish control within their practices. By introducing chance, encouraging sabotage and embracing failure – effectively removing the element of the traditional *ego* (as defined above) from the making process – we will look at the outcome of such concrete actions. It must be stressed these choices were *made deliberately* and made for the sake of the art (and the artist) itself. And while this practice of relinquishing some form of control has been prevalent throughout art history, it is precisely this introduction or encouragement of the unknown, this extra element, this unguided hand that makes the individual works – and in some cases the consequent works and decades – so exciting.

From Marcel Duchamp's game-changing decision to rely on chance and gravity to bring about resolution for his *3 Standard Stoppages* in the early 1900s, to Martin Kippenberger's anarchic work practices with assistants and collaborators at the opposite end of the same century, and from Marcel Broodthaer's engagement with the rain, through to Bas Jan Ader's tumbles and John Baldessari's joyful celebrations of failure, this thesis will look at the reasons these artists, all in various stages of their celebrated careers, decided that the three separate elements of chance, sabotage and failure were the necessary muses that enabled their work to flourish and attain qualities that would never have been present had they been contrived by the more traditional ego-driven, artist-driven methods.

'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter.
Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.'

Samuel Beckett

"The word 'chance' can conveniently be taken to mean that the cause, or system of causes, responsible for a given effect is unknown or unlooked-for or, at least, that we are unable to completely specify it."[1] So says George Brecht in his insightful paper *Chance Imagery*, originally published in 1966. The official Oxford Dictionary definition of chance is as follows:

**Chance:**
**Noun:**

1 A possibility of something happening.
  1.1 The probability of something desirable happening.
  1.2 An opportunity to do or achieve something.

2 The occurrence of events in the absence of any obvious intention or cause.

**Adjective:**
Fortuitous; accidental.

If we enable this definition of *fortuitous, accidental events brought about in the absence of any intention or cause* to be the foundation from which we proceed, we then need to examine how and why such events are introduced into the actual process of making art. The essence of which is the replacing of the self – or conscious – with an accidental – or unconscious – event.

The idea of using chance as a creative tool has been around, of course, since ancient times. Roman author, naturalist, and philosopher Pliny the Elder (AD 23 – 79), tells us how the painter Protogenes flung a sponge at a picture to capture the froth around a dog's mouth, thus creating the sought effect by pure chance (*fortuna naturam*)[2]. Leonardo da Vinci, in his *Treatise on Painting*, advised looking at stains on a wall and other chance markings as "a way of developing and arousing the mind to various inventions". While Mallarmé evoked chance over and over in his search for the secret language of "pure" poetry: his final poem was even titled *One Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*. However, the first explicit use of chance in painting seems to have come shortly before the First World War.

In his book *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, published in 1901, Sigmund Freud examines the notion that common, everyday actions such as forgetting, losing things or bungled actions are actually ways of allowing unconscious thoughts and desires the means to attain some form of compromised expression. Freud states, "Certain shortcomings in our physical functioning … and certain seemingly unintentional performances prove, if psychoanalytical methods of investigation are applied to them, to have valid motives and to be determined by motives unknown to consciousness."[3] This idea of chance deriving from 'consciously unknown causes' was integral to the Surrealists idea of tapping into that vast area of the subconscious (or unconscious) for the production of art. The act of the artist delving within to uncover thoughts and desires currently hidden.

But there is another tradition of producing chance imagery that will be examined here: the results gained from the utilisation of some mechanical operation (or rules) where human agency is bypassed. Where the first instance of incidental results occurs from within one's brain, by delving into the depths of the subconscious to open doors previously hidden or unknown to the conscious mind, the second method utilises rules or practices outside of the maker to independently affect the direction of the work and take it to a place that most likely would have never been reached by conscious decisions. In short, the maker abdicates control or outcomes to an external force or forces.

Although both traditions are adopted to unplug conscious

1 Brecht, George. *Chance Imagery*. (Something Else Press, 1966). p4

2 Geronimus, Dennis. *Piero Di Cosimo – Visions Beautiful and Strange*. (Yale University Press, 2006) p27

3 Freud, Sigmund. *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life'. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. VI.* (London: The Hogarth Press/Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1960) p239

thought from the making process, one is based on an internal process, while the other is an entirely external method. George Brecht examines the differences and also the similarities between these two species of chance by observing that the origin of the former "is unknown because it lies in deeper-than-conscious levels of the mind", while the latter derives from "mechanical processes not under the artist's control. Both of the processes have in common a lack on conscious design."[4] And so it comes back to 'a lack on conscious design', the artist actively bypassing the conscious, or maker's intent, thereby allowing access to an otherwise inaccessible possibility.

Chance has been used to characterise a very broad spectrum of practices, including the readymade, collage, expressionist paintings, performance, participation and more. In a contemporary setting, the use of chance has been implemented by such visionaries as the Dadaists, Fluxus, John Cage, William S. Burroughs and a host of conceptual artists in the 1960s and '70s, and it continues to be utilised still. However, it is a particular work of one of the most influential artists of the 20th Century that is of significant importance in any discussion that centres on introducing the element of chance in art. This particular work, begun in 1913 as an idea to continue the artist's goal to liberate art from the visual – or retinal – realm is entitled *3 Stoppages Etalon (3 Standard Stoppages)* and has proven to be a key work in the course of the career of its maker and, consequently, the course of contemporary art as a whole.

## "It is his decision, and we must respect it."

By the spring of 1913, Marcel Duchamp was already distancing himself, both physically and psychologically, from the celebrated art scene at the time in Paris. He had made something of a name for himself with his canvases, in particular *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2* (*Nude Descending A Staircase, No. 2*) – which had caused some discomfort for painter and co-curator Albert Gleizes

4 Brecht, George. *Chance Imagery*. (Something Else Press, 1966). p5

*Marcel Duchamp - 3 Stoppages Etalon (3 Standard Stoppages), (1913-14)*

at the 1912 Cubist *Salon des Indépendants*, who indirectly asked Duchamp to voluntarily withdraw or change the name of his painting for fear it didn't fit the Cubist model at the time (this according to Duchamp himself)[5]. Of this incident, Duchamp later recalled, "I said nothing to my brothers. But I went immediately to the show and took my painting home in a taxi. It was really a turning point in my life, I can assure you. I saw that I would not be very much interested in groups after that."[6]

Also by this time, Duchamp had begun initial sketches and studies for a project he was referring to as *The Large Glass*. And, through his job at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris,

5 Brooke, Peter. *The 'rejection' of Nude Descending a Staircase*. peterbrooke.org. http://www.peterbrooke.org.uk/a&r/Du%20Cubisme/Part%20two/duchamp

6 Tomkins, Calvin. *Duchamp A Biography*. (Henry Holt & Company, 1996). p83

he devoted himself to the study of mathematics and physics and furthering of the notion of the 'fourth dimension in art' – a mathematical concept of Henri Poincaré, influential to the artistic avant-garde of Europe at the time. Early Cubist Max Weber wrote an article entitled 'In the Fourth Dimension from a Plastic Point of View', for Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Work* in July 1910. Here, Weber states, "In plastic art, I believe, there is a fourth dimension which may be described as the consciousness of a great and overwhelming sense of space-magnitude in all directions at one time, and is brought into existence through the three known measurements."[7] In short the notion of time as another dimension, alongside length, width and depth.

