

Dialogues of Failure

Brian Grison in Conversation with Doug Jarvis & Ted Hiebert

Victoria arts-writer and artist Brian Grison was asked by This Magazine in Toronto to review the “Call for Submissions” for Dowsing for Failure. As preliminary research, a series of email interchanges took place. These have been edited and supplemented for inclusion here.

GRISON: Hello Ted Hiebert. Hello Doug Jarvis. Before we begin these, I want to stress that I am interested in the ideas your Curatorial Statement touches on. My questions are a search for understanding rather than either a critique of your language or your project. I have posed questions as they develop in response to your Curatorial Statement, which I insert into the text of your statement so you can see what has given rise to my question.

Failure – as something that cannot be willfully coveted but must, in many ways, be “happened” upon accidentally and in most instances unintentionally – holds, from our perspective, many innovative and intriguing artistic and theoretical possibilities.

It seems to me that failure can be “coveted.” It’s quite common in social interactions, private neurotic pattern, and Machiavellian relationships – there must be many examples. Failure is very common in the human world. Please comment.

HIEBERT: I agree that failure is common in the human world – this, in many ways, is what makes it both interesting and difficult as a concept to explore. However, I’m not sure that I understand how the “commonality” of failure makes it covetable or even, in any real-world sense, desirable. Isn’t failure more the surprise of encountering that which is beyond control, and perhaps even more specifically, the instances where this lack of control is personally and intimately reinforced? In other words, don’t we find ourselves literally “out of control” when we encounter failure?

JARVIS: I think that with the idea of failure, if you covet something experienced as failure it immediately changes into what one wishes it to be. Thereby changing the nature of what stands as the incommensurable event in its own right. This shift is what we refer to as the happy accident.

GRISON: What do you mean when you say that failure “must be ‘happened’ upon ... unintentionally?” can you give me an example or two?

HIEBERT: From my perspective, this follows from the “accidental” nature of failure. To set oneself up for failure would be a neurotic instance (a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts), in which one gets what one wants (even if that is not what one thought one wanted – if you want the psychoanalytic explanation). To happen upon failure, by contrast, is to encounter it precisely where one did not expect to, and further where it was undesirable and, most often, unavoidable and unpredictable.,

GRISON: What do you mean by “discourses of failure”? Isn’t this e-mail a ‘discourse of failure’? Or do you mean artists whose work actually ‘fails’ – however we interpret the term?

JARVIS: I think that in this context discourses of failure can refer to the idea that the artist has engaged the term, and has some experience of dealing with it as a concept as well, that the artist is not simply doing a keyword search for submissions containing the word failure and all of its subsequent definitions. That we are asking for considered proposals seems a fair proposition. It is not like we made the term up.

GRISON: Consider the following excerpt from the “Call for Submissions”:

While highly political in the privileging of inquiry over declaration, the politics of DOWSING FOR FAILURE are more aptly contextualized as a by-product and side effect of the works to be exhibited rather than an accusation of more linear and calculated political curation.

Does this mean you will privilege text-based rather than image-based works of art, since words lend themselves more to inquiry and images lend themselves more to declaration. (I think that image-based works of art that purport to be inquiring rather than declarative are often weak ‘illustrations’ of inquiries that ought to be text-based. There is an awful lot of declarative work out there that purports to “question this or that” or “challenge this or that,” and most of it is just bad art. I believe this is one of the lingering by-products of Conceptual art).

JARVIS: Perhaps the privileging of either is also something to think about. I have a problem with thinking that the perception of the political in the work would be so clearly differentiated by the language used. The idea that text is a more political means of expression or at least can facilitate those expressions more effectively

is probably as restrictive to the interpretation of what is political as this qualitative account of the mediums.

GRISON: Are you also ‘declaring’ in this sentence that you will develop the theme of Dowsing for Failure based on the proposals you receive rather than having a clear idea of what you expect to accomplish in advance? Is this what you mean by the phrases “by-product” and “side effects”? If so, I will be inclined to skepticism.

