

Bruce Barber | **The Question [of Failure] in Art Research**

"Research is the process of going up alleys to see if they are blind."

Marston Bates (biologist)

"If we knew what we were doing it wouldn't be research."

Albert Einstein (physicist)

"After all, the ultimate goal of all research is not objectivity, but truth."

Helene Deutsch (psychoanalyst)

"Enough research will tend to support your conclusions."

Arthur Bloch (the author of Murphy's Law)

"Research is what I'm doing when I don't know what I'm doing."

Werner von Braun (rocket engineer)

With pronouncements of non-generic, non-directed, non-specific, ostensibly "failure-" oriented, "creative" research in the quotations from the famous scientists above, it is not difficult (empirical evidence notwithstanding) to discern a compatible identification—at the highest level—between art and scientific research. We may have come a long way from the notion that an artist need not be educated and, moreover, that s/he should be satisfied with exhibiting a singular subjective creativity untrammelled by social issues, history, theory, and politics; that, indeed, advanced research could or should be equivalent to a disinterested art practice. We may also be sufficiently distanced from the late-nineteenth-century salon dinner at which Russian intellectuals, Yuri and Mikhail, are conversing about Walter "Z," someone in their circle of acquaintances: "You know . . . he [Walter] was educated as an artist . . . which is to say he was *not* educated!" Or we may question the French saying of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, "*bête comme un peintre*" (as dumb

as a painter), a term that retains currency today and has even been adopted by some contemporary painters as a *marque d'honneur* for exhibition titles and posters.¹

As a director of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design's (NSCAD University) graduate program in fine arts, I was recently confronted with the dilemma of affirming some of the tried (tired?) and tested paradigmatic claims of graduate education in visual arts when, in 2007, I was invited to "pen" an introduction to a Web site of graduate students' work.² In the context of *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School*, published by the NSCAD Press, my task and my introduction to the Web site now properly deserve some self-critical reflection, especially given how rapidly some institutions in North America are now moving towards a reappraisal of the terminal status of the MFA degree. For example, in Canada alone, there are now three graduate programs that provide "blended" PhD programs in visual arts: the University of Western Ontario, York University, and l'Université du Québec à Montréal, with others on the drawing board.

In my contribution to the graduate Web site I wrote: "For the past half century in the Western and particularly the North American context, the MFA degree has offered a tertiary-level (university and college) context for the pursuit of professional expertise in the fine arts, crafts, and design."³ I added that the MFA degree "remains widely recognised as a professional art qualification by institutes of education, parallel cultural institutions, and most professional artist associations and university organisations throughout the world, including, in Canada, the University Art Teachers Association of Canada (UAAC); in the USA, the National Association of Schools of Art & Design (NASAD), and the College Art Association (CAA)."⁴

I quoted from a recent CAA document that claims, "The MFA, unlike most master's degrees, is used as a guarantee of a high level of professional competence in the visual arts. It is also accepted as an indication that the recipient has reached the end of the formal aspects of his/her education in the making of art; that is to say, it is the terminal degree in visual arts education and thus equivalent to terminal degrees in other fields, such as the PhD or EdD".⁵ I continued my Webpage introduction, aggregating more symbolic capital to the MFA degree by affirming that "the MFA is also recognised by UNESCO as an important qualification, along with exhibiting, peer association and professional group memberships, in ascertaining the status of the artist as a professional culture worker." I added a point that continues to have much legitimacy within North America: that "the MFA degree is an important ancillary qualification for practicing professionals within several fields associated with the production and reception of culture, including arts preparatory work, roles within arts granting agencies and councils, museum and public gallery administration, design and promotion, communications and publishing." I referred to Claire McCaughey's *Arts Education in Canada: An Exploratory Study*,⁶ stating that it "underlined the potential transferability of skills [emphasis added] obtained from a fine art education and revealed the extensive economic benefits to the culture industry(ies) and society generally," symbolic points that perhaps would have

pleased Richard Florida and other neoliberal supporters of the cultural “index” reconfigured as a “Bohemian Index,” “Gay Index,” and/or “Composite Diversity Index.”⁷

In this context, however, it is important to underline the potential benefits of higher education in the arts. As I noted in my introduction, the arts “have tremendous currency within the particular social, political, and cultural climates of many countries today, which are the fostering and representation of abstract yet crucial ideas such as national identity, statehood and community.” I pointed out that the economic contributions of fine arts graduates are also now becoming more evident: Recent Statistics Canada documents (2007, 2008), for example, estimate that arts-related employment is over 4% of the total labour force in Canada, contributing several billion dollars per annum to the GDP. This statistic alone underlines the importance of university undergraduate and graduate programs in the fine arts and, in particular, the relevance of graduate education in visual arts. A much smaller percentage of this 4% group is identified as self-employed artists who also (variously) contribute economically to the economy.⁸

This point, I argued in my brief introduction, corroborates the intuitive (and counterintuitive) understanding that many art educators have harboured since the 1950s: that graduate-level education in the arts should offer opportunities beyond those nominally associated with the education of the artist in society. I suggested that this is “particularly important where many vehicles of (graduate) education in visual art serve merely to reproduce the stereotypical roles of the artist as alienated outsider, creative magus or genius figure, disengaged from his or her communities and society as a whole.” Given the present gravity of world problems (climate change, economic struggles, terrorism, and war) it is perhaps important to stress, as I did in my introduction, that graduate students “work beyond the conventional borderlines of art, craft, and design to address the concerns of community and society (Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft), in the classic Tönnies sense of these two terms.”⁹ In this respect, it is important to recognize that following the Sorbonne Declaration of May 25, 1998, the Bologna Declaration of June 19, 1999, asserted the importance of cultural exchange and interdisciplinarity in the fostering of the new unified Europe.¹⁰ Two years later, a follow-up meeting in Prague affirmed that “higher education should be considered a public good [emphasis added] and is, and will remain a public responsibility...and that students are full members of the higher education community.”¹¹

I realize now that perhaps I should have been somewhat more circumspect in my reinforcement of the hegemonic status of the MFA degree, particularly given the rapid development of blended PhD visual arts programs in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand that are discussed in the introduction and other chapters of this book. But what of the question of art research that has become, ipso facto, a foundational principle of many new graduate programs in visual arts? And what of the use of graduate education in fine arts as a “public good?”

| Future indicative?

