

# Thinking in Hindsight

## Ted Hiebert and Doug Jarvis in conversation

Does a failure to fail result in success, or is it not perhaps the other way around? The merry-go-round of failure is less merry and more rounded, one might suggest... or, at the very least, a trajectory of going is initiated such that the compounded merry-rounded results in a proverbial guessing-game of questions not yet bested, jestingly presented as a model of potentially interested engagement. Such is the nuance of collected gestures brought together in a loose reflection of dowsing for failure – a self-cancelled alienation brought about through alien collaboration with that which never pretended to have an opinion in the matter. This thought reflected backwards. This thinking in hindsight. Or, in the words of Antonin Artaud: “this possibility of thinking backwards and suddenly insulting one’s own thoughts.”

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*Dowsing for Failure, as a concept, is a moment of constellation of ideas on failure and possibility that we have been discussing over the course of the last several years. We have come to no conclusions. Instead, we have found potentially interesting conceptual trajectories, out of which Dowsing for Failure, as an exhibition, has emerged. In this sense, Dowsing for Failure can be taken as an excerpted moment in a larger trajectory of inquiry, an excerpt whose simple fact of representation cannot help but undermine the absence of identifiable answers – a nebulae of uncertainty, so to speak, which here takes identifiable and even assessable form.*

*It is in no way our interest to attempt a thematic summary of the works represented by Dowsing for Failure. Such a project would, ultimately, be futile for the simple reason that we cannot claim to have selected the final works in the exhibition.*

*Instead, Dowsing for Failure is a collaboration on a number of levels. First, Dowsing for Failure is a collaboration among our own differing perspectives on art, failure, uncertainty and interpretation – perspectives which have not been brought to a position of consensus but rather more provocatively have been allowed to remain in tension and disagreement during the course of both our conversations and our shared engagement with the project itself. Second, Dowsing for Failure*

*is a collaboration between ourselves and the dowsing rods used to select the participating artists, an engagement which both taints and mocks the curatorial license and attributions that we have used to frame the exhibition. Finally, Dowsing for Failure is a collaboration with the artists themselves, each of whom has contributed works which expand, diffuse, emphasize and/or negate certain aspects of our own conceptual interests.*

*In this sense, Dowsing for Failure is neither properly speaking an exhibition nor an event – not a curatorial project but also not a project left to the whims of chance or fancy. Instead, it is an instance of what might be called calculated disparity – a stage upon which questions without answers are left to provoke their own forms of interest and dismissal, engagement and refusal, uncertainty and clarity, always under the persistent sign of works and ideas left unfinished but not abandoned. And it is here, under the sign of the historical non-finito that the task remains of formalizing some semblance of finitude to what has none.*

*To this end, we have opted to not compose a curatorial statement that might seem to render static that whose merit is precisely its refusal of staticity, to not summarize and abstract from the various faces of represented failure present in this exhibition but to rather engage, as we have all along, with the intricacies of the ideas themselves, without fear or hope of reaching a consensual manifesto on the nature of failure today. This might be called cowardice by some, laziness by others, irresponsible by those who would prefer to have us think the questions through on their behalf. Call it what you wish, and take care of what you wish for, for here the circular deferral of failure-come-represented cannot help but bestow on us all the imperative of interpretive error itself. Ultimately, our perspective is that it is of far less interest to conclude when we have in front of us such provocative instances for speculative questioning. What follows is one such period of questioning, rendered here as an instance of engagement, from our flawed and uncertain perspectives, as a curatorial dialogue on the interstices of interest provoked by Dowsing for Failure.*

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**JARVIS:** Well Ted, we have managed to get the show up and running and I have to admit that I like what we have pulled off. It has been an interesting process. Conceptualizing the *Dowsing for Failure* theme and fitting it with a call for submissions and selection process that we would find engaging was a challenge in itself.

