'A Spectral Building Diamonds Itself':
Failure as a Generative Site for Contemporary Art Practice

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'Failure' is subjective, slippery, risky and self-conscious and - despite its place as a preoccupation of twentieth century art discourse - it is difficult to provide a precise definition of failure in relation to contemporary art practice. My doctoral research attempts to map contemporary notions of failure in order to investigate its generative potential as a site of unrecognised creativity. It has been important to speculate on what failure might be in relation to art practice now and to ask, 'What constitutes a failed work?' Whilst acknowledging that a failure to define failure might be problematic, my theoretical research along with experimentation in the studio has allowed for an investigation of some lesser-known territories: those that have been on the periphery of previous discussions in relation to failure. This paper deals with one aspect of failure that I am currently investigating, specifically, failure in the context of works that literally fail to materialise and are never brought to fruition. What is the creative significance of works and ideas that are unbuilt and/or unfulfilled? What is their potential to act as triggers or agents for irregular inquiries? And what is the relevance of the evidence or traces - if any - of unrealised artworks?

In this paper, I will draw on George Bataille's theories on *l'informe* or formless in order to discuss and problematise the generative potential of unbuilt artworks. I will also discuss the German architect Hermann Finsterlin, along with the curatorial project, *Unbuilt Roads: 107 Unrealized Projects* by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Guy Tortosa. These examples extend the possibility for failure to act as a liminal zone in which inadequacy or weakness acts as an enabling device by reframing creative value, and in particular 'use-value' in relation to artworks and perhaps more importantly to art practices.

The failure of previously held certainties to hold up under new political and social environments along with the perceived failure of modernism and the failure of the material object have been inherent to discussions surrounding twentieth century art discourse. The critic Clement Greenberg (1968) has discussed failure in relation to a lack of artistic mastery where failure is aligned to the viewer's perception of aesthetic weakness. In the artworks of the 1970's, Christy Lange (2005) suggests 'failure itself is staged and systematically documented' in opposition to formalist ideals. Acts of futility, repetition and meaningless, were used by Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci and others, as a post-object conceptual tool that challenged the modernist view of art and the relevance of the art object itself.

More recently, failure has been discussed in terms of material and formal lowliness, excrement and waste, by Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois utilising Georges Bataille's theories on formless to locate operations that go 'against the grain' of modernism (Bois & Krauss, 1997:16). As illustrated by his *Critical Dictionary* published in the surrealist magazine *Documents* in 1929, Bataille (1995) thought it was more useful to provide some idea of the task that a word designated rather than its precise meaning. He did not define 'formless', rather suggesting it was 'a term that serves to bring things down in the world' (Bataille, 1985:31). In *Formless: A User's Guide*, Krauss and Bois (1997:15) resist providing a specific definition for formless, interpreting it as an operation, a pivotal insight that informs their discussion of modernist artworks in terms of base materialism, horizontality, entropy, and pulsation. Terms they describe as 'porous', and that are used to destabilise traditional art historical classifications such as style, theme, chronology, and oeuvre in order to declare them 'null and void' (Bois & Krauss, 1997:21 & 16). Krauss and Bois understood formless 'as a term allowing one to operate a declassification in the double sense of lowering and of taxonomic order' (Bois & Krauss, 1997:18). Base materialism, for example, can be seen as declassifying the *ideal* form of matter.

Paul Hegarty, in his review *Formal Insistence,* calls on Bois and Krauss to broaden the examples of formless cited in their text by the inclusion of a section on failure, stating that:

> Given that a 'base material' artwork is a play of failures, we should look for what fails to come to form or formlessness – then we might be on to where the formless might (not) be in relation to art'. (Hegarty, 2003)

He also concludes that 'for something to stay outside the world of form requires that an object remain a process, disabling the imposition of form at all stages' (Hegarty, 2003). He goes on to suggest that this is impossible but asserts, 'that is its interest: the attempt can only ever fail, and this failing is formless/informe'. In accordance with Bataille's theory of formless as an operation for declassification, artworks that have failed to materialise or remain unbuilt may contain a generative function in that their absence or exclusion from homogenised systems - whether they are political, economic, or aesthetic - calls attention to the restriction or limitations of those very processes.

Unbuilt

This notion of failure, in terms of the unmade work or the 'unbuilt', has not been widely addressed within visual arts but has come into focus over the past ten years through the projects of writer and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. When the online journal *Edge* asked 'What is today's most important unreported story?' Obrist's emphatic answer was 'the unrealised project'. In his online entry he suggests the importance of activating 'certain roads not taken' in the form of the unrealised project, in particular 'forgotten projects, misunderstood projects, lost projects…poetic-utopian dream constructs, unrealisable projects, partially realized projects, censored projects and so on' (Obrist, 2000).