At the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Duchamp immersed himself in the study of Renaissance perspective, which the Cubists regarded as irrelevant and dated – Apollinaire describing it as "that miserable tricky perspective, that infallible device for making all things shrink."[8] Many modern artists of the time strived to capture life, movement and energy in their works rather than imitate what was already present. This group had dismissed vanishing-point perspective, which gave the illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface. Yet Duchamp was already moving away from what was happening around him and following his own appetites with his study of perspective and Non-Euclidean Geometry. Years later, his brother, the painter Jacques Villon, said of Duchamp: "It is his decision, and we must respect it. The course he is following is not an easy one, and if he takes it, he has his own reasons."[9]

7 Weber, Max. *In The Fourth Dimension from a Plastic Point of View*. (Camera Work, July 1910). p31

8 Tomkins, Calvin. *Duchamp A Biography*. (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2014). p125

9 ibid. p126



## A shift to short-circuit the conscious.

"Can one make works which are not works of 'art'?" Duchamp had asked in a 1913 note that he included in *The Green Box* (a work described in the Tate's display thus: 'Duchamp published this collection of 94 documents to explain some of his thinking and to show some of the preliminary works relating to *The Large Glass*. The notes were left loose so that their relationships for the reader would be determined by chance.'[10]). This question in itself seems to imply that anything made by man, from stone axes to tables and chairs, requires the same mental activities – discipline, skill, intent – that go into the creation of an aesthetic masterpiece. It also gives an insight into Duchamp's shift from the retinal – or conscious – to investigating a more scientific method of production.

With his painting *Chocolate Grinder (No.1)* (1913), he had already shown his decisive break with aesthetic-driven art by using mechanical drawing to "rule out any hint of the artist's personal touch."[11] This little painting was, according to Duchamp, "the point of departure for a new technique," as he sought ways to find a "dry" method of drawing and a more impersonal method of creating art. Duchamp explained: "Mechanical drawing was the saving clause. A straight line done with a ruler, not the hand. Forgetting the hand completely, that's the idea … When you draw, no matter what you do, your taste comes in subconsciously. But in mechanical drawing you are directed by the impersonality of the ruler … I wanted to find something to escape that prison of tradition … I didn't completely get free, but I tried to, consciously. I unlearned to draw … I actually had to forget with my hand."[12]

10 Tate. *Marcel Duchamp - The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors Even (The Green Box)* 1934. tate.org.uk. http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-the-bride-stripped-bare-by-her-bachelors-even-the-green-box-t07744 (accessed 19 October)

11 Tomkins, Calvin. *Duchamp A Biography*. (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2014). p123

12 ibid. p123-124

In French there is an old expression, *la patte*, meaning the artist's touch, his personal style, his 'paw'. *Chocolate Grinder (No.1)* marks Duchamp's decisive break with *la patte*. He described it as "the real beginning of *The Large Glass*." It was now, towards the end of 1913 and the beginnings of his 'Stoppages', that he decided to totally short-circuit conscious intention through the use of chance.

*Marcel Duchamp - Chocolate Grinder No.1 - (1913)*

## The Stoppages emerge.

With the methodical patience of a scientist performing an experiment, Duchamp set to work on *3 Stoppages Etalon* by generating elaborate and exacting instructions, recorded in his box of notes for the year 1913. "If a straight horizontal thread one metre long falls from a height of one metre onto a horizontal plane distorting itself as it pleases and creates a new shape of the measure of length – three patterns obtained in more or less similar conditions …"[13] He followed these guidelines and let the threads fall, "twisting as it pleases", onto three separate canvases, all painted Prussian blue, then fastened the thread to the canvases by gluing them down with drops of varnish in the shapes they had assumed. Once these shapes had been preserved, wooden rulers – or templates – were constructed with these new wavy units of length. Duchamp then placed the mounted threads and rulers in a disused croquet case where they became what he then called 'canned chance'.[14]

The rest of the world knew the work as *3 Stoppages Etalon*, or *3 Standard Stoppages*, in which, as Duchamp once said, he "tapped the mainspring of my future."[15] Calvin Tomkins, in his excellent biography of Duchamp, explains: "Stoppages is the French term for invisible mending. What Duchamp had done was to mend, or, rather to amend, the French unit of length, a formerly impregnable measurement marked by two scratches on a platinum bar kept under unvarying conditions of temperature and humidity in a government vault. The spirit of playful physics was at work in this 'new image of the unit of length,' whose contours were dictated by chance, and which Duchamp would come to look upon as one of the key works in his development as an artist. 'In itself it was not an important work of art,' he said, 'but for me it opened the way – the way to escape from

13 Iversen, Margaret. *Chance. Documents of Contemporary Art.* (Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Ltd. 2010) p12

14 ibid. p13

15 Tomkins, Calvin. *Duchamp A Biography.* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2014). p128

those traditional methods of expression long associated with art. I didn't realise at the time what I had stumbled on. When you tap something, you don't always recognise the sound. That's apt to come later. For me the *Three Stoppages* was a first gesture liberating me from the past.'"[16]

## From three threads to cracked glass and bicycle wheels.

So in what ways did Duchamp's 'liberation' take effect and how was this initial step an integral ingredient in what has become recognised as some of the most influential works in the contemporary art world? According to Herbert Molderings in his book *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance*, "Like everything produced by Duchamp between the years 1913 and 1915, the *3 Standard Stoppages* were a by-product of his pre-occupation with his main work, the large-format glass painting *La Mariée mise à nu par ses Célibataires, même*"[17] –better known in English as *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, or *The Large Glass* (1915-1923).

