

Success and Failure in Twentieth-Century Painting

James Elkins

Note to readers: This is a draft Table of Contents for a work in progress. It was originally posted on the author's website, www.jameselkins.com.

Blank characters and apparently boldface, bitmapped characters appear in some places because the original document has unusual diacritics that can only be reproduced using Times CE, TransRoman and PriamojProp.

The names of artists appear here for my own reference; they will not appear in the Table of Contents of the completed book. The names in any given paragraph are in no special order, and some may seem to be out of place, because the context is missing.

Some chapter titles are followed by underlined annotations in parentheses: those are publishers and places where excerpts from the book have been, or may be, published. For current information please email me.

Please send all comments to jelkins@artic.edu.

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Detchko Uzunov.— *Stanislav Pamukshiev.*— *Daniel Buren.*

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Prévost.— *Bernard Buffet.*— *Kako.*— *Daniel Jaugey.*— *Manuel Hernández Mompó.*— *Guy Demun.*— *Lucio Ranucci.*— *Yuri Zwetaev.*— *Maxime Boerie.*— *Claude Verlinde.*— *Graciela Rodo Boulanger.*— *Vaubourgoin.*— *Psyko Tryklo.*— *Thomas Woodruff.*— *Andrew Vicari.*

Nostalgic sweetness -----

Guillermo Conte.— *Boris Zaborov.*— *Loic Le Goumellec.*— *Anne Lan.*— *Thomas Kinkade.*— *Christian Lassen.*— *Nicolae Tonitza.*— *Karel Černý.*

Sour sweetness, bitter sweetness -----

Jan Peter Tripp.— *Ernst Schroeder.*— *Ross Bleckner.*— *Domingo Barreres.*— *David Croll.*— *Rosalyn Schwartz.*

15 Being Academic, Alexandrian, Mannerist, Precious, and Ivory-Tower -----

Tibor Csernus.— *Roman Zaslouov.*— *Edwin Dickinson.*— *John Currin.*— *Donald Sultan.*— *Ross Bleckner.*— *Guy Johnson.*— *Leonid Pinchevsky.*— *Louis Beroud.*— *Jared French.*— *Derek Root.*— *David MacWilliam.*— *Ken Singer.*— *Jeremy Stanbridge.*— *Michael Leonard.*— *James Elkins.*— *Stephen Douglas.*— *Mario Toral.*— *Peter Hart.*

Followers of Cornell -----

Zdeněk Ryker.— *Tasha Ostrander.*— *Kurt Schitters.*— *Marc Prialnic.*— *Yuri Kuper.*— *Ion Bitzan.*— *Ion Stendl.*— *Michael Nesázal.*— *Petru Lucaci.*— *Marc Prialnic.*

Postmodern trompe l'oeil -----

Bernard Scholl.— *Michael Gregory.*— *Yuri Kuper.*— *Georges Porcel.*— *Georges Vaillart.*— *Linda Prince.*— *Monique Mongeau.*— *Robert Helm.*— *Alexis Rockman.*— *Julio Galán, Manuel Ocampo and Juliao Sarmiento.*— *Théodore Raysse.*— *Peter Klasen.*— *Kim Tschang Yeul.*— *Guy-Christian Canat.*— *Arturo Duclos.*— *Juan González.*— *Donald Roller-Wilson.*— *Conor Walton.*— *Guy Diehl.*— *Martha Meyer Erlebacher.*— *Al Proom.*— *David Ligare.*— *C. Daniel Massad.*— *Nelson Shanks.*

Derrida's Favorite Painters -----

Adam Lowe.— *Julius Baltazar.*— *Louis le Brocquy.*— *Bram van Velde.*— *Valerio Adami.*— *Gérard Titus-Carmel.*— *Mark Tansey.*— *Jacques Monory.*

Conceptual Art as Failed Painting -----

Gaylen Gerber.— *Péri László.*— *Marcel Iancu.*— *El Lissitzky.*— *Joseph Kosuth.*— *On Kawara.*— *Stuart Arends.*— *Bernard Venet.*— *John Baldessari.*— *Hans-Albert Walter.*— *Roman Opalka.*— *Ed Ruscha.*— *Daniel*

Dezeuze.— Louis Cane.— Bertrand Poullard.— John Murphy.— Albert Tucker.— Ken Aptekar.—Marthe Wéry.— Luchezar Boyadjiev.