“Community is always revealed in the death of others.”

*Jean-Luc Nancy*¹²

I was recently witness to a discussion between two curators of performance art, who were overheard saying that they were “getting tired of receiving proposals for festivals that were based in relational aesthetics.” They went on to elaborate, speaking about “work that is simply thrown together on the spot and dusted with some social signifiers.” An art writer of my acquaintance also expressed reservations about the “community practice work” of a certified relational artist, posing the question: “Who is the real working artist here when the exhibition is under the imprimatur of this artist but is really the work of community groups working at his behest?”

Despite these mild demonstrations of dissatisfaction, it is increasingly evident that the dominant international “aesthetic”—dare we call it that?—of the last decade (at least since 1996 and into “the noughties,”) has become, for better and for worse, “relational,” and we cannot necessarily blame Nicholas Bourriard for this fact.¹³

There perhaps can be no better evidence of this “dominance of the relational” than the increasing institutionalization of various forms of social practice in graduate programs around the world. The Graduate Program in Fine Arts at California College of the Arts, as one example, promotes its programs on the Web by informing intending students that they “may choose to focus on social practice instead of a traditional studio discipline.”¹⁴ MFA students at CCA are invited to incorporate “diverse strategies in their studio practice,” including “urban interventions, utopian proposals, guerrilla architecture, ‘new genre’ public art, social sculpture, project-based community practice, interactive media, service dispersals, and street performance.”¹⁵

The CCA Web description goes on to affirm that graduate students in social practice (SOPR) will focus their attention “on questions of aesthetics, ethics, collaboration, persona, media strategies, and social activism, issues that are central to artworks and projects that cross into public and social spheres.” CCA also informs intending applicants that as much of their work involves “public commissions, long-term residencies, and the creation of alternative institutions or collectives,” students are prepared to “conceive projects, articulate narratives that support them, and cultivate a network of fellow practitioners and supporting institutions.”

This program description subtly shifts attention away from the atelier or studio to the less generic workshop by affirming that the centrality of social practice “is the workshop.” Yet lest it seem too progressive, the text retrieves the studio signifier(s) by conflating “studio/practicum” for their description of a year-long course led by “resident faculty members in coordination with national and international visiting artists and theorists.” As described, each workshop takes “a field-based approach and is centered on a particular thematic

framework.” The description goes on to explain that the “workshops may be located in diverse social and physical contexts, including urban environments, formal and informal organizations, and popular media.”¹⁶

The University of New Mexico also delivers a relational art practice program through their P.L.A.C.E. program (Partnership Learning through Art, Culture & the Environment). P.L.A.C.E. is described as a program that links “arts-based service learning with Relational Aesthetics” and supports a “community effort to explore what these two approaches to art have in common,” an exploration that considers the questions: Who is interested in exploring these issues and practices? How and where can these be taught? What is the significance and value of relational art?¹⁷ The P.L.A.C.E. program cites *Corpos Informaticos Research Groups* and the *Walk and Squawk Performance Project* as models of relational art practice to be accessed by their students.¹⁸ Well and good. But if this is the future of art schools, how is it possible for many graduate, and especially PhD, programs to deliver this and under what institutional umbrellas?

Most “blended” PhD programs follow models long established by the humanities and the social sciences, with the important difference that they recognize, somewhat variously at the moment, the value of creative work (research, production, and exhibition). The tension between the written dissertation—the text—and studio-based practice is typically evident in most Visual Art PhD programs. The exhibition of practical studio work for the PhD in many new programs must have a major text, which is less a “support” and/or “augmentation” document (as is typified in the MFA or MVA) than a demonstration of the scholarly competence and originality of the PhD candidate. The assessment is therefore based on the degree of research of primary, secondary, and tertiary literatures. The assessment requires a demonstration of theoretical depth and breadth in the relevant field(s) of research and a thorough explication of important debates identified in the original thesis project description or research question, whatever this may be.

Typically “blended” visual arts PhD programs reinforce some of these objectives through graduate-level courses, theory, research, and methodology seminars including the “advancement to candidacy” accompanied by various directions about primary and secondary research, data collection, and management. The secondary and tertiary language determinations of these programs (common in Humanities and Social Science programs), although preferred in some new PhD options, are typically absent. The PhD program in visual arts typically has word length prescriptions for the thesis document and specific directives about venues for exhibitions, performances, and screenings. Invariably there is a prescription for an oral (*viva voce*) defense and, in some cases, publication of the completed text as a corollary to the presentation, exhibition, or screening of work. In other words, the blended visual arts PhD programs in many institutions may approximate the structure but are ‘different’ from humanities, social science, or science-based PhD’s. What is the character of the difference? And what are the outside limits of this difference?

| Three “blended” PhD models

I was fortunate in 2005 to be a consultant and external reviewer of a new proposal for a visual arts PhD developed by the University of Western Ontario. I was also a consultant (although not a reviewer) for a new visual arts PhD program at York University that was recently instituted. My two colleagues reviewing UWO were an art historian and film theorist from Quebec, both senior scholars in their respective fields. We reviewed voluminous documents and over the course of several days, discussed all aspects of the proposed program with administrators, faculty, staff, and graduate students, including alumni and prospective applicants. We spent several days discussing the documents at our disposal and subsequently, via eMail, reviewed points where we differed in our assessment. It was an exhaustive process, not without some struggle, and mostly based upon our perception of the integrity and value of creative (practical) work in what is arguably a “reworking” of a humanities PhD, which is primarily text based, with varying emphases on other components, including art practice and curatorial production. Upon our recommendation and as finally approved by the Ontario Council of Graduate Studies (OCGS), the University of Western Ontario PhD program in Visual Arts was instituted.¹⁹