I remember thinking before we put out the call for submissions that the project would probably take a bit of energy on our parts to get the concept across to others and get the general support of the gallery to put on the show. I didn't realize at the time that we would subject ourselves to such a rigorous engagement with the submissions, the dowsing process and the set-up of the gallery space. Not to mention the patience required to deal with failure as the basis for a gallery show. I think this is the part that has surprised me the most, the barrage of literal perceptions on failure and its dialectic counterpart, success.

**HIEBERT:** Indeed, I share your sentiment and confusion on the various interpretive failures that would literalize the exhibit while seeking to render success where there is none. This is likely the least interesting way to view the concept of failure, and equally uninteresting as a thematic summary of the show.

**JARVIS:** The double spin of using a divination method to seek the presence of failure from a pile of submissions seemed like a set-up to begin with. I must admit that to think about that aspect alone is enough to cause a perceptual tailspin. Chasing the tail of artists' intent in circles of proposal rhetoric was the first indication that what we were conjuring was not going to be straightforward. Personally, this was a comforting measure, what it meant for discussions with colleagues and peers was a little less clear.

**HIEBERT:** I think what is perhaps too easy to forget is that we have been implicated in the gesture of the exhibition itself by virtue of the dowsing process we employed. It is, of course, a cop-out on our part, but one that was both necessary and appropriate given the circumstances. To defer our own interpretive license to the dowsing rods means that we can't really take credit for the way in which the show has come together – something which is understandably frustrating to anyone who seeks a unified assertion or conceptual insistence on our part. To put words in the mouth of the dowsing rods seems to be an unacceptable personification, with the one caveat that we have of course already personified the process itself by virtue of our own engagement. The tailspin, as you call it, allows for many possible spins, all spiraling into a plummeting Icarian imagination.

### Gordon Lebrecht

**HIEBERT:** One might look, for instance, at Gordon Lebrecht's work as perhaps both the most dominant and the most invisible piece in the exhibition itself. At its simplest, one might posit a simple reversal of the standard "white cube" along the

lines perhaps of a black non-cube, a void that is also a voided space, or perhaps a virus for which there is no real vaccine.

**JARVIS:** His piece has an all-encompassing presence within the display space. It actually turned out to be an interesting conceptual and aesthetic basis for the show. His submission was pedantic with the proposal for the show written as one line amidst three pages of text. His piece has a significant presence; it can come across as a design element, which I like. It is easy to forget that Gordon's work was a proposal; the convention of painting gallery walls black can be easily dismissed. His flip of the white cube, as you say, was a significant element early on.

**HIEBERT:** Yes, the proposal is seemingly important here, since the piece was conceptual and unrealized, one might wonder how suddenly day turned into night in the gallery itself, the vampiric horizon for placement of all other works. I'm reminded in this context of Albert Camus' assertions about the screaming sounds of existential silence, the innocuous presence of absence which, even early on, seemed central to the work itself.

**JARVIS:** The black painted walls have provided a popular departure point for entry into the show. Lebredt's work helped steer collaboration with the other works as we figured out ways to present them without inhibiting his from existence. The 10'6" black band around the gallery was not interrupted by the other works, but augmented. Paradoxically, his piece is freed from compromise by the other works, helping to achieve the conundrum of the work being present and absent simultaneously.

**HIEBERT:** It is curious, in this sense, that he has titled his piece *In addition to...* when it is perhaps more explicitly a subtraction: a subtracted expectation or a voided addition of sorts. In this context it also seems relevant that Lebredt's work seems to be as much a frame for the other works as a piece in its own right – the doubled reversal you mention seems to suggest that the other works in the exhibition also take on the properties of frames for his. I like this double-speak, it loudly declares its own invisibility, which of course also has the doubled effect of rendering into perception the darkness that is, ultimately, imperceptible. It's as if the Modernist myth of minimal decision here takes negative form. In this sense one might even suggest that Lebredt's piece, rather than an addition or a decision, might be better seen as an indecision: the negative choice is perhaps interchangeable with the choosing of negative space.