HIEBERT: Our process is a combination of the extremes you mention. We have built-in a self-reflexive element to the process of curation we will be following, in the sense that we feel a need to open up the selection to a process of “dowsing” that many will find questionable. In terms of the specific phrase you cite (which deals with the *politics* of the exhibition), what we mean is we are skeptical of work with a political agenda for the simple reason that we are of the opinion that, in art, politics should grow obliquely out of the work itself rather than forming the central “declarative” locus of interpretation.

GRISON: Your sentence, “failure is not something that can – properly speaking – be cultivated” sounds almost oddly moralistic. However, I assume you refer to failure in the Newtonian sense – and I agree. However, cultivated failure is a common feature of human life and culture and what I’ll call natural failure as a normal aspect of the human condition. On the level of cultural matters, the history of the scientific, and non-scientific calibration of time is a history of failures. On the personal level, most attempts to receive or express love end in failure.

HIEBERT: I’m not clear what the “Newtonian” sense of failure is. I’m also not quite sure what you mean when you say that cultivated failure is a common feature of human life. Again, the failure that results from attempts at love (as you mention) are not properly seen as intentional – they occur, of course, and are failures precisely because they were not the outcome that was hoped for. From my perspective, the personal turmoil failures of this type can cause also means that they cannot be intended (self-sabotage, for instance, is a poor form of expressing one’s love for someone else). Further, the fact that failure can and does occur should not be viewed as a de-legitimation of the experience of failing. We tend, as a culture, to anaesthetize our failures as quickly as possible, which I think does an injustice to possibilities and perspectives that we may well not be otherwise able to encounter.

GRISON: When you refer to the intention to “make failure into the spectre of its own success, a self-fulfilling prophecy” you are describing a common human

attribute in the realm of self-imaging, interpersonal relationships and Machiavellian politics. However, are you referring to something that you see occurring in the realm of art practice?

JARVIS: I think that there is an interesting aspect to considering the practice of art as a terrain where the notion of failure is mobilized to pursue the manipulation of materials, ideas and interpretations. The theme of failure for an art show may have as much to do with putting on a gallery presentation than the fact that an art practice is a fertile zone of failed attempts. I think rather that it is this relationship specifically that we are wanting to address that using failure as a means of producing one's art may be likened to doing commercial work, or other types of production inspired by other means. It may be that by presenting this topic as a theme it gives one the chance to ponder the relationship between failure and one's art practice and hopefully be able to distinguish between the intended mobilization to amenable ends, and the acceptance of incommensurable results.

GRISON: Your explanation could have been written by a Symbolist poet (except for the word 'existential' of course). I assume you are referring to works of art that fail so badly that they are worthy of only the trash bin or fireplace. Am I right? A possibly appropriate example might be the occasional result of some 'accident' of 'miscalculation' in a potter's kiln, the results of which is utterly useless for its intended use – despite possibly still being an aesthetically successful object. (Of course my use of an example from the world of Craft is philosophically, politically and even existentially dangerous; however your reference to phoenixes and ashes led me to this particular example).

HIEBERT: Perhaps. Again, when the artist fails and the work succeeds there is often room for the resurrection of "interest." Your example points to this type of instance. It is much less interesting when the work fails and the artist nevertheless attempts to "turn" the work into a success of some sort.

GRISON: If I understand you correctly, I agree that there would be a paradox in making a work of art that is a representation of its own condition as a failure. Such a work of art would not be a failure if its representation was both practically and aesthetically successful. I thought this was something you wanted to avoid. As well, as a discourse on failure, would not such a work of art be an illustration of an idea better represented by text?

HIEBERT: You have exactly identified the problem we seek to avoid. The illustration of failure is not interesting. We know it happens, we fear it happening

to us, and yet we always know it will happen anyways. The rhetorical salvation of failure is equivalent to the illustration of failure. In both instances there is a safety zone constructed to protect oneself from the intensity of the experience itself. The two key words in the sentence you deconstruct are “paradox” and “renderings,” which allude not to the stand-alone representation, but to the act of engagement that necessarily occurs “despite” the failure itself. Put more simply, we are seeking works that represent failure without exiting from the failure of representation itself (this is the “paradox”).