The UWO program provides an instructive model, one that clearly illustrates what I identify as “the tension” between creation research and the hegemony of the text. The institution offers three streams for the “blended” visual arts PhD: a project-based and dissertation stream; a dissertation primary text (with provision for a collection of published essays) accompanied by a secondary (subordinate) practical (studio) component: and, finally, a full dissertation accompanied by curatorial project(s). The first project-based stream requires four materially (art) based projects and a shorter written thesis. In the literature for their program, UWO states that in the second year of the program graduate students will present a research prospectus of twenty-five pages in length outlining exhibition and writing plans that are orally presented and defended. The proposal must also include a bibliography and a timetable for the completion of work during the ensuing two years. At this time, the student formally selects this stream of the program. In years two and three, PhD students produce two minor studio exhibitions (or the equivalent) of new work produced within the overall research program of the candidate. The UWO program determines that one exhibition (alternatively a screening or performance) will be presented in the university department’s ArtLab Gallery, and the other presented in a public gallery, or artist-run centre (a contested point of discussion for the reviewers, given the relative differences between both venues). The UWO program literature reaffirms that the preliminary exhibitions could be presented as an exhibition, performance, screening or Web-site presentation. The exhibitions are also to be thoroughly documented for inclusion in the dossier that accompanies the written thesis produced in year four of this program. The final exhibition is presented in a recognized public gallery or an institution of equivalent stature (emphasis added), and in accordance with the desire to accommodate blended

production “may be a publicized screening, performance or as a professional Web-based presentation.” The “thesis exhibition” must be widely publicized and thoroughly documented. In year four of the program a written thesis of publishable quality (normally 80–100 pages in length) is presented. The documents note that the thesis text must meet the standards “typically set in well-respected national or international peer-reviewed journals,” and the PhD candidate must have an oral examination at which all his/her committee members are to be present. This structure is similar to many PhD’s in the sciences and some in the social sciences. The final exhibition and written thesis at UWO are examined in the context of the dossier documenting the earlier projects. As an institutional caveat, the department PhD document also dictates for all three models that the PhD thesis and thesis examination follows the rigorous regulations established by the UWO School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.²⁰

The second model for the blended visual arts PhD at UWO accommodates students who wish to concentrate on producing a longer dissertation or integrated series of (publishable) articles. As with the first model, in year two, a research prospectus including a table of contents, a bibliography and a timetable is presented and defended. After the prospectus is accepted, the student formally selects this stream of the program, or is presumably steered toward another stream. In years two and three, the PhD student undertakes his/her research, with thesis writing undertaken in year four. A creative component to the research (video, Web site, performance, etc.), may also be carried out as a minor focus of the research, with this production being thoroughly documented for inclusion in the dossier that accompanies the written thesis of publishable quality (normally 200–250 pages in length), presented in the final year of the program. Again, similar to a PhD thesis in a scientific field, this text must meet the standards typically set in well-respected national or international peer-reviewed journals. The thesis is also subject to an oral examination, and the additional creative project is discussed in this context. As with the first model presented the PhD thesis and thesis examination once again follows the regulations established by the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.²¹

The research requirements of the third “adapted project-based PhD stream” at UWO accommodate those students whose research is best suited to a combination of materially based projects and a written thesis. As with the first two models, a research prospectus outlining museum-based and /or other curatorial practices (emphasis added) as well as writing plans is presented to the student’s committee and defended. In years two and three, the student produces a minor project or exhibition or equivalent, culminating in the writing of an article of publishable quality, an exhibition, film, or performance. Where appropriate, the event is also to be presented at a public gallery or artist-run centre. The project must be thoroughly documented for inclusion in the dossier that accompanies the written thesis in the final year. For final evaluation, the results of a major research project are to be presented in a recognized public gallery or an institution of equivalent stature. This may also be a publicized screening, performance, or professional Web-based presentation. Again, the UWO gradu-

ate study document underlines that the exhibition must be widely publicized and thoroughly documented for the dossier, and either a written thesis or a related set of integrated articles “of publishable quality meeting the standards typically set in well respected national or international peer-reviewed journals” (normally 100–150 pages in length) must accompany the final exhibition. An oral examination also takes place. The final project or exhibition and written thesis are examined in context of the dossier documenting the earlier project with the PhD thesis and thesis examination, once again following the pro forma regulations established by the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.²²

The reviewers expressed some trepidation about the competing aims of the three models for this program, particularly with respect to differing details of research, thesis production, exhibition, timing and assessment. We also expressed some concerns about resources and funding for graduate students that were later satisfied by further disclosures by the department and university administration. Through extensive discussion the members of the review committee were able to accommodate their individual differences and produce a series of recommendations for the institution of the degree. This program is now in its second year of operation.

York University in Ontario provides a wide range of graduate programs in visual arts and related programs, including a long-standing MFA program, a combined MBA/MFA offered by the Schulich School of Business and the Graduate Program in Visual Arts, and a three-year pilot MFA program for practicing artists with established careers. The Department of Visual Arts, PhD in Art History and Visual Culture, offers opportunities for students to undertake degrees in four fields of study: “Canadian; Curatorial and Museological Studies; Architectural Studies; and Modern and Contemporary.”²³ York also offers MA and PhD degrees in cinema and media studies. The Web site describes the PhD in visual arts as a four-year advanced degree “that will prepare mature researchers with the highest qualifications to teach studio practice and theoretical courses, supervise graduate students within a university context, and have significant professional careers as artists.”²⁴ In somewhat different terms to the UWO degree, the York University program literature describes the PhD in visual arts as “premised on scholarship that is practice-based” offering a program of study wherein “original research is materialized and disseminated in the form of art works.” Research in this context is focused on visual arts, as well as specific research questions that are defined by the candidates. The application form explicitly requests candidates to identify the research project that they intend to undertake. “Research questions should be located within the practice that is central to the program of work.” It must also include the cultural and scholarly context for art practice “from one or several points of view: aesthetic, philosophical, political, etc.”²⁵

On the surface, the identification (conflation) of scholarship with innovative practice-based research moderates the struggle over the weighting of text in relation to studio production. The privileging of original research “materialized and disseminated in the form of art works” can be read positively. Perhaps,

following Derrida, we can say that there is “nothing outside the text,” and that there is therefore, equivalence between research and creation. This is an ordination for artwork that is more common in MFA program descriptions. The question in research in the York University description, however, declares the fundamental difference between this institution’s blended PhD and the three models offered by UWO.