## Anthony Schrag

**JARVIS:** Anthony is trying to balance on the ladder, and he falls. It is very easy to relate this physical activity to the success and failure of a balancing act. Does this have to be constituted as failure, or is he achieving what he intends, shifting his weight up and down the ladder with gravity, only to then do it again? Also, the fact that this is an edited video work does leave it open to a manipulative play of intentions. The artist not being able to balance on the ladder is maybe not the point, but with the narrative of try and try again he enters into a dialogue with the viewer. It makes me wonder what it seems like he is trying to do? Romantically, he may be trying to reach the sky, which is different from trying to balance successfully on a ladder. I am curious why he looks up towards the sky. What could he be looking at? This is where the work gets situated in a perspectival narrative.

**HIEBERT:** A comment was made at the opening of the exhibition that Schrag's work has a sort of Sisyphean overtone, which I think is worth exploring. I would be tempted to disagree with such a sentiment, for the simple reason that there is no real period of rest in the playfulness of the piece. His is not an eternally futile punishment, but, from my perspective, a game of deferral whose sole purpose is to ask that seemingly innocent question of "why not?" and then to proceed despite the seeming impossibility of realization. Is this ladder the "corporate ladder" or the escape hatch for those who might be bored with the day-to-day? In a sense I'm not sure that it's either, since the piece (despite its title: *Climbing to the Clouds*) seems actually to have more to do with creative ways of falling. Here, effort is deployed in a rather uniform and repetitive way in order to allow for exactly the possibilities of falling differently, at times backwards and in slow motion, but at others with potentially painful repercussions. This "risk," so to speak, seems to be that upon which both the triviality and the seriousness of the piece itself rest.

Of course, your comments on balance have much to say about all this as well, since it is the failure to balance that results in the dynamism of the projection. To be literal about it would be to say that effort itself is unbalancing – to try to achieve that which one knows one can is a boring and useless endeavor. Instead, Schrag has articulated that fateful side of living where only those achievements that are impractical or impossible are actually worth coveting. One must retain some semblance of playfulness in attempting the impossible.

## Benjamin Bellas

**JARVIS:** Benjamin's work was the only one within the context of the show that played with the logistics of presence, leaving the option open to be literally judged as failing to meet a certain criteria, namely, arriving on time.

**HIEBERT:** Yes, Bellas' work has a nice story attached to it, particularly since it emphasizes the triviality of literalizing failure that we find so distasteful. That his work did not arrive in time for the opening meant that we had to adapt, collaborate in the unlikely and undesirable after-effects of last-minute panic. This wasn't really a failure but a communicative oversight, for which Bellas himself bears no blame. Nevertheless, he rose to the challenge, creating a spontaneous object out of the events themselves. One would be a fool to call this a "happy accident" and yet there is something of interest in that which was neither happy nor accidental. In this sense, despite the fact that Bellas' work is the most material of any included in the show, it is also the most hypothetical, always implying the stories behind the objects themselves. And, inevitably, he could have made it all up. Was the water bottle really opened at 30,000 feet and, if so, why did the cabin pressure not serve to adapt the piece to its context? Is the hard drive really filled with resentment? Perhaps, but in either instance one ruins his work by over-literalizing the facts when it is instead the suspended literality of his objects that carries such poignancy.

**JARVIS:** His work also highlights the fact that decisions are made in the creation and presentation of work. We made choices throughout the installation of the show, stressing the fact that we were present agents who would not necessarily go away. This presence on our part is highlighted by our collaboration with the dowsing rods. How our involvement can be perceived reflects another way of holding question in play.

**HIEBERT:** I suppose that's true enough. The nuance, however, has to do with the immediacy of presence, and not simply with the choices made. That's what separates involvement from design, an aspect of Bellas' work that seems very explicit. And while not mutually exclusive in any real sense, these objects do not read as design elements, but as indebted to a personal history of sorts, even without considering his elaborate story-based titles. What each of his pieces has in common is that they are used objects, objects that declare their own history of use, misuse or intervention. In a way one might even suggest that the stories distract from this immediacy of the object, each of which seems to have its own story that has little to do with the title given to it. There is a play in these works which is not so much about humanizing the inanimate as it is about dehumanizing

personal narrative in favour of the immediacy – one might even say the novelty – of use.

