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What is wrong with failed art?

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to argue that proper artistic failure may turn out to be artistically appreciated and even considered as artistically successful. A set of arguments is provided in order to overcome intentionalism, the widely accepted view according to which an artist's intentions fix the artwork's meaning. Instead, we propose and elaborate an alternative model: emergentism of artistic meaning and value. Emergentism explains how artistic failure can turn out to be artistically successful. That is, artworks may succeed despite the failure of the realization of artistic intentions. It is argued that such a rehabilitation of artistic failures, perceiving them as not necessarily doomed, paves the path for experiencing failures as not merely failures. The paper suggests that under defined circumstances it is possible to receive aesthetic satisfaction from failures. Moreover, the possibility of treating failures as valuable, yet risky, artistic strategy is suggested.

Keywords

Failed Art, Success, Emergentism

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Mistakes and failures are common in art. From airplanes and watches featuring in historical movies to disastrous musical and theatrical performances, from geometrical errors in artistic images to cognitive falsehoods in novels, artworks are full of mistakes. But it is not enough: the art world is full of artistic failures as well. Dramatically bad-written fictions, unskilled painted portraits or naive songs are commonly encountered and contested. Failures are often experienced and judged as shameful, hard to understand or even embarrassing. And as such, they are responsible for destroying professional careers and are not easily forgotten (and forgiven) by fellow artists. To make matters worse, artistic failures work in mysterious ways. That is, sometimes it is not possible to point out an exact *cause* of failure. This brings lots of frustration and disappointment both for artists and audiences since there is a lack of vivid and tangible reason for spectacular disasters.

But does wrong art inevitably lead to artistic failure? And, conversely, is failed art *per se* wrong or bad? Taken abstractly, these questions sound rather silly: it seems obvious that artistic mistakes produce nefarious effects on artworks and that failed artworks are bad. Yet, this is not always the case: amiss attempts may turn out to be successful after all. The point is not only that mistakes in the representational content of a picture, or that historical errors in a novel, or in an Opera's *libretto* are not necessarily causes of artistic failure¹. Nor the point is merely that the same way the ugly may be aesthetically rewarding, mistakes may be intentionally produced in art. Rather, as already recognized for instance in 18th century French aesthetics², errors and mistakes, such as violations of formal rules, may turn out to be ingredients of "good" artistic achievements, while "mistaken" artworks may prove even more significant than "correct" ones. Moreover: as we shall argue in this paper, proper *artistic failure* may turn out to be artistically appreciated and even considered as artistically successful. Artistic success can mean two things: 1) the artist's success in realizing her artistic intention or her attempt at artistic production; 2) the success of the artwork as such³. We assume that those

¹ See Voltolini's and Fernandez's paper in this issue of "Studi di Estetica".

² See Mazzocut-Mis' paper in this issue of "Studi di Estetica".

³ Moreover, for the sake of simplicity, we limit our inquiry only to *artistic* failures. Nevertheless, one could ask about the relationship between *artistic* failures and *aesthetic* failures. The two kinds of failures could be distinguished as follows. Aesthetic failures refer to aesthetic properties realized in/by an artwork *Y*, whereas artistic failures refer to a much broader category (there might be non-aesthetic

who experience the artwork by appreciating it, interpreting it and evaluating it, are first of all interested in the artwork's value understood primarily not as an achievement of the artist, but as the artwork's success (which, as we suggest in what follows, should be spelled out in terms of its capability of developing artistic normativity). Therefore, against what Xhignesse (2020) assumes, success and failure are not exclusively properties of the artist's attempts. Here we will deal mainly with the success of the artwork as such; however, we will also refer to the artist's activity, especially when her failure becomes responsible for the artwork's success or is otherwise appreciable in the context of the experience of the artwork.

The paper has the following structure. First, (§1) we introduce and analyze the case of artistic failure which is, paradoxically, experienced and judged as "good" art. In the further steps (§1.1 and §1.2) the possibility of such paradox is explained and situated into a broader picture of artistic normativity. A set of arguments is provided in order to overcome *intentionalism*, the widely accepted view according to which artist's intentions fix the artwork's meaning, as resulting from the artwork's content (e.g. the colors and shapes of a painting, the notes of a musical piece, the dialogues of a theatrical piece etc.). Instead, we shall suggest an alternative model: *emergentism* of artistic meaning. Emergentism explains how artistic failure can turn out to be artistically successful: artworks may succeed despite the failure of the realization of artistic intentions. Next, (§2) we investigate the issue of experiencing failures as failures. By enumerating and explaining cases when artistic failures bring rewarding pleasures (§2.1), we sketch the dynamics of implementing failure as an artistic strategy (§2.2). A brief summary of our argument follows in the conclusion (§3).