The European Graduate School (EGS) Media and Communications program describes its program in dynamic terms, which are less specific to generic academic culture than the programs at York, UWO, CCA, or the University of New Mexico. “Facilitating creative breakthroughs and theoretical paradigm shifts” (emphasis added) as their Web site describes it, EGS “brings together master’s and doctoral students with visionaries and philosophers of the media world who inspire learning about art, philosophy, communications, film, literature, Internet, Web, and cyberspace studies from a cross-disciplinary perspective.”²⁶ The EGS program literature describes seminars, workshops, and colloquia that are offered in intensive de-centered formats at the campus in Saas-Fee Switzerland (and other sites, including New York, Paris, Berlin, Dresden, Toronto, and Honolulu) by professors of international reputation in their particular area of expertise: philosophy, psychology, anthropology, the sociology of communication, film, art, literary theory, cultural, and technology studies. The faculty at EGS includes many luminaries who are major figures in their fields. Many hold senior appointments at their own universities in Europe and North America and are seconded to teaching at EGS during the summer and, occasionally, at other times during the year.²⁷

In terms of its relation to “research” and the “question” in research, EGS, like other universities, promotes research, and emphasizes that “research is vital to the institution’s mission” and that the university is committed to fostering opportunities for research that will advance media arts and communication studies. But unlike many PhD programs in North America, research at EGS includes “activities relating to the production of scholarly publications relevant to the history, theory, and criticism of (and education in) media, visual arts and culture, and the production of original works of art in all media.”²⁸ Visual, cultural, and textual materials are considered equals but as is typical of many European universities, PhD dissertations must be publishable. EGS publishes all of its PhD students’ dissertations on its Web site and, beginning in 2009, intends to publish these, along with books by faculty members, through Atropos Press.

Through research activities undertaken by faculty and students, and according to the briefs of the Bologna and Prague educational accords, EGS affirms that it makes a significant contribution to European culture and the international culture industries. Interdisciplinarity, arguably a research “rhizome” employs distinctive components of two, three, or more disciplines in the search for and creation of knowledge or artistic expression. EGS recognizes that interdisciplinary work is endemic in complex areas such as the media arts. And given the heavily matrixed character of contemporary social life, the Deleuzian rhizome trope is appropriate to the character of this interdisciplinary re-

search with a cross-disciplinary perspective. It is no surprise to learn that Jean-François Lyotard was a guiding spirit during the founding phase of EGS, and Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida “amicably supported” EGS work for many years and held several workshops until they passed away respectively in March 2007 and April 2004.

Like Black Mountain College, with which it is often compared²⁹, the program of the EGS is distinguished by “the cordial interaction of eminent faculty members with students,” who are described as “the best of their generation.” EGS enjoys an international mix of students who are usually outstanding graduates as well as filmmakers, artists, Web designers, computer programmers, university and college instructors, writers, actors, photographers, theater directors, teachers, journalists, graphic designers, musicians, critics, and editors. The European Graduate School considers for entrance to the program “only fiercely independent and mature students” who work well within a limited-residency program. Master’s and PhD students are expected to choose their own emphasis and area of concentration as supported by their master’s and PhD thesis / project that is determined either prior to, or during the first year of the program. The language of instruction is English although the campus life is characterized by a plurality of languages. Admission requirements to EGS are similar to US, Canadian and Australian institutions and conform to the Bologna treaty.³⁰ That is students applying for admission to the EGS post-graduate studies program must have a master’s degree (or its European equivalent) and students who have begun their studies at another accredited graduate school may apply for up to 18 transfer credits.³¹ In common with other “blended” PhD programs, a minimum of four years is required for completion of the degree.

Typically, each of these blended PhD degree options recognize the important relationship of research to creative practice—the question—and to critical education. They also affirm the importance of innovative research processes, a variety of research outcomes, and implicitly acknowledge the role that innovative research may serve in the wider community for the public good. But what if a fundamental component of the question in research is failure as indicated in the quotations from the famous scientists that introduced this essay? We should remind ourselves, from time to time, that the worlds of art are quixotic and often do not easily submit to institutionalized structures that overdetermine outcomes, educational or otherwise. After all, Andy Warhol did not have a graduate degree and when he received an honorary PhD from NSCAD, he neglected to receive it! Marcel Duchamp accepted the failure of his broken large Glass and his “dust breeding” as integral to the work’s conceptual schema. There are many other examples, both historical and contemporary, of successful artists who either accommodated failure as a necessary component of their creative “research” or forged their practice outside of the institutes of art education. The present vogue for “outsider art” only reinforces the ideologies associated with the production of a particular exoticized genre of vanguard art.

| The question of failure (for success)

When one has dealings with scholars and artists it is easy to miscalculate in opposite directions: behind a remarkable scholar one not infrequently finds a mediocre man, and behind a mediocre artist, often a very remarkable man.

*Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil*³²

In the present context, where the art world is becoming increasingly professionalized, globalized, multi-disciplinary, yet subjected to multiple claims of aesthetic predominance, Nietzsche's commentary gives some pause for reflection. Are we becoming overdetermined? What if failure were the zero sum game of success in fine arts education at any level, even the doctoral? And what if we maintained, like Einstein, that "if we knew what we were doing it wouldn't be research"; or, like Marston Bates, that research "is the process of going up blind alleys to see if they are blind." What if we agreed with Werner von Braun's statement, "Research is what I'm doing when I don't know what I'm doing."