Not until sometime in 1914 did it occur to him that his invention could be put to use in *The Large Glass*. The lines formed by the dropped threads became the capillary tubes through which the illuminating gas is transported from the bachelor moulds (*9 Malic Moulds*) to the sieves, present on the lower of the two panes of glass – the bachelor's realm. A more detailed interpretation of these elements comes again from Molderings: "The three curved lines of the *3 Standard Stoppages*, obtained through the 'rephysicalisation' of the ideal straight and reendowed through chance with 'the nearly of the "always possible,"' served as models for the curvatures of the capillary tubes on *The Large Glass* that connect the malic moulds with the sieves, where their sexual yearnings are filtered and transformed."[18] Chance was

16 ibid. p128

17 Molderings, Herbert. *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance.* (Columbia University Press, 2010). p7

18 ibid. p44-45

*The Large Glass (1915-23), Installation view of the bachelor's realm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1954. Photo by Hermann Landshoff*

also utilised in the colouring of the sieves, as the dust that had collected over the months inside their contours was then fixed with varnish in New York in 1920.

Consequently, with his newfound sense of liberation Duchamp would, in turn, gift the world's dictionaries with a new term: 'readymades'. This word and the works and processes it refers to would change the art world.

Readymades were "his antidote to retinal art, because 'it was always the idea that came first, not the visual example.' They posed the question 'What is art?' and suggested, quite disturbingly, that it could be anything at all – a readymade, in fact, was 'a form of denying the possibility of defining art.'"[19]

19 Tomkins, Calvin. *Duchamp A Biography.* (The Museum

Duchamp even referred to *3 Standard Stoppages* as his favourite readymade[20], which in itself, testifies to the influence the *Stoppages* had over his future work. He had once defined the readymades thus: "My intention was always to get away from myself, though I knew perfectly well that I was using myself. Call it a little game between 'I' and 'me'."[21] The introduction of chance in "the little work" *3 Standard Stoppages* was one of the first obvious steps to 'get away from himself', and ultimately free his path for the masterpieces to come.

## In conclusion.

It is important to remember that before his 'chance experimentation' with thread, Duchamp was predominantly a painter, and approached art in a painterly way. With his first steps of "unlearning to draw", he began a journey away from the two-dimensional world of canvas and pigment. He allowed his interests in physics and mathematics – as well as an indifference towards 'art society' in general – to unlock his mind in a way that truly opened up the future world of art, causing a great deal of shock at the time. He started crossing mediums and smashing boundaries with his readymades, sculptures, boxes, suitcases, catalogues and appropriations – all standard fare in the art world of today. But it was the *3 Standard Stoppages* that opened the door to all of what was to come. Herbert Molderings succinctly states: "The strategy behind the *3 Standard Stoppages* of conducting absurd experiments in accordance with scientific standards in order to visualise, in an ironic way, the conventionality and relativity of scientific principles was henceforth to be the hallmark of Duchamp's artistic approach. The *3 Standard Stoppages* became the guiding principle of his artistic thinking."[22]

of Modern Art, New York, 2014). p156

20 ibid. p156

21 ibid. p156

22 Molderings, Herbert. *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance*. (Columbia University Press, 2010). p44

**Sabotage:**
**Verb:**

1 Deliberately destroy, damage, or obstruct (something), especially for political or military advantage.
1.1 to intentionally prevent the success of a plan or action

**Noun:**

The action of sabotaging something.

**Origin:**

19th Century: from French, from saboter – kick with sabots, wilfully destroy with wooden shoes.

While the operative words in the definition above seem to revolve around the destruction or prevention of a plan – a plan, one can suppose, that is contrary to the saboteur's own plan – the focus of this chapter is more aligned with the diversion of a plan or action, not so much its prevention or destruction. More precisely, it aims to focus on redirection through the active encouragement of misunderstandings, communication failures, fabrication mishaps and fostered confusion. While the previous chapter dealt with the active removal of the self from the artistic process by introducing the external element of chance into the work, this chapter will look at how one artist used the elements of sabotage mentioned above to bring hidden benefit to his work – in this case through collaboration with other artists, with results that would most likely never have been achieved had he worked alone. Let's call it a removal of self by collaborative sabotage.

## Not a proper boy.

"Being able to obscure things, trivialising, exaggerating, these are all ruses for keeping humanity alive, as an individual and in confrontation with others. Anything you can do with language works just as well with pictures. Concealing, revealing, glossing over, leading people astray."[1]

1 Krystof, Doris & Morgan, Jessica. *Martin Kippenberger, Parachever*

*Martin Kippenberger in Venice, 1996. Photo by Elfie Semotan*

So said Martin Kippenberger in conversation with Daniel Baumann, and a more accurate description of the artist, his methods and inspirations, would be hard to come by. Camouflage, exaggeration, humanity, self-reflection, confrontation, whitewash and misdirection – all mixed in with a huge dose of humour – are touchstones of Kippenberger's extensive output. And while this output has to be characterised, on one hand, by an honest and ceaseless drive to better himself as an artist – and angering as many critics as possible along the way – perhaps a more accurate description would be to describe him as always striving to better the work he produced.

Kippenberger was greatly involved with the relationship between the maker and the work, and consequently he continually explored the issues of authorship, individuality, personal presence in art and that which is uncontrollable in the

*Picasso/Completing Picasso, Interview between Martin Kippenberger and Daniel Baumann*. (Tate Publishing, 2006) p64

making process. It is this relationship with his work as artist (subject) and work (object) that is of interest as we look at how this relationship pushed this most prodigious talent to willingly relinquish control in the 'sanctity of the studio', and how he ushered confusion and even conflict into his work, purely for the benefit of the work itself.

"'Isn't misunderstanding what someone says the most acceptable misunderstanding in communication?' Kippenberger asks in his book *Café Central* while describing the origin of his *Peter* sculptures: a Spanish carpenter had totally misunderstood (collaborator and fellow artist) Michael Krebber's instructions. Both artists were so excited by the results that they started building in errors themselves."[2]

The *Peter* sculptures were so named because 'peter' was Kippenberger's term for objects that fit no known descriptive category. Holland Cotter from *The New York Times* describes them: "The sculptures are made from pieces of found furniture or industrial hardware to which additions or tweaks have been made. Shipping pallets become playpens (his mother died when pallets slid off a truck and hit her), a steel loading cart is equipped with briefcases; a designer chair is elevated on a pedestal; a set of shelves on wheels hold bananas preserved in resin. Many 'peters' were actually made by longtime assistant, Michael Krebber, who now has a substantial career of his own."[3]