## June Pak

**JARVIS:** June's video piece, compared to the other works in the show, seems to be the most pre-meditated in its construction. Watching the video makes me wonder whether she scripted the sequence beforehand or if she filmed each segment and then found a lucky poetic fit. I suppose it doesn't matter how the video was created, however it does make me curious of her creative process. How does the way that she approaches her work suggest a concept being realized, or a process being explored?

**HIEBERT:** It really could go either way, couldn't it? Personally, I prefer to read this work as exploratory rather than illustrative, teasing out possible modes of self-interaction and self-intervention. Given the calculated nature of the video, one might almost say that any look at oneself must somehow participate in a dialogue of equal contrivance. This pre-meditation that you note might well be some sort of psychological fail-safe, allowing for the external presentation of what amounts to an internal dialogue. What seems to carry this piece are those moments where the two Junes exchange glances, noticing or accusing the self-to-self interference that might be called characteristic of contemporary living.

**JARVIS:** Yes, the character(s) within this piece highlight a pattern among the different works in the show: the artists presenting themselves in their work. June's video renders a tension between the characters of her self. I am curious how the notion of tension becomes evident in different works in the show. Do you think that tension is an inherent ingredient for notions of failure?

**HIEBERT:** I agree that the works in the show have a common theme of tension, of one sort or another, but I'd also reiterate that these tensions do not take the same forms across the works of different artists. With Pak's work, I think that while the characters are themselves in tension, the larger trajectory of the piece suggests that, in fact, it is the duality of the figures that is entered into tension with our presuppositions that individuals have only one personality, one character, one body. I don't read this piece as metaphorical. Instead I read it the same way I read my own face in the mirror each morning – a moment of articulated polyphony that, when divided, always suggests a third body. Despite the fact that this piece is titled *Double* it seems there is a definite trinity in play, a meta-script of one sort or

another where it is precisely the lived frustration of a multiple self that emerges as the suggestion that we are not perhaps as unified as we might think.

**JARVIS:** The triangulation of characters, the suggestion of a third body, references aspects of our own involvement in collaboration with the dowsing process. The process that you and I both engaged allows the agency of the dowsing rods to come into play. The notion that we cannot claim full responsibility for the final selection of artists is supported as much by the personification of a dowsing collaborator as it is by the doubt levelled towards the processes of divination.

### Daniel Olson

**JARVIS:** I overheard a comment at the opening that Daniel's video was considered a "one liner." Aside from being a funny comment on this piece, it made me think about the levels of interpretation that can be projected back onto the works in the show. It is funny how the horizontality of the figure, as well as its stillness, can elicit such minimal interpretation. From a certain perspective one could say that it is perhaps the most provocative image in the show: an adult male lying prostrate with the suggested intention of achieving an erection. What I like to imagine is that this piece is a smokescreen for a 55 minute tantric video in which the artist is really not very interested in what the viewer thinks he is doing. He is, perhaps, merely exploring a myriad of personal manifestation exercises, under the auspices of a façade of creative production.

**HIEBERT:** Indeed, as with many of the works in this exhibition, Olson's piece relies on the faith of the viewer to uphold the status of the represented event. Interestingly, his piece also resists giving the viewer enough information to know exactly what is happening. The meditative connotations are, in this context, explicit in the piece itself. That one could appear as meditating when one is actually trying to get an erection has much to say about the taboos and interpretive expectations brought to the work by the viewer. This is not made more clear, but rather more ambiguous by the title, *Immanence* which seems to refer not to a desired objective, but rather to the very process itself. The title and the stated activity are, in this sense, in opposition with one another. How, in other words, does one fail at immanence?