At its annual meeting in July 2005, the British Association of Teachers was considering a motion in to replace the grade "Fail" on a report card with "Suspended Success."³³ A follow-up media interview with members of this association said that the motion was unlikely to pass (that is, fail) but the fact that the motion was even raised speaks to the deep cultural ambivalence we harbour, particularly in the school and university system—especially at the graduate level—against failure. It can be said that failure, like otherness and stupidity, is a feature of our socialized identity as human subjects, and perhaps a true measure of its presence in our lives is only available to us when we negotiate a culturally constructed "normative" plateau and approach or achieve the plenitude of success. Of course, otherness and stupidity have differing ideological coordinates that secure their legitimacy as cultural discursives; hence, otherness can be constituted within and of itself—I am an/other—but to obtain a measure of its e/affects in the social arena, we must acknowledge/inscribe a concept of difference and recognize the *conditio sine qua non* of "no singularity without alterity, no alterity without difference, no!"³⁴ But as Avital Ronell has argued, stupidity presents altogether another set of options and opportunities that exclude lack as a founding principle:

Unlike truth, or the history of its inscription, stupidity does not suffer from its own lack, however, because in a sense it has arrived without diversion or delay. Stupidity can be situated in terms of its own satiety, as the experience of being full, fulfilled, accomplished: *le bonheur bête*. Protected from any alterity, making sense to and of itself, enveloped by a narcissistic certitude that rhymes internally—being, in sum, without a care—stupidity may well approximate a plenitude. It may be as close as we mortals come to plenitude.³⁵

Unlike stupidity, failure is constituted in terms of its other. And without a concept of failure we would not have a concept of success and vice versa; but the criteria by which we measure success or failure and different gradations thereof (for example in the realm of art) are, at best, questionable. The status of failure in *manquéhood* is therefore worthy of discussion, particularly in the context of the discussion thus far of graduate education in fine arts as a successful outcome of academically respectable and innovative research.³⁶

Is merely being frustrated in realizing one's ambition(s) to be considered a measure of failure, when failure can have so many different mitigating circumstances: for example, illness, poverty, the pursuit of a different career path, a difficult marriage? At what point does frustration of one's desires and ambition degenerate into the (absolute) negative value judgement of failure? The cynics will say failure always has its excuses but few will view failure, however it is constituted or framed, as necessarily a cause for celebration, or even success.³⁷ What is failure? The arch response to this question is that failure is the "flipside" or negative of success. In the dictionary sense, failure is defined in terms of a lack: "lack (an absence or deficit) of success, a lack of desire for success, non-performance, non-occurrence, inactivity; physiologically, in the sense of an organ ceasing to function, heart or kidney failure; and mechanically as in engine failure"³⁸ Economically, the lack is expressed in terms of indebtedness, loss of capital gains, and bankruptcy, which are much evident in the news now, as we suffer the consequences of the worst recession since the stock market crash of 1929. This lack can also be expressed as a failure in love, which can have innumerable consequences but usually means alienation from and/or rejection by the subject of one's affection.

In the practice of daily life, failure can embrace many situations, such as the preparation of a family meal, which can be recognized as a successful exercise by father/chef but might be considered an abject failure by the family members who would probably not feel the desire to overtly express their dissatisfaction. Similarly, a college teacher or university professor may have judged his or her most recent lecture to be a resounding success, but the obverse may be the opinion of the students, who may make their judgements known at class evaluation time. The phrase "nothing succeeds like success," also has its counterpart in the more rarely heard "nothing fails like failure." It is often remarked that one's success is tantamount to another's failure—"your loss is my gain"—and this is usually perceived to be the fundamental (Darwinian) "survival of the fittest" character of the worlds of commerce and sport. A "win, win" situation is a popular speech performative for plenitude in certain situations where the evacuation of the potential for loss, defeat, and failure is required.

But are examples of failure the lacunae of defeat or retreat? When does the lack of achieving success (achievement) acquire a negative value judgement? Can we question, after Derrida, whether this lack itself is the frame of the theory of failure? "What does the lack depend on? What lack is it? And what if it were the frame? What if the lack formed the frame of the theory? Not its accident but its frame. More or less still: what if the lack were not only the lack of theory

of the frame but the place of the lack in a theory of the frame.”³⁹

And what of success? Etymologically “succeed” stems from the Old French *succeder* which derives from the Latin *succedere*, meaning to go [forward]—a “pass go.” The synonyms for success indicate “the accomplishing of a purpose, favourable outcomes, the accomplishment of a goal or aim; betterment of one’s position, progress, the accumulation of wealth, property and status.”⁴⁰ Within capitalist society, conventional indicators of artistic success are readily indicated by the accumulation of both material and symbolic capital: awards, certificates, diplomas, a graduate degree, prizes, profitable sales, goods, and property—followed by distinction and status. The artist and his/her work become the subject/object of critical legitimation and valorization in newspapers, magazine reviews, journal essays, catalogues, and books. She or he may also be offered honorary appointments and awards, etc. But these evaluations are *intrinsic* to success. The *succès de scandale* that, with *épater le bourgeois*, was a key objective of the historical avant-gardes may be the only example of a success that includes in its very definition a measure of *failure* (scandal) that is *ipso facto* also perceived as success. The value of success, however, like the value of beauty, the sublime, and pleasure (which we know from Kant) is necessarily a question of judgement, about which Derrida has posted a few warnings.

Now you have to know what you are talking about, what intrinsically concerns the value of “beauty” and what remains external to your immanent sense of beauty. This permanent requirement—to distinguish between the internal or proper sense and the circumstance of the *objet* being talked about—organizes all philosophical discourse on art, the meaning of art as such, from Plato to Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger. This requirement presupposes a discourse on the limit between the inside and the outside of the art object, here a discourse on the frame. Where is it to be found?⁴¹