2 Kippenberger, Susanne. *Kippenberger The Artist and his Families*. (J&L Books, 2011) p 192

3 Cotter, Holland. *Live Hard, Create Compulsively, Die Young*. nytimes.com. *http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/27/arts/design/27kipp.html* (accessed 2 December, 2016)



"I always wanted to be an artist, even as a child. I saw what a pleasant life they lead."[4]

Martin Kippenberger knew from an early age he would make art. Not only make art, but make a living – make his name – making art. "A boy who wasn't a proper boy, a clown, who often wept and who preferred painting to playing with cars. 'Martin unser Künstler' (Martin our artist) was written in big letters on the kitchen wall."[5] Susanne Kippenberger, his sister, speaks of growing up with this "most special boy" and his wanderlust, both physically and artistically, that seemed to underpin the restless and relentless searching he undertook with his life and his art. She goes on to describe the man she knew as a brother and a very public figure at the time: "Art was not a reflection of his life, it was his life. 'Wer sich dem Abgrund stellt, muss sich nicht wundern, wenn er fliegen kann' ('People who face the abyss shouldn't be surprised if they can fly') is written on one of his paintings; it shows a house on wheels, a rubbish bin as someone's home. That's how he worked, and how he lived: always on the move, always skirting along the edge of the abyss, in a mobile home of sorts."[6]

Skirting along the brink of the abyss. Kippenberger certainly did his fair share of that, evident in his ever-evolving body of work and, I suppose in hindsight sadly, in his personal life as well. His perpetual forward motion was not so much a contrived state – something to work at to be maintained – but more of a major element of the man himself. He was always searching. Always moving. And the same can be said of his art and of the obstacles he placed in front of himself, personally and professionally, for the betterment of the work.

4 Krystof, Doris & Morgan, Jessica. *Martin Kippenberger, Parachever Picasso/Completing Picasso, Interview between Martin Kippenberger and Daniel Baumann*. (Tate Publishing, 2006) p59

5 Krystof, Doris & Morgan, Jessica. *Martin Kippenberger, Heimweh Highway or: Start Simple Get Home*. Susanne Kippenberger. (Tate Publishing, 2006) p49

6 ibid. p53

In 1980, painting in Germany had suddenly gained the critics' attention after a period where it had been deemed, according to the critic Manfred Hermes, "empty, invalid and irrelevant". But it was a certain style of painting that had the country's art world excited: large pictures, figurative, often coarse and with an aura of emotional directness. But, perhaps in response to the unresponsive and unimpressed (with his art but more so his antics in the Berlin art/music scene) art press of Germany at the time, Kippenberger had imposed upon himself a 'prohibition on painting'. This punk rock act of prohibition was in fact the starting point of what would turn out to be his most important exhibition to date.

*Martin Kippenberger - Lieber Maler, male mir (Dear Painter Paint for Me), (1981)*

Kippenberger hired Mr Werner, a Berlin sign painter ("the star among stars" of movie poster painters), to make paintings based on images supplied by Kippenberger for *Lieber Maler, male mir (Dear painter, paint for me)*. It was a major success and a masterstroke. Diedrich Diederichsen described it as "a pointedly non-naïve conceptual work that at the same time expressed the greatest enthusiasm for naiveté, simplification, and sentimentality. What underlay it was the deepest, but also the most cheerful, mistrust of the artist-subject."[7] Here was an artist who, in so many ways, viewed the maker as secondary, as purely a tool, to what was made.

Throughout his prolific career, Kippenberger often used appropriation as such a tool. From hiring painters to complete a series (*Lieber Maler, male mir (Dear painter, paint for me)*), as mentioned above, to reusing his own work or co-opting the work of others – he once famously purchased a Gerhardt Richter painting and added legs, turning it into a coffee table, before selling the work for a price that was much less than the value of the Richter. He was continually interested in the relationship between artist (subject) and artwork (object).

## Appropriation, sabotage, confusion and misunderstandings.

As his career progressed, Kippenberger increasingly used assistants to develop and fabricate his work. One reason for this was his desire to expand the professional scope of his practice. Being involved with other artists and assistants he knew he could trust and work with also provided a mirror of sorts; an objective reflection of the artist himself, and the veracity of his work.

According to David M. Thomas, "What distinguishes Kippenberger's studio practice to that of his peers is that he was unconcerned with producing objects that conformed to purely his ideas. Rather, he believed that his work would benefit

7 Kippenberger, Susanne. *Kippenberger The Artist and his Families*. (J&L Books, 2011) p 201-202

from potential communication failures and even malfunctions in its fabrication. Kippenberger actively encouraged mistakes, misunderstandings, and confusion. This process would often be built on a joke between himself and an assistant, where most of the joke had been forgotten from the night before and the strangely rendered objective remnants were its intended result." [8]

Kippenberger enlisted the talents of other artists to help facilitate this fascination with the relationship between the maker and the object and to push the maker out of the production loop by whatever means possible. His sister Susanne recalled how "he had countless helpers, some of them official but most of them unofficial, including small children and old grandmothers. He knew how to delegate and command, how to exploit others' talents for his own benefit; he was constantly giving orders and assignments and making requests."[9]

In his relentless drive to make art, Kippenberger was not only willing to sacrifice the artist for the work but sought influence and assistance from external sources to aid him with his production at such an prolific rate. His sister goes on to say: "He played with the myth of the artist and the artist's authorship (who is an artist? what does he actually do?) in countless ways. For *Woman*, Martin left it up to the printer to decide the order of the pictures. In a used bookstore in Paris he found copies of a book called *Les Mémoires d'un Cordon Bleu* and bought up every copy, numbered and signed the shrink-wrapped books, and lo and behold, another genuine Kippenberger."[10]

Renowned German writer and critic Diedrich Diederichsen explains, "Their [i.e., the assistants] job might have been to make his production more difficult or call it into question, or it might have been to speed it up, to develop ideas, or to hamper their development."[11] He goes on to say, "these negotiations with other artists and their spaces – created a conceptual space for the objective rendering of the artist's self in a way that would have been impossible for him to achieve by himself. One of the principles in this process was: 'to explore the problem of individuality and authorship, the magic of personal presence in art objects, and the controllability of that which is uncontrollable and contingent'." [12]

8 Thomas, David M. *Zones Of Subjective Projection: The Artist's Studio And The Museum*. (Studio Research 0, 2011), p12

9 Kippenberger, Susanne. *Kippenberger The Artist and his Families*. (J&L Books, 2011) p154-155

10 ibid. p185

## Heavy guy, back seat driver.

According to Tate Modern's 2006 exhibition catalogue, "With *Lieber Maler, male mir (Dear Painter Paint for Me)* (1981), *Heavy Burschi (Heavy Guy)* (1991) and the *Installation der Weissen Bilder (Installation of the White Paintings)* (1993), the spotlight turns to Kippenberger's idea of delegating the act of painting to others. Confrontation and exchange with other artistic positions, as well as different forms of collaboration, are very much the hallmarks of Kippenberger's artistic praxis. For Kippenberger, art became an all-embracing life system."[13]

If we take *Heavy Burschi (Heavy Guy)* as an example, we are incontrovertibly presented with Kippenberger at his most confrontational. It is a work that questions the notions of ownership, authenticity, labour and societal relations and the veracity of originals versus copies of a work. It also deals with hierarchy and relationships in the art world, for the maker (or, in this case, makers) in their studios, viewers in the museums and purchasers in the galleries.