Conclusion: The Temptations of the Delicate ----- --

Erling Sjøvold.— Alan Feltus.— Pat Andrea.— William Bailey.— Kenneth Evett.— David Klamen.— Giorgio Morandi.— Vieri Vagnetti.

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Bernard Buffet.— George Grosz.— Marc Chagall.— Gino Severini.— Tamara de Lempicka.— Otakar Kubín.— Emil Filla.— Marcel Janco.— André Derain.— Maurice Vlaminck.— Georges Roualt.— Raoul Dufy.— Emil Nolde.— Karl Schmidt-Rottluff.— Giorgio de Chirico.— Roberto Matta.— Angel Botello.— Herbert Boeckl.

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Aleksander Zyw.— Günter Tuzina.— Karl Gunschmann.

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Günter Tuzina.— Ràfols Casamanda.— Nicolas de Staël.— Karl Gunschmann.— Luc Tuymans.— Frank Born.— Georgia Hayes.— Leda Catuna.

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Walter Gutbrod.— Henri Michaux.— Pierre Edouard.— Mondrian.— Genko Genkov.— Mayo.— Alan Wolton.— Numa Donzé.

Inability to find a subject ----- --

Avigdor Arikha.— Dezső Váli.— Attila Szűcs.— Carl Timmer.—

Inability to pay attention ----- --

Alberto Reguera.— Jerome Mesnager.— Hermann Kirchner.— Xaver Fuhr.— Nicolas Roméo.—Gabriele Mucchi.

Enough ----- --

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Conclusions

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Preface

In the winter of 1998, thinking of the third millennium, I was teaching a course called “Failure in Twentieth-Century Art.” The idea was, I hoped, fairly simple: I meant to tot up some of the century’s less successful artworks, to see what counted as failure.

The class was in trouble almost the moment it began. Some students resisted judging artworks altogether. They said that everyone has a different perspective on art, so that each failure is a relative failure: a failure in someone’s eyes but not in everyone’s. Each context is different, they said, and there are as many purposes as there are artists. By consensus they decided there can be no consensus about good or bad art, and they proposed that canons of success or failure are only made by academics and neo-conservatives. They claimed pluralism and postmodernism had opened the way to an unlimited field of art making, where each work has its own voice. Given the conceptual disarray of late twentieth-century art, and the number of competing schools and styles, I was not inclined to argue against them: there certainly seemed to be an unmanageable number of activities that went by the name of art.

In that fashion the students conspired to undermine the course by avoiding judgment altogether. Yet there was something perverse, even bewildering, in the way they applied their doctrine. It turned out that even when they were suspending judgment, the students knew instantly when a work was bad. During the semester we had some protracted if inconclusive discussions about Ad Reinhardt and Hans Hoffmann, but when I showed lesser-known artists the results were nearly unanimous: everyone knew failure when they saw it. The students were out of the habit of judging openly, and they couldn’t always say *why* they disliked a given artwork, but they judged rapidly and with confidence. Despite the fact that the class included a wide range of

students—figurative painters, performance artists, installation artist, a printmaker, several photographers, a video artist—they rarely disagreed. Even the graduate students, who were versed in the nonjudgmental approaches of art history, knew what they liked the moment they saw it. As a whole the students condemned work effortlessly and sometimes savagely: and almost in the same breath they denied they could ever compare one artwork to another and say which one was better.