This, then, may appear to be a/the (research) question. Where indeed, is it to be found? Where is the limit between the inside and outside of failure? How for example, are success and the failure “to pass go,” for example, signified in films that represent art, artists, and art history? Christopher Cross, the “Sunday painter” in Fritz Lang’s *Scarlet Street*, is a classic artist *manqué*. Although he treats his painting as a hobby, he recognizes the particular power of modernist art and the celebrated high place—the pantheon of the great—that the successful artist may occupy within culture and society. “Cézanne... he was a great painter,” he tells Kitty March during their “courtship/ entrapment” scene, expressing the desire that some day he too would like to be an artist of distinction. Painting in his spare time enables Chris to avoid his demanding wife, Adele, who berates him at every opportunity for any perceived infractions against her domestic rule. As a classic pre-feminist “hen pecked” husband trapped in a loveless marriage, he readily falls victim to the alluring charms of Kitty March, the femme fatale he rescues from a beating at the hands of her boyfriend Johnnie. Although Chris has a somewhat limited knowledge of the trajectories of modernism, he recognizes that if he had the strength of will of an artist like Paul Gauguin (another artist *manqué* trapped in a bourgeois existence) he could

leave his wife, give up his day job, move to Tahiti, realize his ambitions, become a successful professional artist, and live the good life. Ironically, Adele's first husband, a policeman whose photographic portrait glares down imperiously from the wall of their apartment, exercised more personal freedom by faking his death in order to extricate himself from personal debt and his marriage to Adele. Chris Cross is caught in the classic existential (Sartrean) dilemma of being for others or being for himself. When he exercises a measure of "free choice" to pursue both Kitty and a studio (a room of his own) in which to paint without fear of criticism from Adele, his art succeeds by being legitimized in the art world, but he fails by becoming a thief and a murderer. At the end of the film, Chris is locked in the cell of his own personal hell. With less tragic results than *Scarlet Street*, the "Gauguin option" for transcending creative frustration and *manqué*hood is played out in many popular films, for example *The Moon and Sixpence* (1942) based upon Somerset Maugham's Gauguin inspired story about a London-based broker who, without the benefit of a fine art graduate education, gives everything up to live in Paris as a painter.

There are many other film and book narratives populated with frustrated and tortured artists *manqué*, misunderstood geniuses (*alter dei*) who struggle to realize their identity and mission as artists (which, as both Schopenhauer and T.S. Eliot observed, is to rise above mere talent) but who fail in their pursuit of success and the good life, turning their frustrations into self-hating, murderous or suicidal behavior that ultimately affects their families, those with whom they work, and the community at large.⁴² *The Dark Side of Genius* (1994), directed by Phedon Papamichael, recounts the story of an artist-killer who murders his beautiful model and, when paroled from prison, seeks out a new victim, a female reporter who is attempting to write a story about him. Ingmar Bergman's Gothic fantasy, *Hour of the Wolf* (*Vargtimmen*, 1968), unfolds the story about the tormented inner life of a painter (Max von Sydow) who lives a solitary life with his wife on a northern island off the coast of Sweden. *Gothic* (1986), is director Ken Russell's stereotyped exploration of the laudanum-addled lives of the tortured geniuses Byron and Percy and Mary Shelley at the Villa Diodati in June of 1816. One scene includes a powerful evocation in Mary's waking dream of spectres based on Fuseli's painting *The Nightmare* (1781), suitably accompanied by theatrical flashes of lightning. There are also films that represent the lives of artists who struggle with their patrons: for example, *Close to the Wind* (1969), in which a sculptor comes into conflict with those who provide him with economic support to act out his neuroses, and Michelangelo's (Charlton Heston), epic struggle with the Pope over the painting of the Sistine Chapel represented in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1958), directed by Carol Reed. A different illustration of an artist *manqué* is provided in the cult film *Performance* (1970), an artful thriller directed by Nicholas Roeg and Donald Cammell, starring Mick Jagger, who plays the role of a fading pop star—another artist *manqué* stereotype—who is contrasted with Chas (James Fox), a powerful gangland boss who is described "as an artist...a real performer."

The characters of Dr. Hannibal Lecter and Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* are also figured as artists *manqué*, which makes their psychopathic behaviour more diabolical than it would have been had they been more transparent and “conventional” serial killers.⁴³ Their “life-enhancing,” (pro) creative talents (Dr. Lecter’s (Lector/Lecteur) classical drawing skill and Bill’s talent for fashion design, patterning, and sewing) contrast markedly with their desire to kill. Arguably, their art and design talents could have led them to pursue different career objectives—and perhaps a graduate degree in fine arts—but not, of course, if their artist sensibilities were somehow ideologically inscribed in their psychopathy. Other films about the art world represent an artist’s mid-life crisis as an opportunity to assume *manquéhood*. For example Martin Scorsese’s Abstract Expressionist artist (Nick Nolte), in *Life Lessons: New York Stories* (1989), struggles with his mid-life crisis and a troubled career by succumbing to the charms of a younger woman. Stourley Kracklite (Brian Dennehy), the unsuccessful architect in Peter Greenaway’s film *The Belly of an Architect* (1988), also undergoes a mid-life crisis, losing his career, his wife, and child, finally taking his own life to transcend his *manquéhood* to achieve post-mortal success (transfiguration) through failure. Dozens of books and films contain accounts of the struggles of frustrated and tortured artists *manqué* who fail in their attempt to realize their visions. Even prototypical geniuses like Leonardo and Freud had their own moments of *manquéhood* (frustration, doubt, and at times, failure) in their inability to complete their masterpieces or derive satisfaction from their work. Freud was so concerned about these problems that he had to investigate Leonardo’s childhood in order to understand his own predicament.⁴⁴

The line between genius and madness, it must be reiterated, like the line between success and failure in the arts, even at the PhD level, is very fine. The history of the genius /madness conflation from which we derive the *manqué* theory of lack has been, and continues to be, a powerful ideological force in Western culture, one which has been neglected in most of the literatures, except those that nominate Adolf Hitler as the exemplary artist *manqué* whose artistic rejections apparently precipitated a world war!⁴⁵

The vicissitudes in art research are exactly this, and the future of the art school and art education may ultimately depend on the particular framing of the [question] in art research. Given the increasing professionalism of the arts represented in the proliferation of visual arts PhD programs worldwide, it is wise to reflect on the status of failure in the fomenting of progressive critical art practice. If research is necessarily the (perhaps blind) pursuit of the interrogative, it may be wise to reflect on the presence of failure and *manquéhood* as a powerful stimulant and determinant in the production of innovative art. And this begs the question how *failure* may be accommodated within academically cohesive and success-oriented postgraduate degree programs in visual art? Perhaps in order to live, we must remember death. *Vivere disce, cogita mori* (learn to live, remember death).