11 Diederichsen , Diedrich. *'The Poor Man's Sports Car Descending a Staircase: Kippenberger as Sculptor', Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective.* (MIT Press, ed. by Ann Goldstein and Lisa Gabrielle Mark, 2008). p148

12 ibid. p118–83

13 Krystof, Doris & Morgan, Jessica. *Martin Kippenberger,* (Tate Publishing, ed. by Doris Krystof and Jessica Morgan, With Susanne Kippenberger and Gregory Williams, 2006), 76


*Martin Kippenberger - Heavy Burschi (Heavy Guy), (1991)*

*Heavy Burschi (Heavy Guy)*, listed in 2006 as privately owned, is an installation combining large, original canvases painted by Kippenberger's assistant Merlin Carpenter (at Kippenberger's direction), with full-size, full-colour, framed prints of the canvases hung systematically around the walls and a constructed wooden 'skip' housing the smashed original canvases in the centre of the room.

This single installation brings together many of the defining themes of Kippenberger's practice, both concerning media and its process of production. Kippenberger asked Carpenter to make the paintings based on images from all his catalogues, but he was dissatisfied with the finished canvases. He ordered all 51 paintings be destroyed, but first had each photographed, reprinted to its original size and framed, exhibiting them together, with the remnants of the paintings in a skip, as a single installation. This use of another painter to paint his ideas was repeatedly used by Kippenberger, as he strove to discover – and stretch – his relationship with what it meant to be 'the artist' and what the art itself was intended to be.

By playing with the classical idea of the 'master/artist/ego' within the artistic process, Kippenberger replaces one man's work with that of other men, before replacing the other men's paintings with one man's reproductions. He creates a unique work by destroying the original paintings and displaying the copies – manufacturing an appropriation of an appropriation – or, in his own words, transforming the pictures "into a kind of double kitsch".[14]

This act of total disregard for his collaborators, be it intentional or (more likely) not, illustrates another vital aspect of Kippenberger's drive for artistic perfection. He was obsessive in the quest for completion of his ideas (or at least the total undertaking of them), and whoever happened to be involved, or stood too close to the flame, was also subject to the whim of the artist and the art. Consequently, they stood a good chance of getting burned.

Kippenberger's (at times long-suffering) supporting cast was continually changing as they grew in stature and careers progressed, though some simply grew tired or needed a rest as he moved on with his obsessions and unboundedly followed his wanderlust. His sister Susanne goes on to say, "A Cologne colleague described the relationships between Martin and several of his assistants as 'insanely Oedipal', with everything that goes with it: support, admiration, subordination, rebellion, rejection."[15]

14 Martin Kippenberger

15 Kippenberger, Susanne. *Kippenberger The Artist and his Families.* (J&L Books, 2011) p 305

Merlin Carpenter (of the *Heavy Burschi* collaboration) distanced himself from Kippenberger relatively quickly compared to other assistants, moving on to work with Albert Oehlen and Werner Büttner. However, he had his final say on his former employer in a book published by Max Hetzler (after Kippenberger's death) called *Guitars Not Named Gundrun*, which paid homage to Kippenberger. In it, he called Martin a "'Back Seat Driver' (the title of his submitted essay): someone who leaves all the work to others, who makes others drive and pay for the gas, who turns their stories into his own sculptures."[16]

Although Kippenberger was driven, focused, uncompromising in his art, and an abrasive (at times) character to be so intensely involved with, his assistants and collaborators mostly all recall him with a smile and an understanding of the fact that part of his genius was that he made art for art's sake: not for the critics and the art markets, but for artists and for art. This fact becomes apparent in the way he worked with others: his collaborators were expected to enlarge the work, to surprise him.

"Martin had a very open system of collaboration. Ideas were developed together in bars and restaurants, Martin made sketches at most, and within the framework of what they'd discussed, the collaborators executed the ideas according to their own ideas. He didn't want assistants to execute his plans," notes Uli Strothjohann, his assistant and collaborator (mid-1980s until 1991). "He wanted people to apply their own style."[17]

"I am a travelling salesman. I deal in ideas."

Martin Kippenberger

16 ibid. p305

17 ibid. p306

*Martin Kippenberger - Untitled, (1992)*

So Kippenberger, it seems, was continually commenting on himself and his relationship with the art world in general by the very means of his making of art. The decisions he made concerning the creative processes were deliberately effected to sabotage any ego-driven 'the creator as master'-style practice. Kippenberger, who once referred to himself as a 'salesman', developed a subversive image of the artist, far-removed from the clichés of creating meaning and realising visions.

This continual reflection/comment/maker/object relationship he engaged with was perhaps born out of his innate restlessness as a person. His commitment to his work was a by-product of his inability to rest, his fear of the happy suburban household and the 'pleasant lives they lead', and the fact he was, in his own words, born to be an artist.

While speaking to Daniel Baumann, Kippenberger discusses his early struggles with technique and style and how these obstacles, in the end, brought him to the core of his inevitable practice and his ability to sacrifice anything and everything – the artist included – for the benefit of the art. "I drew my way through all the art books on the bookshelves. That helped me to see things more clearly than if I just looked at the pictures. You find out how difficult it is to do certain things, that you're just not able. Then my father said that if I wanted to be an artist, I'd have to find my own style, I got very stuck until I suddenly realised that having no style is also a style, so that's what I did. That set me free. Don't worry about style but about what you want to say. How it looks is a different matter."[18]

The same rule can be applied to process as well: anything goes as long as it serves what you want to say. Much like Marcel Duchamp's turning away from the 'retinal' and the artistic style of the times to follow his more mathematical muse, Martin Kippenberger also served his particular muse. While both these characters were quite divergent personalities, their commitment to their craft and their own inner drives and voices brought them to places where they were able to relinquish control of their selves and their ideas to other forces – gravity, collaborators. Their art was enriched because of this. It just goes to show that sometimes the end very much does justify the means, especially when all that's involved is a little 'letting go'.