I also quite like the cross-overs between Olson's "failed" phallus and other such devices in the exhibit. You and I have talked about the relation between Olson's work and Schrag's, wherein the phallus takes on quite a different connotation, and with Pak's piece as well. Interestingly, this same line of thought could be levelled

back at us too, through the phallic interventions of the dowsing rods.

**JARVIS:** Yes, I think the phallus is funny. It is kind of a stupid reference, but that is what makes me laugh. We have not put up a sign suggesting that obvious referents are wrong, just that they are not the only things going on. In terms of the dowsing rods as a flaccid illustration of our own ability to participate in the selection process, well it's a rather rhetorical observation, isn't it?

However, Daniel's *Attempt Number 3* is not so obvious. Meditation, transcendence, sunning at a nudist colony? He was specific about situating the projection in the downward perceptual zone of the viewer in the gallery space. The duration of the work also helps the viewer to forget what he is trying to do. He has constructed a situation that allows for some interesting double guessing as to who is watching whom. This aspect helps to highlight an interaction between the works in the show and the audience.

### Mike Paget

**HIEBERT:** Paget's work, I think, reiterates in new key many of the thoughts we've been discussing about works by Olson, Schrag and Pak. Here, it is not the personal interaction of the artist that is front and central, but the interaction between the viewers and the works. One might, for instance, rename *Acid Spill* as "failed attempt number n," in a sort of combination of Olson's *Failed Attempt* and Lebrecht's *6 + n elements*. The running total of "n" would have much to say about the extent to which viewers are willing to interact with the frustration of playing an always losing game. How many times can one jump out of a plane without a parachute? How many times might one run away from a tidal wave of acid? This is not unlike the simple process of living – how many times must one get up in the morning, for instance – but is accentuated in this context by reinforcing the banality and absurdity of allowable behaviors.

**JARVIS:** Mike's video game consoles incorporate hand-operated devices to maneuver and manipulate what is going on. Obviously they are interactive and, one could say, require or inspire the viewer to participate. But you are right in that they do put the control of futility in the hands of the audience. I enjoyed finding the loophole in the one game; to cheat death, to stay alive for me both foiled the piece and allowed me to fool myself with an attitude of conquest – short-lived of course. It sets up the idea that this work fails to achieve immediate demise. You still die, it's just not as dramatic a death. You have to fade out – a more humble demise.

These works also involve a literal tactility, along with Benjamin's teddy bear, which speaks when held. They need to be touched. Does this suggest an ergonomics of art and audience interaction?

**HIEBERT:** If we could use the term "anti-ergonomics" I think you might be onto something here. Instead of the adaptive architecture that facilitates easy living, Paget's work does the opposite. These consoles are, of course, familiar objects to most of us – objects which we already know how to interact with. Except, in this instance, the conceptual ergonomics of the games frustrate our expectations. In other words, it's not so much the viewer that plays these games, but the games that explicitly play those people who interact with them. I find myself in an odd place interacting with these games, unsure of whether I am angry at not being allowed to win or fascinated by the duration – however short – of the engagement itself. If one looks for meaning in this work, one will find nothing. If one, on the other hand, simply wants to play, there are potentially hours of obsessive entertainment awaiting to be engaged with. The trick is, of course, that one is always playing on the terms of the game itself. The interactivity is a hoax, but the interaction isn't. It's a pleasant paradox.

### Nate Larson

**JARVIS:** During the exhibition I had the opportunity to talk with my mother about Nate's work. We discussed how individuals following the process might perceive related events at every turn, affirming their belief and highlighting their relationship to the notion of faith. It is also playing with a religious marketing scam, one that could be considered false from the start. However it does take into account how each individual negotiates a belief system. Whether imagination, contradiction, or just the notion of meaning itself, that Nate has chosen this device as inspiration for his work does play with the suspension of belief and its familiarity in contemporary life. I am curious if the majority of people who engage in these scams aren't also hoping for a bit of amusement as much as being enveloped in the divination and engagement of ritual.