1. *Artistic failure-as-success (bad good artworks?)*

First, let's explore the possibility of "good failed art", by considering the case of the disastrous movie *The Room* (Wiseau 2003). Due to its quirky and non-sequential dialogue, bad acting, prolonged sex scenes, completely out of place color effects, plot built on the most banal clichés

causes/reasons of *Y*'s failures). However, *Y*'s artistic failure can be caused by *Y*'s aesthetic failure and in such a situation the aesthetic failure may be a part of artistic failure.

and subplots that are inadequately resolved or simply disappear altogether etc., this film about the story of a banker betrayed by all his friends is widely known as the worst film ever made, “the *Citizen Kane* of bad movies” (Dyck, Johnson 2017: 279). The vicissitudes of the movie are narrated by the book *The Disaster Artist* (2013), written by Greg Sestero and Tom Bissell, who presented Sestero’s memoir about his involvement in the making of the film, as well as in 2017 movie *The Disaster Artist*, directed by the brothers James and Dave Franco and based on the homonym book.

The film about the film highlights something important: the disastrous failure of *The Room* turned into an unexpected and sensational success, so much so that the film became a cult movie highly appreciated by cinema experts and lovers. But the film’s success is due to the way the artist’s intentions are completely upset. In other words, the fact that the film fails to realize the artist’s intentions, and in that sense is wrong, does not prevent it from being a success beyond the expectations of the maker himself. As the actors involved in the production stated, Wiseau intended *The Room* as a melodramatic love story, but the film succeeds as a kind of weird black comedy. The success of the film therefore occurs despite the artist. Of course, the director declared that the flaws were intentional and that the genre was precisely the black comedy. Yet, it is plausible to believe that these declarations are part of the disaster, being the result of an awkward and clumsy attempt to regain possession of an artistic result that was completely out of the “artist’s” control. One may surely think that actually “the film was ‘good’ from the very beginning and what changed was not its quality (or the way it was appreciated) but the appreciators’ point of view”;⁴ but since artwork’s success, and therefore its artistic goodness, is measured on the basis of the appreciators’ aesthetic judgment, it is plausible to maintain that a failed artwork subsequently imposes itself as a successful one.

The phenomenon of artistic failures turning out to be successes is not restricted to cinema and does not only concern the present era (Dyck, Johnson 2017: 279 f). The point is not that an artwork fails in some respects due to some of its qualities and yet is artistically successful by virtue of other qualities. This could be the case of immoral art which, despite its immorality, has excellent artistic qualities (to stay in the cinematographic field, think of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the will*, 1934). However, the philosophical issue presented by the successful-

⁴ Mateusz Salwa, personal communication.

because-failed art is also different from artworks whose artistic goodness stems from it being ethically flawed, i.e. immoral (Eaton 2012). The question at stake here concerns the artist's responsibility for the artwork's artistic value. In point of fact, the fundamental distinction between the aesthetic experience of an artwork and that of nature, is that the former is made by a human being and embodies human meanings and intentions, displaying the artist's perspective on reality, on history, on life, on human relationships etc., while this is not the case of natural beauty. In other words, much of the artwork's value depends on what Dworkin called the "performance value" (Dworkin 2011: 197 f, 241 ff), i.e. the value of being the result of human activity. Yet, in artworks which succeed not only in spite, but by virtue of their failure, the artist is not responsible for its success. Thus they lack performance value. How can they succeed as art?

Intentionalism is the view often praised as accounting for artistic value's dependency on human activity. It is a thesis, which states that an artwork's meaning depends on the artist's intentions (Livingston 2007) and seems to respond well to the need of assigning the right weight to the artist's performance in the assessment of artistic value⁵. Indeed, in an intentionalist perspective, if, as it seems, Wiseau's belated statements are nothing more than an opportunistic ploy to take creative credit, *The Room* is simply a resounding fiasco: not only is it aesthetically questionable, but the finished product is far from fulfilling the intentions that seem to have guided its production. But does intentionalism, also implicitly endorsed by Wiseau, who corrects his intentions *post factum* (Dyck, Johnson 2017: 293), offer an adequate account of artistic creativity and artistic value?