18 Krystof, Doris & Morgan, Jessica. *Martin Kippenberger, 'Parachever Picasso/Completing Picasso, Interview between Martin Kippenberger and Daniel Baumann'*. (Tate Publishing, 2006) p59

Whether you succeed or not is irrelevant, there is no such thing. Making your unknown known is the important thing--and keeping the unknown always beyond you."[1]

**Georgia O'Keeffe**

**Failure:**
**Noun:**

1 Lack of success.
  1.1 An unsuccessful person or thing.

2 The neglect or omission of expected or required action.
  2.1 A lack or deficiency of a desirable quality.

3 The action or state of not functioning.
  3.1 A sudden cessation of power.
  3.2 The collapse of a business.

*Bas Jan Ader - Fall 1, Los Angeles (1970)*

1 *Georgia O'Keeffe – Quotes, Quotable, Quote*. goodreads.com. http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/302-whether-you-succeed-or-not-is-irrelevant-there-is-no (accessed 9 January, 2017)



While the preceding chapters dealt with artists who deliberately introduced external forces into their work to affect the work's outcome, this chapter looks at artworks that use failure as the core of the works. While not quite aligned with the 'removal of maker' practice of the previous chapters, the use of failure for the success of the work follows along the idea of using unorthodox, or as in this case paradoxical, processes to unlock previously hidden components or directions within works of art.

Paradoxes are at the heart of any artistic practices that deal with failure: if the notion of the art is to fail, then any success brought about is also through the failing. Success is defined through failure. In our neo-liberalist world of 'success at all costs', to strive to fail might seem to be counter to social expectations, but if removed from this context, the act of failing can lead to potential discoveries previously hidden. Between the two poles of success and failure lies an immense world of unconscious possibility and potential just waiting to be unlocked. All it takes is application, perseverance and the ability to grab hold of the possibilities when they manifest themselves.

Then there is the more human relationship with failure itself. As stated above, we live in a world seemingly driven toward ever greater success. Bigger, better, faster, stronger are ideals projected at us from all angles. Yet most of us are more intimate with situations that require perseverance, thought, struggle, patience on a daily level. The winners are held up as something to strive to become, yet we count our successes on much smaller scales. We struggle with our daily lives, our wants and needs, and in these struggles – and failures – find growth, knowledge, strength and ultimately success. And it is through this shared intimate relationship with failure that the success and value of artworks dealing with this relationship are found. The paradox of failure as a success is woven through our intimate quest for 'perfection'.

Curator and writer Lisa Le Feuvre states, "Artists have long turned their attention to the unrealisability of the quest for perfection, or the open-endedness of experiment, using both

dissatisfaction and error as means to rethink how we understand our place in the world." She continues, "The inevitable gap between the intention and realisation of an artwork makes failure impossible to avoid. This very condition of art-making makes failure central to the complexities of artistic practice and its resonance with the surrounding world. Through failure one has the potential to stumble on the unexpected. To strive to fail is to go against the socially normalised drive towards ever increasing success."[2] In the words of Samuel Beckett: "To be an artist is to fail as no other dare to fail."[3]

So when dealing with the element of failure in the artistic practice, we need to look then at how this 'failure' is interpreted or executed. The interesting paradox of failure as core motivation in an artistic practice is that one cannot set out to fail because the evaluation process of success – as measured by failure – becomes irrelevant. The success of a specific work is achieved through the pursuit of failure. The two divergent poles act to reinforce the other. In fact, paradoxes are at the heart of all dealings with failure – it is a position to take yet one that cannot be striven for. But there has to be space to allow the failure to succeed and the failures need time to take hold, to make themselves evident, to present themselves to the maker.

## The relationship with the paradox.

In his short story *The Unknown Masterpiece* (1831), Honoré de Balzac tells the story of the ageing master painter Frenhofer's obsession with finishing his 'masterpiece', which he has secretly been working on for the preceding 10 years. It is a painting that portrays a beautiful nude woman (who is also a past lover) with such artistic skill and brilliance that she seems to be actually alive. Ever dissatisfied, however, the artist meticulously strives for this unattainable perfection, year upon year, layer upon layer, brush stroke upon brush stroke. The work will be hidden from all until it is – in the master's eyes – complete and perfect. However, when two younger painters who are admirers of Frenhofer finally persuade the master to reveal the painting, they are shocked to find the pursuit of perfection has undone the final representation, leaving a 'wall of paint' with only a single perfect foot just visible amongst the mass of colour. The master tries to justify the painting as an atmosphere rather than a depiction, but ultimately, in their era of representational art and in the face of the younger men's mockery, he believes it to be a failure. When alone that evening, he destroys the canvas and mysteriously dies.

Balzac's story, while written in the age of Romanticism (with its idea of the artist as a heroic individual tasked with 'raising the quality of society'), is a graphic illustration of the gaps between intention, expectation and realisation. The master, in the end, was unable to see through the perceived failure and unrealised expectations that would have allowed himself the freedom to embrace the greater unknown that came through his continued application and 'heaven-sent' failure. De Balzac's fictional artist had in effect created the first abstract painting, pre-dating abstract expressionism by 125 years.

Fast-forward 100 years or so – through the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, Fauvists, Expressionists, Cubists, Futurists, Surrealists and so on – and we find ourselves in a much-changed landscape with respect to failure as artistic praxis. Since the 1960s (and, as previously shown, with a great debt owed to 1913), the possibilities for what art could be expanded vastly to include such concepts as a hole carved in a wall, the exact measurement of a room, a distance travelled, a closed exhibition, or the meaningless task of placing objects back and forth between two carefully constructed boxes. In fact, meaningless work, or the execution of meaningless tasks, became medium, method and metaphor within the artworks themselves. Artists conceived intricate systems for the execution of these processes and these systems were often irrational, absurd or destined

2 Le Feuvre, Lisa. *Failure. Documents of Contemporary Art.* (Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Ltd. 2010) p12

3 Beckett, Samuel. *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit, transition no.48* (1949)

to fail, drawing their strength from the fact that these same qualities – irrationality, absurdity and failure – are prevalent in the lives of us all as we stumble and improvise our own ways through the world.