**HIEBERT:** You might be right, but I'm sure we could never admit to it. What I like about Larson's work is that it bears a very strong affinity to our own curatorial process. It becomes difficult to say whether his engagement is sincere or contrived – all that one can say with conviction is that his belief was sufficient to go through with making the work. Between the very calculated aesthetics of presentation

and the highlighting of those important aspects of the *Miracle Pennies* instruction manual, Larson has polarized the debate such that it could go either way. In this context, we perhaps do an injustice to the work if we read it as an insincere commentary on an already dubious ritual. Instead, I'm tempted to argue for a sort of idealist cynicism that holds itself firmly to the process required while never explicitly believing in the desired outcome. In this way, while it may not be a disbelief proper that is suspended in its contemplation, it is at the very least a sincere performance that is contemplated despite the question of belief or doubt.

**JARVIS:** Engagement within the work does give the interpretive process something to hang onto. Maybe we can assume that the intent of the marketer is a perspective that is perhaps as calculated as the one Nate deploys in the construction of this work. The sincerity of Nate's attempt, the way that he executes the work with an attention to detail as prescribed by the instructions, does direct the question back towards the viewer. The marketer is already convicted of playing a trick, a marketing scam. Nate's work presents a diagram of the process, a documentation of how one may go about filling out the form letter. The audience is left to query the cause and effect of whether this process is going to achieve something beyond the literal observation of deception and obedience. It is curious how this brings us back to our involvement with the show.

## Concluding Remarks

**JARVIS:** Bringing all of these artists work together for this show has brought up some interesting curiosities for me: the notion of failure as the theme for an art show as well as how a theme participates amongst all of the variables involved.

I recognize that our intent was not to put together a survey show displaying our specific take on failure. However, I am caught in the non-intent of interacting with the notion of failure as a dynamic within creative production and interpretive observation. As we have discussed, it has been interesting to see how and where different literalizations rear their heads, and where they go from there. Do they sit static, holding ground for all they are worth? Or, do they emerge into perception and continue with the flow of interpretive participation and poetic realization? For me, failure has become just another part of the overall configuration of the show, another participant in a series of moments, instances without intent, experiences without end. I suppose one question has become of interest to me beyond others and that is, how does the show situate the viewer in the question of failure?

The works that ended up being in the show are vague enough to not give a clear declaration on the theme and, as we have discussed, we were intent on this. That being said, there seemed to be an initial tendency of viewers to want to calculate the relationship between the works, their success, and their appropriateness to the theme. Ok, that's fair. I wouldn't want to impose restrictions on the viewer any more than we wanted to avoid summarizing failure as a theme.

What has made a significant impact on me is that things can be held at bay, in relationship to one another without a contrived meaning to be shared by the context and situation that they are suspended in. Through a series of different discussions ranging from ridiculous rants on the protrusion of artifice, to the absurd declaration that there is no meaning in life, we have woven a terrain of points and projects that have managed to stay in play. This says as much about the popularity of failure in contemporary society as it does about the interface of presentation and observation within an art context. This process has had its moments and I am happy to have been a participant in some of them.

**HIEBERT:** All things considered, I can say that I am pleased with the way this exhibition has come together. As a whole, I'm not sure that there is any overarching unification of concept in play, which is good since we sort of wanted to avoid that kind of thing. Instead, what I find interesting is the way in which the exhibition functions as a whole, with each artist's work entered into a dialogue of some sort with those around them. That the works all hold their own does not mean that there isn't a conversation taking place, one that – from my perspective – reiterates many possible ways of looking at, considering and engaging with ideas that might be outlandish, might be destined to fail, but which nevertheless provide both an entertaining articulation of self-reflexive representation on the part of the artists, and a compelling survey of possible trajectories of failure in the contemporary world of art.

In the end, the exhibition begins and ends with darkness – the darkness of *In addition to...* but also the darkness of uncertainty, of indecision, of contemplation and speculation, of questions without answers or those with many possible ways of looking. The framing of the exhibition is, as the framing of life, a place where possibilities, fantasies and nightmares roam and proliferate... dowsing, in the end, for failure.