GRISON: Does this mean that you are more interested in the condition or event that caused the failure than the resulting visual evidence of the failure? Would this condition or event need to be repeatable? Would this repeatability be the equivalent of the condition of extreme sports that you refer to? For example, I’m thinking of the place of gesture – as both condition and event – in the painting practice that Jackson Pollock developed as a kind of repetitive dance around and across his canvases. Am I correct to interpret your last sentence here as a possible reference to the notion that in the existential moment of his dance/gesture Pollock would not have been concerned with either the success or failure of either his process, his performance or the result?

HIEBERT: We are not scientists. Repeatability is an artistically useless concept – and it is only interesting in this way. Repetition (as in multiples, for example) is interesting for precisely the ways in which it fails to accurately repeat (think of photography or printmaking as opposed to the standardized multiples of the digital print). In terms of extreme sport, it is the adrenalin rush rather than the “goal” of winning that forms the locus of engagement. In this sense, your analogy to Pollock is apt – as long as we keep in mind that what (for him) might well have been an expressive moment of futility was immediately romanticized by the art world itself (in essence ruining his failure).

Think of the opening paragraphs of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, for instance:

I am a sick man. ... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased. However, I know nothing at all about my disease, and do not know for certain what ails me. I don’t consult a doctor for it, and never have, though I have a respect for medicine and doctors. Besides, I am extremely superstitious, sufficiently so to respect medicine, anyway (I am well-educated enough not to be superstitious, but I am superstitious). No, I refuse to consult a doctor from spite.

In this instance too, you would be correct to suggest that it is the “gesture” that informs the spirit of the work. And no greater travesty can be done to a work such as this than to call it a “successful” piece of literature. It is tragic. It is despicable. And yet, despite these obvious transgressions, it is seductive and compelling and terrifying.

GRISON: I’m not sure that I agree with the following:

Here, the stakes of making art in a contemporary world fully materialize as a project not of making meaning, but rather as strategies for dealing with the fact that there is none. No merit in meaning. No merit in success.

First, I’m not sure that the purpose of art is ever to make meaning – let alone within contemporary practice. Second, what evidence can you provide that making art is limited to “strategies for dealing with the fact that there is [no meaning]”? Further, if your claim that there is both no merit in meaning and no meaning in either failure or success in particular, then why do you limit this philosophic or existential paradigm to the contemporary world. I think that to be a correct observation of the human condition, which is the condition of art-making, the condition you describe must be applicable to all times and places.

JARVIS: I’m not sure if the statement necessarily implies that the purpose of art is to make meaning. Rather it implies that the pursuit of meaning can be confused with an intent to make art. If the intent of the art practitioner is simply to formulate a stance on a particular topic, or to render a calculated form, then does that project need to be contemplated as art? Could the same action not be realized as an attempt to articulate a stance in the world, making certain that particular coordinates are understood. I think that what the statement implies is that a work’s interest as art can come from its not being concerned with taking a stance, yet still working within the systems of language and materiality that can also be used to articulate meaning.

Art-making as the human condition is certainly a way of looking at it. I would rather allow the human condition to be a participant in the realm of art, but not tethered to its existence synonymous to its production. If we can’t at least imagine that art has somewhere to go beyond the confidence of a generalized human awareness, then how can that awareness be stretched to challenge its own existence?

GRISON: This part of your statement is especially tricky to me:

And consequently, no merit in failure proper, but rather in those methodologies invoked for mobilizing failure to some other end. And these are ends that (again) cannot be properly intended, but require rather a nuanced representational presence in order to tease out the latent possibilities of their inherently revolutionary form.

What do you mean by “methodologies.” What do you mean by “invoked for mobilizing failure to some other end”? Does this not turn failure into ‘happy accident’? How does one invoke a methodology for a particular end without intention? What would a “representation presence” mean in this situation, and why would the resultant work of art (if that’s what you mean) encompass an “inherently revolutionary form”?

JARVIS: Methodologies refer to the actions that take place in the process and production of work that are not necessarily intended, such as a plan, but those events that can contribute to the work by simple association. Not to belabour the idea of collaboration, but I think this use of methodologies is a way to attribute participation to things unintended yet still within the realm of being consciously implied. The way that one’s tools affect the outcome of a work simply by way of being that specific make or model.