Some said there was no such thing as failure because “failed” paintings are entertaining. The students often enjoyed work they judged as unsuccessful. They laughed at sentimental and naïve paintings, and they found some minor painters very funny because they were *so* bad. The students said they really liked such work, and one told me her pleasure proved that there is no such thing as genuinely bad art or actual failure. We really love this stuff, another said. I suggested they were laughing *at* the art, and not with it, and that the difference might be crucial. Even so, most of the students refused to acknowledge that was a problem: what’s the difference, one said, between giggling with delight at a painting and giggling because the painting is delightfully silly? If someone paints a bad landscape painting, does it matter if we like it because it’s bad, and the painter liked it because he thought it was good? The idea seemed to be that even the most ridiculously inadequate artwork, the kind that most obviously fails, is well served by someone who takes pleasure in its ridiculous earnestness. No matter how I tried, that first semester I couldn’t get the students to acknowledge that they were judging art.

That was the first of two strange situations that provoked this book. The second emerged more slowly, as I became aware of the great mass of painting that has never made it into academic discussion. The first year I taught “Failure in Twentieth-Century Art” there was hardly enough time to laugh at all the appalling art that I found, in abundance, in every local gallery and museum storage area. The Ryerson and Burnham Library at the Art Institute in Chicago, which is one of the largest art libraries in the United States, is a treasure house of bad art: in the alphabetical section on American modernism, between the books on Pollock and the books on Reinhardt there are five feet of exhibition catalogues and monographs on less well-known American artists, most every one

failed in one sense or another. After Pollock comes, appropriately, a book on Henry Varnum Poor, and then Fairfield Porter, Edward Henry Potthast, Richard Pousette-Dart, Audrey Preissler (“An American Humanist Artist of Today,” according to the book’s subtitle—her *Survivors of the Mayflower* are chubby babyish Pilgrims, naked except for tricorn hats), Maurice Brazil Prendergast, Harvey Quaytman, Walter Quirt—and that is still in the letter Q, not even in the bulky R’s, and only in American painters, and only those who have books and not just brochures. The infinity was absolutely daunting. The first year I taught the course I tried reaching into the stacks with my eyes closed, picking books at random. Most lurches at the bookshelves yielded new examples of failed art. That year I went to the library before class each week, and in a few minutes I had too many books to carry and too many judgments to count.

In the year or so after that first course, the unseen and unstudied production of the twentieth century continued to strike me, with increasing force. One day in 1999 I spent a half-hour in the Louvre bookstore, looking over the latest offerings on twentieth-century painting. When I finished, I went back through the Carrousel mall to the Métro, and stopped at a newstand just short of the ticket booth. There I found the gaudy commercial magazines that are ignored by the serious art world: *Univers des arts*, *Revue des arts*, *Art actuel*, and a half-dozen others. Since then I have gotten to know a number of such magazines. They are a parallel universe to avant-garde art, criticism, and history. The issue of *Art actuel* I picked up that afternoon announced the results of a poll: the editors had asked five thousand of their readers to name the top twenty artists of the century.¹ Jean-Michel Basquiat made number four, and the list also included Dalí and Nicolas de Staël. Pollock barely made the list at number twenty, one behind Nikki da Saint-Phalle. Runners-up included Victor Vasarely and Zao Wou-ki. Several of the readers’ picks, especially de Staël, Saint-Phalle, and Zao, are entirely typical of fin-de-siècle French taste, and they wouldn’t make a top-five-hundred list in some other countries. In my experience, most American art students have never heard of Zao Wou-ki or de Staël. Few know Vasarely—and certainly not as the central figure he is for much of mid-century painting outside of Europe. *Art actuel* is not as

distant from academia as some of the other glossy art magazines, and the same issue had essays on Orlan (the artist who documented her plastic surgery) and Francesco Clemente (noting his recent Guggenheim retrospective). But then there were also brief accounts of the ten members of the “groupe fractaliste” who make fractal collages; of Michèle Katz, who emulates Yves Klein’s anthropometries using male models; and of dozens more who would never cross the radar screens of *Flash Art*, *Artforum*, *Tema Celeste*, or *Art in America*.