Endnotes

- 1 Marcel Duchamp. The original barb was "as stupid as a painter." Duchamp said that the problem with painting was that it was too "retinal," and he wanted to put painting "back in the service of the mind."
- 2 Since its institution in 1973, NSCAD's MFA degree program has successfully graduated over two hundred artists, craftspeople, and designers, many of whom have gone on to achieve national and international prominence in their respective fields. These include Joseph Bartscherer (1979), Dagmar Dahl (1991), Christof Migone (1996), Theresa Hubbard and Alex Birchler (1992), Monika Napier (1998), Beverly Naidus (1978), Micah Lexier (1984), Rita McKeough (1979), Robyn Moody (2006), Greg Payce (1987), Steve Reinke (1993), Pamela Ritchie (1982), Celeste Roberge (1986), Emilie Rondeau (2006), Hall Smyth (1991), Monika Tap (1996), Nathalie Majaba Waldburger (2004), Theodore Wan (1978), Sarah Washbush (2005), and Laurel Woodcock (1992), among others. Several NSCAD graduates have become curators, critics, and authors, including Gary Kibbins, Laura Kipnis (1982), Jim Drobnick (1986), and Robin Peck (1975). NSCAD MFA graduates have also distinguished themselves as publishers: Rob Labossiere (1985); directors of museums, galleries, and artist run centers: Chris Tyler (1978), Jim Scheufele (1977); Erling Thor Klingenberg Valsson (1997), Sara Angelucci (1997); presidents of art colleges: Alan Barkley (1977) and museum directors: Jeff Spalding (1975), who was recently awarded the Governor General's Award for his services to Canadian museum culture and fine art. During this three-decade period of operation, the program has consistently attracted approximately two hundred applications for less than ten places per year, which remains one of the highest ratios of any program in Canada. The MFA program has enjoyed the continuing support of the NSCAD administration and faculty and has been administered by nine MFA directors: Gerald Ferguson, Bob Berlind, Eric Cameron, Garry Neill Kennedy, Stephen Horne, Jan Peacock, Susan McEachern, Barbara Lounder, and Bruce Barber.
- 3 For this and subsequent references to this introduction, see Bruce Barber, "A Few Notes on the MFA Degree Program at NSCAD University," *NSCAD University*, NSCADU, 2007, 16 Jan. 2009, <<http://www.nscad.ns.ca/mfa2007/barber.php>>: Google Search; Barber MFA NSCAD.
- 4 With Patrick Mahon, my colleague from UWO, I co-chaired a UAAC roundtable on graduate studies in Canada when the association met in Halifax in 2006. The roundtable had the blended PhD on the agenda but discussion time was limited.
- 5 CAA guidelines for MFA standards.
- 6 Claire McCaughey, *Arts Education in Canada: An Exploratory Study* (Ottawa: Canada Council, 1988).
- 7 See Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); *The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); and *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
- 8 Statistics Canada, "Canadian Culture in Perspective: A Statistical Overview" *Canadian Culture in Perspective: A Statistical Overview*, 12 March 2009, <<http://www.statcan.gc.ca>>.
- 9 See Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, ed. Jose Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).
- 10 According to the Bologna Declaration, "This is of the highest importance, given that Universities' independence and autonomy ensure that higher education and research systems continuously adapt to changing needs, society's demands and advances in scientific knowledge." See Bologna Declaration, 1999, "About the Bologna Process," n.d., *Bologna Process*, Benelux Bologna Secretariat, n.d., 18 Jan. 2009, <<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/about/index.htm>>.
- 11 See Prague Communiqué, 2001, *Bologna Process*, Benelux Bologna Secretariat, n.d., 28 Jan. 2009, <<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>>: Main Documents/Ministerial Declarations and Communiqués/Prague Communiqué.

- 12 Jean Luc Nancy, from *The Experience of Freedom*, quoted in *A Dictionary of Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Protevi (New Haven: Yale U P, 2006) 126.
- 13 Relational aesthetics has very diverse origins from the historical avant-gardes, such as Dada (Kurt Schwitters, Marcel Duchamp) through to Conceptual art (Joseph Kosuth, Art & Language, among others) and contextual art (Jan Swidzinski). The term "relational aesthetics" was first used in 1996, in the catalogue for the exhibition *Traffic*, curated by Bourriaud at CAPC, musée d'Art contemporain de Bordeaux. *Traffic* included artists that Bourriaud would continue to mention in his writings throughout the 1990s: Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, Carsten Höller, Christine Hill, Vanessa Beecroft, Maurizio Cattelan, and Jorge Pardo. His book, *Relational Aesthetics*, has become the defining text for this term. See Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2002).
- 14 The California College of the Arts is where Suzanne Lacy used to teach. From 1987–97 she was dean of the School of Fine Arts at the California College of Arts, and in 1998 became founding director of the Center for Art and Public Life. In 1996–7 she co-founded the Visual and Public Art Institute at California State University at Monterey Bay with artist Judith Baca. Lacy is now the chair of fine arts at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. She is the author of *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Washington: Bay Press, 1995).
- 15 See "Overview: The Field of Social Practices" in "Social Practices," *California College of the Arts*, CCA, n.d., 14 Jan. 2009, <<http://www.cca.edu/academics/graduate/fine-arts/socialpractices>>.
- 16 The CCA Website offers a print-on-demand document at the end of each course. The most recent volume, *There Is No Two Without Three*, is available as a free download (or as a print-on-demand paperback). See Ted Purves, et al., *There is No Two Without Three*, 2008, *Lulu*, Lulu.com, n.d., 16 Jan. 2009, <www.lulu.com/content/2414798>.
- 17 The P.L.A.C.E. Program "already asserts that arts-based service learning belongs in the curriculum of fine higher education of a 21st Century public university. We think it is not only socially responsible to give fine arts students experiential and pre-professional learning opportunities in the service of our communities, we also think it has academic and research value to pursue new approaches to fine arts teaching and activity that is [in] keeping with contemporary issues of identity, society, and technology." See "Service and Relational Arts," *P.L.A.C.E. Program*, UNM, n.d., 28 Jan. 2009, <http://place.unm.edu/service_relational_art.html>.
- 18 See "Happy to Meet You: An Introduction to Relational Art," *P.L.A.C.E. Program*, UNM, n.d., 28 Jan 2009, <http://place.unm.edu/relational_art.html>.
- 19 See "PhD Regulations, Visual Arts Department," *University of Western Ontario*, UWO, 24 Nov. 2008, 28 Jan. 2008, <http://www.uwo.ca/visarts/grad_students/phdregulations.html#rotc>.
- 20 "PhD Regulations."
- 21 "PhD Regulations."
- 22 "PhD Regulations."
- 23 See "Graduate Programs: Department of Visual Arts," *York University*, York U, n.d., 28 Jan. 2009, <<http://www.yorku.ca/finearts/visa/grad.htm>>.
- 24 See "PhD in Visual Arts," *York University*, York U, n.d., 28 Jan. 2009, <<http://www.yorku.ca/gradvisa/phd.htm>>.
- 25 See "Supplementary Information Form," Graduate Programs: Visual Arts, *York University*, York U., 28 Jan. 2009, <http://www.yorku.ca/web/futurestudents/graduate/programs/Visual_Arts/whatYouNeed.html>.
- 26 See The European Graduate School, home page, *European Graduate School*, EGS, n.d., 28 Jan. 2009, <<http://www.egs.edu/>>.
- 27 The EGS faculty includes Giorgio Agamben, Chantal Ackerman, Pierre Alferi, Pierre Aubenque, Alain Badiou, Nicholson Baker, Judith Balso, Lewis Baltz, John Perry Barlow, Marcel Beyer, Yve-Alain Bois, Catherine Breillat, Victor Burgin, Judith Butler, Sophie Calle, Hélène Cixous, Diane Davis Michel Deguy, Manuel DeLanda, Claire Denis, Suzanne Doppelt, Atom Egoyan,