And therein lies the success of the work and the built-in lure of witnessing – or experiencing – the artist's repeated failure and perseverance as they willingly engage with the seemingly unattainable tasks they set for themselves. They may fall, sometimes quite literally, then pick themselves up, dust themselves off and start all over again. It is the pure 'human-ness' of persistence in the face of great odds that stokes our desire to see the person succeed. The fallibility of our daily lives, our trips and stumbles, are presented as something normal, something to be embraced, something human that we all share.

Take the popularity of the films by Buster Keaton for example. Why do we laugh as Keaton survives tornadoes, waterfalls, avalanches of boulders and falls from great heights? Certainly, we see him as an 'every-man' – human, fallible, plucky – who, in the face of the most daunting obstacles, remains true to his objective and himself, but more poignantly, we see his trips and pratfalls as the physical reminder of who – or more importantly how – we are. While we fumble and fret our hour upon the stage, Keaton, on the other hand, remains true to his humanity in the face of adversity and stumbles his way onward, integrity intact and a better man for it. In a way, he is the person we all secretly wish to be.

So this is the crux of our fascination with depictions of failure in the arts: we see in them our own struggles – at times meaningless, bearing little or no fruit and seemingly without justification – and are better able to accept that we all struggle and in our struggle humility is nurtured and there is worth.

In an article for the Tate, titled *Bound to Fail*, Christy Lange summarises the attraction of failure in works of art: "There is something fragile and fallible about taking on a project that can't

*Buster Keaton in The General (1926)*

be finished, performing an act that can't succeed, or creating a work that will never be seen. It is the repeated, unsure attempts and predictable small failures that constitute the self-effacing and endearing quality of meaningless work. The act of failure or the failed act of art making is promising and productive. Or maybe it is because when systems try and fail to create order, or break down and fail, it evokes our own failings. As Annika Ström suggests: 'I guess it's more interesting because it creates questions instead of just answering a question, a question only made by the artist... and it shows that the artist is fragile. It presents the fragile parts of us all.'"[4]

4 Lange, Christy. *Bound To Fail.* tate.org.uk. http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/bound-fail (accessed 12 November, 2016)

## The hour of consciousness.

Endless Actions and irresolvable pursuits: repeated, unsure attempts and predictable, small stalemates all destined to fail, much the same as the tragic figure of Sisyphus – doomed for eternity to repeat his worthless task set him by his overlords and masters. In Greek mythology Sisyphus was the king of Ephyra (now known as Corinth). He was punished by the gods for his pride and deceitfulness by being forced to roll a boulder up a hill, only to watch it, upon reaching the top, roll back down the hill again, repeating this action for eternity.

Through the classical influence on modern culture, tasks that are both laborious and futile are therefore described as *Sisyphean*. But writer and artist Emma Cocker sees the classical interpretation a little differently: "The term *Sisyphean* … actually refers to a tripartite structure whereby a task is performed in response to a particular rule or requirement, fails to reach its proposed goal and is then repeated. More than a model of endless or uninterrupted continuation of action, a Sisyphean practice operates according to a cycle of failure and repetition, of non-attainment and replay; it is a punctuated performance. A rule is drawn, an action is required, an attempt is made. Over and over, again and again."[5]

She then goes on to state that in this specific structure, it is the moment of inaction – the reflection of the task at the foot of the mountain that precedes the impending labour – which is the most important. That, in these moments of calm, the resistance or refusal of the system's inherent authority is the true power of the repeated futility for the participant.

Albert Camus in his story *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) says of that moment: "That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness."[6] The myth of Sisyphus and the inherent 'hour of consciousness' can be used as a frame in which to explore artworks that utilise this practice of seemingly purposeless repetition.

If we take this view and apply it to specific works by Marcel Broodthaers, John Baldessari and Bas Jan Ader from the 1960s and '70s, we can examine how, in their failures and through their use of humour, they channel both the spirit of Keaton's spirited every-man while also presenting a deeper, but fluid – or, in Ader's case, even tenuous – Sisyphean view of that 'moment of consciousness' that everyone can experience when faced with perpetual failure or adversity. In each of their works, the Sisyphean rule is brought into play only then for it to be distorted through humour, whereby the failure of the action is not only inevitable (through rain, chance and gravity) but is moreover encouraged.

*Marcel Broodthaers - La Pluie (Project pour un text) (1969)*

5 Cocker, Emma. *Over And Over, Again And Again.* In *Failure. Documents of Contemporary Art.* (Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Ltd. 2010) p154

6 Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus.* p117

In Broodthaer's film *La Pluie (Project pour un text)* (1969) the Sisyphean construct is perforated with a solemn and deadpan slapstick (Ah, back to Mr. Keaton again…). The artist is filmed sitting at a low table, fountain pen in hand, ink pot at the ready, attempting to write something, over and over, while rain falls continuously upon him. Each inky inscription is duly erased by the downpour, but the action continues nonetheless. It is never clear what exactly it is he is writing, but with diligence, he fills page after page from his stack of paper. Until, at last, the camera pans in to show the ink bottle running over and staining the pages, his rain-soaked writing dissolving into blotches and blobs. Only at this final moment of the film does he place the pen upon his dampened pages and bring an end to his seemingly futile endeavours. His 'hour of consciousness' reached after the meticulous demonstration of futile energy expended and the glorious failure of his act successfully laid bare.

For Broodthaers, his 'hour' is expanded as a broader embracing of his task's failure, thereby distancing himself from the futility involved and focussing the viewer's attention instead to the act of perseverance that is at the centre of the work. His diligence to see through the pointless exercise of writing in the rain is of much more importance than the words that he writes.

Alternatively, in John Baldessari's photographic series *Trying to Photograph a Ball so that it is in the Centre of the Picture* (1972-73), *Throwing Four Balls in the Air to Get a Square* (1972-73), and *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)* (1973), "each photographic sequence documents a failing permutation of an action caught at a moment of playful non-achievement."[7] Providing the viewer with the rules of his game in the titles, Baldessari makes clear the intent of his work: this is a documentation of persistence and perseverance rather than the inevitable failure that is hinted at in the title.

7 Cocker, Emma. *Over And Over, Again And Again*. In *Failure. Documents of Contemporary Art*. (Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Ltd. 2010) p157



*John Baldessari - Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts), (1973)*

Aesthetically the photos are pleasing: colourful orbs arrange themselves almost merrily upon the backdrop of a very 1970s chroma-colour blue Californian sky. However, it is immediately apparent the thrown balls will most likely never match the claims made in the title. The photos are in fact a documentation of only a portion of the rule-bound activity that could probably go on indefinitely. The appearance of the photos – the colours and compositions – add to the playfulness of the task at hand, offering an almost nonchalance to the Sisyphean struggle taking place.