In 1997, Obrist along with the curator Guy Tortosa initiated a project where questionnaires were sent to over one hundred artists, inviting them to describe a specific failed or unbuilt project from their practice. The artists were encouraged to provide reasons as to why the work was never realised, as well as any drawings or other documents relevant to the project. The resultant replies were compiled and published as one document entitled *Unbuilt Roads: 107 Unrealized Projects*. Obrist and Tortosa observe that such a publication had never been produced before, stating in their introductory essay that:

> Unlike unrealised architectural models and projects submitted for competitions, which are frequently published, endeavours in the visual art worlds that are planned but not carried out ordinarily remain unnoticed or little known. (Obrist & Tortosa, 1997)

According to the artists cited in their text, works were not realised either because they were 'public commissions not fulfilled for political, technical or economic reasons' or because they were 'desk-drawer projects developed by the artists on their own without reference to a particular commission'. Obrist and Tortosa also note that 'many of these planned undertakings were either forgotten or rejected by the artists themselves'.

Whilst documentation and models can be quite substantial for major art commissions, they are - along with the more arbitrary notes and sketches for minor projects - never seen or exhibited. Speculating on the marginalised nature of this type of material, Zsuzsanna Gahse notes when writing on the work of the Swiss artist, Ariane Epars:

> They missed their cue and unlike the executed exhibitions they did not even make a brief appearance. They were never published. They have nothing to do with the public, so they have literally become *anecdotes*. But anecdotes also leave a trail. (Gahse, 1998:31)

The content of *Unbuilt Roads* is unique in that it brings together unknown artistic ideas as written on the questionnaire forms, but perhaps more importantly it includes letters, plans, sketches, faxes and notes, as well as photographs of propositional models or places. These traces, scraps, and detritus, act as by-products or evidence of a failed effort, existing as a kind of excretory record for the production that was never carried out. If as Linda Carroli asserts in her essay *Paying for the Privilege* that 'artistic products or artworks exist in the realm of 'commodity' within markets' it is interesting to speculate on the importance of this material in relation to the late capitalist emphasis on securing economic-value in relation to art (Carroli, 2000:1). As posited by Bois and Krauss, Bataille also believed that:

> Meaning systems… are devoted to the rationalisation of social or conceptual space, to the process of homogenisation, in order to support the orderly fabrication, consumption, and conservation of products. (Bois & Krauss, 1987:245-246)

In this light, Obrist and Tortosa's project is profound in that it draws attention to the role of artworks that do not fulfil these criteria that fail to materialise and thereby fail to become a 'product'. These failed projects along with their residual documentation could be then be read as scatological or formless as defined by George Bataille (1985:31) where he suggests that what formless designates 'has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm'. Krauss and Bois have described how for Bataille formless is closely aligned to heterogeneity in that it 'designates from the outset what is excluded by idealism' for example 'by the ego, capitalism, organised religion and so on' asserting that heterology itself signals rejection (Krauss & Bois, 1987:53).

Bois and Krauss (1987:245) also suggest that 'it is the inevitable waste of the meaning system, the stuff that is no longer recyclable by the great processes of assimilation' that Bataille wants to explore through his own heterological procedure. Bataille (1985:97) elaborates on the importance of this material in *The Use-value of D.A.F. de Sade*, claiming, 'the intellectual process automatically limits itself, by producing of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogenous excremental element'. For Bataille, heterology is 'the science of what is completely other' and he speaks of the specific importance of its scatological function as an operation when he states that 'excretion presents itself as the result of heterogeneity, and can move in the direction of even greater heterogeneity, liberating impulses whose ambivalence is more and more pronounced' (Bataille, 1985:102, 95). In *Against Architecture*, Denis Hollier (1989:128) suggests a more defined role stating that the scatological 'ignores the fact of representation making possible the distinction between use values and exchange values'. It becomes apparent that rather than sublimating or repressing models of art production, failure (in terms of artworks that are unrealised) could act in an operational sense through determinedly revealing creative ideas previously avoided or excluded, or simply not valued by homogenous systems of meaning.

Unknown

In the exhibition of *Unknown Architects* (Arbeitsrat für Kunst) held in Berlin in 1919, Walter Gropius chose to include the architectural drawings of the untrained German architect Hermann Finsterlin. (Sharp, 1966:97) The carefully illustrated designs - proposing wildly distorted structures inspired by weathered forms the designer had witnessed in nature - would have shocked and amused the majority of his peers with the improbability of their construction. Absurd, irrational and technologically challenging if not impossible, Finsterlin's proposals were revolutionary in their desire for a previously unimagined non-Euclidean form of architecture. Perpendicular angles were to be removed, creating spacious 'cells' enveloped by an outer skin in which Finsterlin claimed 'you will not only feel that you are an inhabitant of a fairy-tale crystallic gland but also a privileged inhabitant of a giant organism' (Finsterlin cited in Sharp, 1966:98). Prolific and diversely creative, Finsterlin typified the theoretically-driven avant-garde artist, producing paintings, poems, essays, models and toys as well as more than 500 watercolours and ink sketches of his radical, organic designs (Pehnt, 1973:96).