The usual academic sneer at magazines like *Art actuel* is that they’re driven by the market, and in bed with the galleries. But what, exactly, is the force of that criticism? It’s hard to imagine a scholar of modernism or postmodernism who isn’t attentive to the connections between art and the late-capitalist market system, so in theory academic art historians should be interested in *Art actuel*. But art historians and newspaper art critics rarely look at the enormous amount of art produced by the worldwide art market, unless it is reviewed and exhibited internationally at major venues such as biennales. It is uncomfortable to remember that the commercial art market is far larger than the “art world.” There are dozens of “boutique” galleries for every serious one, and for each scholarly monograph there are literally thousands of exhibition brochures, glossy magazines, and pamphlets filled with praise for the artists—material that is virtually never discussed, or even read, in academic circles. Is there a single reference to *Univers des arts*, I wonder, in any of the tens of thousands of dissertations on art history? In any of the hundreds of thousands of scholarly essays indexed in *Art Abstracts* or the *Bibliography of the History of Art*? (It is also said that magazines like *Art actuel* don’t offer sufficiently incisive or well-informed criticism: that’s another issue, but a dubious one since many of the critics who write for *Art actuel* know the artists and the gallerists and the relevant art criticism.)

The invisibility of judgment and the ocean of forgotten art are the two problems that got me started on this book. *Failure* was the project’s touchstone from the beginning. At times, I thought of changing the title so that it would not sound so polemical, but I have decided to retain it in order to keep the central idea before the reader’s eyes. I want to be honest about what happens to most

people who are serious about painting. In this book failure is the ordinary condition of life. A life spent in painting is comprised of the hopes that did not come true, the achievements that proved to be out of reach, the fame that never materialized, the accomplishments that somehow did not go as they had once been imagined. On a rough count, art history studies the top one-tenth of one percent of what is actually produced. Failure is average art, made around the world by the ninety-nine point nine percent of artists who are not indispensable to the ongoing conversation, or game, or story, of painting. There is no single failure in this book: the criteria continuously shift. Failure is multiple, and fugitive, and what counts as failure is closely determined by the circumstances. (It's the same with success.) The third and last aim of this book is to come to terms with the many individual occasions and criteria for failure. I want to see if they are really infinite, or if they can be classed and arranged and given histories. If they can, then the ocean of unknown painting might also be retrieved for history: there might be something to consider seriously in that lower ninety-nine point nine percent.

Acknowledgments

In preparing this book I did my homework as impartially as I was able. I went methodically to galleries, museums, artists’ studios, and academies in a number of cities including Chicago, Dublin, Kyoto, Taipei, Prague, Budapest, Bucharest, Sofia, Asunción, São Paulo, Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Ljubljana, Bratislava, Vienna, Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Shanghai. The visits varied from a single day to several months, averaging around five days each. There are some places mentioned in this book that I have not visited—Samoa, Bashkortostan, Guinea, Papua New Guinea—but I have seen most of the art first hand. On each trip I met artists, visited studios, talked with curators, museum directors, gallerists, critics, art historians, and students, usually all day long on pre-arranged itineraries. I spent several months doggedly criss-crossing Paris, visiting nearly all of its two-hundred-odd galleries. I did not avoid galleries because they looked touristy, or linger in galleries that promoted avant-garde painting. In general, I have tried to look at everything, from the Museum of Modern Art in New York to a tiny commercial art gallery, the size of several photo booths, tucked away in a small shopping mall in Asunción, Paraguay. After all that, I have only seen a nearly microscopic fraction of the painters of the past century. This book is a report on that minuscule, unreliable sample.

My largest debt is the hospitality of many people who taught me their country’s art, arranged accommodation, and shepherded me around unfamiliar territory. Thanks, then, to the following. In Hangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai: Fan Xiaoming, Gu Ling, Qigu Jiang, Hill Jiang, and Ding Ning. In Nanjing: Chang Nincheng. In Plovdiv, Bulgaria: Anastas “the Culture.” In Sofia, Bulgaria: Zhivka Valiavicharska, Kamen Balkanski, Iaroslava Boubnova, Luchezar Boyadjiev, and Diana Popova. In Budapest and Eger, Hungary: □ □ □