As Emma Cocker states, "In refusing to take the task wholly seriously, the artist deftly defies the gravitas (and, more literally, the gravity) of the Sisyphean paradigm – pathos is replaced by a knowing game-play."[8] In other words, by embracing the absurdity in failure (or perhaps our absurd cultural aversion to

8 ibid. p157

failure), Baldessari is set free from the act of failing. A liberation from daily mundaneness is achieved by the very human act of perserverance.

Bas Jan Ader - Fall 2, Amsterdam (1970)

As a counterpoint to Baldessari's overt levity in the face of failure, the film work and, in a broader context, the unmitigated success of Bas Jan Ader's whole body of work is in the exploration of the possibility and potential of a sustained demonstration of failure. With Ader's films from the early '70s, repeated or *Sisyphean* failure recalibrates to become the central focus of a body of work, where it is then repeatedly explored, demonstrated, tested out and trialled. "His inhabitation of the Sisyphean trope can be seen to oscillate between a genuine attempt at a given (if impossible) task, and the playing out or playing within the conventions of the action itself."[9]

9 ibid. p157



Taken as a series, Ader's *Falls* certainly illustrate the myth of Sisyphean struggle, where, across five differing films he is seen falling or dropping from a height or over an object. Across these multiple documentations he is locked into a pre-determined action (balancing of a chair, cycling along an edge, tilting on one leg) that requires him to repeatedly 'give-in to gravity' and fall – sometimes very unceremoniously. The outcome of the action is a deliberate failure in 'real world' terms.

Bas Jan Ader - Broken Fall (organic), Amsterdamse Bos, Holland (1971)

In *Fall 1, Los Angeles* (1970), he falls from a precariously balanced chair off the roof of his California bungalow. In *Fall 2, Amsterdam* (1970), he cycles over an Amsterdam bridge before steering his bicycle over the edge and into the water of the canal. In *Broken Fall (geometric) Westkapelle, Holland* (1971), he tilts sideways on one leg, seemingly in accordance with the ever-present wind, almost mirroring the angle of the saw horse standing beside him, before toppling over the trestle into the

nearby hedge. And in *Broken Fall (organic), Amsterdamse Bos, Holland* (1971), he dangles from the end of a tree bough for what feels like an eternity – but is actually just over a minute – before finally losing his grip and plunging into the canal below.

In each of these filmed performances, the artist's body follows the trajectory of the Sisyphean rock and indeed falls, or gives itself over to the force of gravity that affects us all. There is no apparent 'hour of consciousness' in this series from Ader, and in contrast to Baldesarri's (and to a lesser degree Broodthaer's) work, the humour is much more physical and immediate – almost in the vein of Keaton. However, the levity is quickly lost and the gravitas takes hold. The actual physical falls of the artist – like Keaton's falls – are a direct reminder of our failures and our mortality, but unlike Keaton, the humour is swiftly replaced by a much more enduring melancholic reminder of our shared human condition.

Whether embracing the very human experience of failure with humour and impossible rules to follow, or presenting a more layered – perhaps remorseful – examination of human fallibility, the artists of today can borrow from the methods used by Keaton, Baldessari, Broodthaers and Ader to enable us, the viewer, to engage with our failings in a human way. To embrace failure, celebrate it and learn from the hidden gifts that infinitely repeatable actions can uncover. In short, to stumble upon the unexpected. "A rule is drawn, an action required. An attempt is made. Over and over, again and again – a task is set, the task fails, and the task is repeated. *Ad infinitum*."[10]

10 ibid. p161

"Art is a collaboration between God and the artist, and the less the artist does the better."

Andre Gide[1]

In the making of art, the rules, like the ideas themselves, are boundless. In the making of art a pencil stroke is as valid as a multiple room installation, as a book of a thousand pages or a masterpiece hanging in a museum. Inspiration is drawn from the world existing around the artist and that world is also boundless in its capacity to alarm, to baffle and to inspire. And while the world has certainly changed since Marcel Duchamp made the decision to lessen the role of *la patte* in his work, the idea to seek influence from outside conscious thought is as relevant today as it ever has been.

Our modern world is filled with information, facts, opinion, thoughts, entertainment streamed at us from all directions. All the world's history and biases, lies, truths, half-truths, hates and loves are available in our pockets at the swipe of a finger at any one time. Under the guise of progress, we bombard ourselves with information that seems to mostly dull the senses rather than sharpen our understanding of who we are, why we are and how we can be better. In this world of instant gratification and a desire for control, the ideas of introducing the intangible, uncontrollable and unattainable in works of art hold even more value than ever before. Art is meant to question. Is meant to draw back the curtain, but only a little. It should leave the viewer wanting to know more. In our world of hyper-information and craving control, it's the unknowing, the intangible, the unexpected that cut through the noise and become real. Become human while originating as something outside of being human.

1 *99 Inspirational Art Quotes from Famous Artists*. artpromotivate.com. http://www.artpromotivate.com/2012/09/famous-inspirational-art-quotes.html (accessed December 29, 2016)



In the chance patterns of three falling threads, a previously unseen door is unlocked and a path is followed that is still reverberating in the art world over one hundred years later. In the introduction of conflict and miscommunication with collaborators and assistants, a totally driven artist is able to continue to search for truth in art by extracting the artist from the art itself. In the blatant presentation of falling and failing yet persevering, artists from the '60s and '70s – that most conceptual of eras – show us that one of the most important human qualities is the ability to continue on no matter what. That, as humans, we fail and failure is as important as it is funny, inescapable and uncontrollable.

While the times change with the ceaseless march of human endeavour, the qualities that make us who we are inevitably remain the same. Our need to seek answers, to ask questions and to find meaning amongst the rubble is still at the heart of what it is to be alive in our particular age. Regardless of geography, century or social standing, this inner narrative provides impetus for the posing of the questions. And sometimes this inner narrative can benefit from a suggestion via an outer source. A perhaps more transparent voice, an unbiased voice that is less influenced by the issues of the day and able to set the course on a purer, previously unseen direction. A bearing that can set free the art from the constraints of the artist and propel itself into the glorious unknown, the glorious uncontrollable. All it takes is a little letting go.

*Chance, sabotage and failure really are the three likeliest muses.*

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## Colofon

**BA Thesis**
**Chance, sabotage and failure. The three likeliest muses.**
**Russell Joyce**

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DOGtime FA5 2017
Thesis advisor: QS Serafijn