Although Gropius and others initially supported his ideas, financial and engineering constraints would determine that Finsterlin's structures could not be built and - exemplifying the perceived failure of avant-garde idealism - he could claim to be an architect on paper only. Despite the fact that none of his buildings were ever erected Finsterlin's methodologies can be seen as an exemplar of the visionary and generative potential of unrealised projects, in that his refusal to compromise freedom of vision in the face of technological and conventional failure demonstrates a willingness to foster the broadest possibilities for creative outcomes.

Wolfgang Pehnt (1973:98) writing on Finsterlin's architectural theories affirms 'Finsterlin had no feeling for the reality of building, nor did he wish to cultivate one for fear of losing his freedom of vision'. Finsterlin understood the dynamic possibility of the creative process, seeing it as an encompassing, total activity not dependant on notions of success or failure. He states in his essay *Der achte Tag* (The Eighth Day) written in 1920, 'building is everything, love, procreation, struggle, movement, suffering, parent and child and the holiest symbol of all that is holy' (Finsterlin cited in Sharp, 1966:104). Further-on he uses the multifaceted surfaces of a cut diamond as an almost ecstatic metaphor for the generative potential of the creative vision even in its unrealised or ghostly state. Emotively he states, 'where the air is thinnest and shame melts before the purifying glance of the sun, a spectral building diamonds itself' (Ibid). I have chosen to borrow this poetic phrase for the title of this paper.

Although his work remained obscure for many years, interest in Finsterlin's visionary forms and philosophies was revived during the 1960's, including a Berlin retrospective of his drawings, paintings and models in 1962 (Sharp, 1966:106). Minimised or excluded from historical investigations, Finsterlin's profound influence on modernist and contemporary architecture is only beginning to be acknowledged. Victoria Newhouse (1998:248), in her book *Towards a New Museum,* notes that Frank Gehry's designs for the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao have Finsterlin's shapes as their formal basis and he is credited by Newhouse (1998:119, 248), Franz Shulze (2000:94), Anthony Vidler (2001) and others, to have directly influenced the architectural work of Jøen Utzon, Frank Gehry, Philip Johnson and Frank Stella. The strange organic forms originally depicted in Finsterlin's drawings can be seen to have eventually materialised in the iconic structures of the Sydney Opera House, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, and the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas.

Finsterlin's methodologies and resultant obscurity illuminates particular kinds of tensions and contradictions that exist between idealised notions of creative freedom and the conditions in which creative ideas are received and validated. It is precisely the impossibility of his creative vision, which dislocates our sense of the known, requiring us to critically redefine the parameters for existing paradigms. His approach is unique in that in some ways it can be seen as a model for the triumph of failure as his designs confirm the importance of peripheral models, those not so easily assimilated or commoditized, to act as generators for a more multi-faceted or (diamond-like) point of view. In particular, his work draws attention to the importance of the material traces of unbuilt or failed projects to continue to act as potent and ongoing triggers for creativity.

In conclusion, the examples I have cited in this paper: Obrist's and Tortosa's curatorial focus on unrealised projects along with the renewed interest in the methodologies of Finsterlin, demonstrate the significance of failure as a site of creative importance in relation to contemporary art practice. It can be seen that Finsterlin's, as well as Obrist and Tortosa's promotion of art practice as hypothesis is integral to opening the way for failed or propositional works to act as speculative tools, acknowledging that the use-value - as opposed to economic value - of art practice is multifariously open-ended.

It could be suggested that failure in the form of the unrealised work could act as a process or an operation in its generative capacity, as Krauss and Bois have suggested in Bataille's notion of formless. Specifically, in its capacity to contest values imposed onto artworks and art practice under homogeneous meaning systems, and perhaps crucially for contemporary artists, under the increasingly stringent climate provided by economic rationalism. Richard Grayson affirms this critical point in his curatorial essay for the *2002 Biennale of Sydney: (the world may be fantastic)*, where he states that visionary artworks:

> Often seem recalcitrant to 'use value'…they are not necessarily overtly political, analytical or able to be articulated in terms of received code or discourse, be those discourses social or aesthetic. But I would suggest that *because* they do not fit comfortably within these received, attenuated discourses, ironically, this is where their 'usefulness' lies.
> (Grayson, 2002:14)

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