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Newman, Jonathan Fineberg, Michael Kimmelman, Peter Fitzgerald, Arthur Danto, Jerry Saltz, Peter Schjeldahl, Mary Sherman, Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, Leah Ollman, Michael Fried, Martin Donougho, Margaret Hawkins, Jerry Cullum, András Szánto, Jeremy Simon, and especially Peter Plagens who wrote me several long, energetic, and deeply dissatisfied letters. And thanks to Joseph Grigely, who contributed the term “bullshit!” to the list in chapter 1; to Sergey Ivanov, for information on Leningrad Impressionism; to Juan Carlos, for information on contemporary painters in Papua New Guinea; to Leua Latai, for introducing me to Samoan painting; and to Bohdan Gorczynski, for help with Polish painting.

A note about deeper debts. This book can be read in part as an oblique, perverse, but nevertheless sustained answer to T. J. Clark’s *Farewell to An Idea: Episodes in a History of Modernism*. His book may seem the opposite of this one in many respects. *Farewell to An Idea* amounts to a very demanding history of the best modernist painting; he puts stringent requirements on painting, and pays constant attention to the places where painting falls off its mark. My requirements are variable and often lax, and I pay most attention to painting that has not come anywhere near what it seems to promise. Clark’s book pares down, mine expands. Yet I will argue that the subtractive modernist logic Clark practices is related to the additive logic of this book: one implies the other, cannot make sense without the other.

There is another model for this book that may seem very distant: while I wrote the last several years’ worth of drafts, I was also reading the *Origin of Species*. Darwin’s book is a model of careful step-by-step argument and calm rhetoric, which builds unpromising fragments into a deeply persuasive whole. I think I needed a model of expansive, resourceful, unemotional writing in order to try to come to terms with such a desperately unruly, under-theorized, and emotional project as world painting.

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Because of the nature of this material, ample documentation for many artists is missing. I have not made the usual distinctions between fold-out exhibition brochures, exhibition catalogues,

and “serious” monographs: all are cited in the standard form. The absence of an author or editor may be construed to mean the text in question is a brochure or other ephemeral item. Readers should be aware that in many cases very little has been written about the artists, and that the sources are cited more to place the artists with certain galleries than to provide bibliographic backup. However it is continuously surprising to me how many artists have work on the Internet. If you are curious about an obscure artist I mention here, and the documentation is unavailable, try typing the name into a search engine. Two times out of three, you will be rewarded by a blurry but serviceable image.

Some terminological notes. “Fin-de-siècle,” unless otherwise noted, means the end of the nineteenth century, and “turn of the century” denotes the end of the twentieth century. After long consideration, I decided to capitalize the names of art movements. English-language practice is inconsistent, and the tendency is to use lowercase. But with the proliferation of minor schools and unfamiliar names, I thought it would be clearest if I capitalized everything uniformly. The exception is new non-English terms, which are given in italics: *Arte concreto invención*.

I have tried to be faithful to Roman diacritics and non-Roman scripts. It would have been possible to present all the artists’ names in a standard North American Roman typeface, but I find that geographical and political biases are subtly reflected in the absence of diacritics. A standard “pan-European” font such as Times CE, for example, works well for Polish but cannot reproduce Romanian diacritics such as Ț. For the same reason I have preserved non-Roman scripts wherever they are in use by the artists themselves. It seems only appropriate, in a book dedicated to the representation of non-Western art, not to flatten names and terms into the relatively inflection-free Western fonts that are increasingly in use throughout the world.

Last: in a book this size, there are apt to be errors. If you find any please write to me, care of the publisher or via the internet.

Part of Part II Chapter 4 appeared as a book review on the College Art Association's site www.caareviews.org.

Part of Part I Chapter 3 appeared on the same site; and so did a portion of the Conclusions.

A different section of Part I Chapter 3 was given as a paper at the 2000 meeting of the College Art Association.

Notes to the Preface

¹ Jean-Pierre Frimbois, “Vos Vingt artists du siècle,” *Art actuel* [1] no. 4 (September-October 1999), 40-41.