- Tracey Emin, Bracha Ettinger, Chris Fynsk, Antony Gormley, Peter Greenaway, Durs Grünbein, Werner Hamacher, Barbara Hammer, Donna Haraway, Michael Hardt, Martin Hielscher, Michel Houellebecq, Shelley Jackson, Claude Lanzmann, Yang Lian, Greg Lynn, Paul D. Miller a.k.a. D.J Spooky that Subliminal Kid, Carl Mitcham, Colum McCann, Jean-Luc Nancy, Gaspar Noe, Ulrike Ottinger, Cornelia Parker, Quay Brothers, Jacques Ranciere, Larry Rickels, Asvital Ronell, Jacques Roubaud, Wolfgang Schirmacher, Volker Schlöndorff, Michael Schmidt, Hendrik Speck, Bruce Sterling, Elia Suleiman, Margarethe von Trotta, Fred Ulfers, Gregory Ulmer, Agnès Varda, Paul Virilio, Victor J. Vitanza, Hubertus von Amelnunxen, Samuel Weber, Lebbeus Woods, Krzysztof Zanussi, Siegfried Zielinski and Slavoj Žižek.
- 28 The EGS is a privately funded Graduate School, established in 1994, and is a graduate and post-graduate degree-granting University with a Campus in Saas-Fee, Wallis, with centres in New York and Dresden. The EGS is accredited by permission of the State Council (*Staatsrat*) of the Canton Wallis, Switzerland, to award recognized Master's and PhD degrees and is formally recognized as a university in Wallis by *Staatsratsbeschluss* (State Council decision, from June 20, 2002).
- 29 EGS has been referred to as "White Mountain College".
- 30 The recognized degree issued by the EGS and authorized by the Minister of Education of the Swiss canton of Wallis is a Doctor of Philosophy / Dr. Phil. (The degree is also signed by two representatives in the EGS Doctoral Program Council of cooperating universities from Germany and the USA).
- 31
- 32 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Maxims and Interludes" 137, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R.J Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990).
- 33 CBC News, July 25, 2005; Michael Kesterton, "Miscellany," *The Globe and Mail*, July 25, 2005.
- 34 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 31.
- 35 Ronnell Avital, *Stupidity* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2003) 44.
- 36 I have adopted the neologism *manqué-hood* (cw sisterhood, manhood, childhood, statehood) to signify the condition or state of *manqué*.
- 37 I am indebted to my EGS colleague Klaus Ottmann, whose PhD thesis, "The Genius Discussion: The Extraordinary and the Postmodern Condition," introduced the challenging notion that the genius decision is "defined as an active-passive activity of the postmodern artist who is engaged in an activity of failure." For a PDF version of this dissertation, see Klaus Ottmann, "The Genius Decision, The European Graduate School," EGS, 28 Jan 2009, <<http://www.egs.edu/resources/klaus-ottmann.html>>: search; Ottmann The Genius Discussion.
- 38 See "lack," *Concise Oxford Dictionary* 2001.
- 39 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987) 42–3.
- 40 See "succeed," *Concise Oxford Dictionary*.
- 41 Derrida 45.
- 42 "The person endowed with talent thinks more rapidly and accurately than do the rest; on the other hand, the genius perceives a world different from them all, though only by looking more deeply into the world that lies before them also, since it presents itself in his mind more objectively, consequently more purely and distinctly." Arthur Schopenhauer in *Schopenhauer: Philosophical Writings*, ed. W. Schirmacher (New York: New German Library, 2002) 83.
- 43 See Elliott Leyton, *Hunting Humans: The Rise of the Modern Multiple Murderer* (London: Blake Publishing, 2001). Leyton argues that Hannibal ("the cannibal") Lecter, the aristocratic serial killer of fiction and film, bears no resemblance to his real-life counterparts Bundy, Berkowitz, Dahmer, et al., who are mostly from the working classes. Leyton's contention is that serial killers are not diabolical geniuses or insane but a product of their environment, which

is particularly influenced by American mass culture.

44 Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (New York: Norton, 1964).

45 Here the signal example is provided by Adolf Hitler whom author Joseph P. Stern describes as "an artist manqué." See Joseph P. Stern, *Hitler: The Fuhrer and the People* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1975) 45; and Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (New York: Overlook Press, 2003).