GRISON: Can we speak to the “Curatorial Method” section of your “Call for Submissions”? Specifically the following:

Following the Call for Submissions for DOWSING FOR FAILURE, we will select a short-list of artists whose work offers possible strategies for the mobilization of failure. From this short list, the final artists to be exhibited will be chosen through a documented series of dowsing experiments in which dowsing rods will be used to divine the qualitative relationally of the proposal to the theme of failure. The process (obviously) is flawed, but necessary in order to ensure that the exhibition resists the calculated attempt to successfully represent failure, instead gravitating towards the circumstantial and contingent assessment of proposals as representative of a certain indefinable, yet nevertheless present, relationship to the theme

What do you mean by work that “offers possible strategies for the mobilization of failure”? How will you arrive at the short-list of participants? If this will be a human-based selection process, I think you might have a problem with intellectual subjectivity, which is to say, using a selection process that is neither rational nor

objective. For any other kind of exhibition I would not be so concerned about this selection process, but I think it essential that the curators share the dilemma of representing failure as they select the art for the show.

HIEBERT: It perhaps will suffice to say for the moment that it is the process of dowsing that ensures our own implication in the curation of the exhibition. In exactly the opposite way to how we are not scientists, we are also not spiritualists. A purely impartial methodology would only lend itself to rhetorical presentation – in this you are absolutely correct. It is the subjective infection of the process that ensures we ourselves will be implicated in the curatorial method. Likewise, a purely partial method (in which we simply selected the works we thought did best justice to the concept) would be fundamentally flawed in that it would excerpt us from the concept we seek to present. To this effect, we have chosen a paradoxical method in which we both do and do not have voices in the process of selection – we have opted to compile a short-list to ensure the integrity of the exhibition, and we have opted for dowsing to ensure that our own curatorial integrity will be compromised.

GRISON: I have a problem with the dowsing component of your selection process. First, it is difficult to avoid polluting the dowsing process with the effects of the observer/participant. You would need to do the dowsing in a manner that eliminates the human element in the decision-making process. Will you be doing this? Second, dowsing will include the element of ‘happy accident’ in the selection process, and I would think you would want to avoid this element of chance. I’d be more interested in the dowsing aspect of the selection process if the exhibition were either a discourse on Dadaist philosophy, politics or practice, or was a kind of research project in pataphysics. However you don’t mention either Dada or Pataphysics.

JARVIS: If we had stated that we were going to put out a call for submissions and then simply use the dowsing process to choose a number of works without creating a shortlist then I think the critique would be fair. However, we collaborated with the dowsing process to arrive at a final selection of what works would be in the show. The use of dowsing as a device or process with which to collectively assess the relationality of the proposals to the call was a decision on our part, as we constructed a methodology for the project. In terms of Pataphysics, since we are not scientists and therefore not interested in the reproducibility of this process, an aspect of the science of imaginary solutions is an apt reference. I think that our collaboration with the dowsing process helps to steer the concept of the show around a perceptual corner, without having to re-create a pathway or state an art historical precedent.

GRISON: I guess the last part of your Curatorial Statement is, in effect, a ‘weasel clause’ or a loophole that allows you to escape the presumed seriousness of your initial proposal. I think you could drive a philosophic truck through this loophole.

Consequently, DOWSING FOR FAILURE should be taken literally as a descriptive title and evocative declaration of the premise for the exhibit. We neither condone nor dismiss the potential of dowsing proper as an allowable or legitimate activity. Rather, here we are interested in methods for accumulating works of a certain sort that will fit within a certain parameter of meaning; one that might be seen as evocative rather than didactic, and which consequently requires an invocative method of selection rather than an explicit assessment of categorizable appearances.

HIEBERT: If you had said “weasel claws” you might have been closer. Remember that a loophole is also a descriptor for a noose. We are “dowsing for failure” not setting ourselves up for a failure of dowsing. You might drive a truck through it, but how will that truck be affected in the process, and who will be its roadkill? That’s the part we find interesting.