⁵ Alternatively, instead of intentions – considered unsuitable to explain the meaning of art because they are hidden in the artist's head – one can resort to the notion of "sanction", that is, intention made publicly recognizable through the artist's direct intervention in the artwork or through public declarations, writings, etc.: this correction of intentionalism proposed by Irvin 2005 goes in the direction of contextualism. According to contextualism, artworks' evaluation and interpretation must take into account artistic practices. The view we suggest in this article – emergentism – preserves the perspective of contextualism, but makes it more dynamic: artworks intervene to transform the normativity of the relevant artistic practices. This implies that even the artist's sanction is not the ultimate criterion for the interpretation of the meaning of the work and for its artistic value and success.

1.1. *Problematizing Artistic Intentionalism*

We believe the answer to this question depends on how the concept of “intentionality” is understood. If the intention is understood as an internal state of mind that causes the actions that lead to the realization of work, intentionalism is to be rejected. Not only, in general, is it theoretically incorrect to explain intention in this way – since such an explanation involves the problem of the “deviant causal chains”⁶ – but, in particular, such an account of artistic intentionality contradicts the creative character of artistic making.

As argued by Preston (2013), the intentional character of an action does not depend on intentions preceding the action, conceived of as causes of the action detached from the context, in which the action takes place. Rather the intentionality of the action is articulated through realization of the action in specific circumstances. So an event is intentional, and it is an action (which is intentional in itself), if and when it is plausible to describe it by attributing responsibility for it to an agent (Bagnoli 2010), i.e. when it is possible for someone to declare “I did what happened” (Anscombe 2000).

This is particularly evident with creative agency, as in the case of artistic production. According to a plausible idea of creativity, a creative result cannot be traced back to plans, recipes and intentions, but emerges beyond them. Otherwise it wouldn’t be creative (Bertinetto 2012). This seems to correspond to the widespread and traditional belief that the creative artist does not well know how he produces his artistic inventions: he does not completely control the ideas, techniques, processes, and

⁶ It is a problem highlighted by Roderick Chisholm (1966) with this famous example. A man wants to kill his uncle to inherit his assets. This thought, formulated while driving his car, makes him nervous. This causes him to lose control of the car and thus he runs over and kills a passerby, who turns out to be his uncle. The conditions of the causal theory seem satisfied (the intention to kill the uncle causes the movements that satisfy the intention), but clearly the killing of the uncle cannot be defined as an intentional action. The defender of the causal theory can correct the example by arguing that the guy intended that kind of result, but not that particular result. Therefore he can argue that the action is intentional if the intention to achieve this result causes the achievement of this result. However, this explanation does not answer the question of what specifically characterizes the intentional action. In fact, the question of whether the man really intended this result is exactly the question of whether the action is intentional. Instead, what is needed here is an explanation of what it means that he intended this particular action: this is exactly the explanation that the causal theory should offer, but instead presupposes.

materials thanks to which the artwork is created (an idea that is found both in the Platonic conception of the inspired poet and in the Kantian view of genius as nature that gives the rule to art). If it depended entirely on previous knowledge, the result would be expected and would not offer truly new outcomes. Since novelty seems to be a quality that a creative product must necessarily have, if the object produced were the result of applying rules and intentions, it would not be something creative and, not being creative, it would not be a successful artwork.

This is the reason why intentionalism can explain artistic value, only if “intention” boils down to a perspective on the action under which responsibility for what happened can be attributed to an agent *post factum* (let’s call this view “attributive intentionalism”)⁷. Conversely, if “intention” is understood as a mental state possessed by the artist before the action and causing the action (let’s call this view “causal or mental intentionalism”), intentionalism cannot explain artistic value. In point of fact, although artworks ensue from the artist’s agency, artistic meaning cannot be traced back to the artist’s intentions understood as his internal mental states: it emerges on them, otherwise the artifact would not be creative. Not only that: an artwork’s meaning and value emerge from the interactions between the artist, the materials, the cultural contexts of artistic practices, as well as from the interactions between the artwork and the appreciators. These evaluative/interpretive interactions can be understood in terms of *conversations* (Carroll 1992). Yet, just as a conversation’s meaning does not depend on the speakers’ private intentions, but emerges pragmatically through the conversation itself (Sawyer 2001), so an artwork’s meaning and artistic value emerge through the “conversation” between the artwork and those who experience it (Huddleston 2012).

⁷ One may try to defend intentionalism by arguing that an artist may change her intentions and plans of actions. An artist may find that her attempt to produce her work W1 has failed and so she can use the failed attempt to produce a second W2 artwork based on W1, but resulting from different intentions. “So the failure of W1 can be the success of W2 because those are two different, albeit related, works. Notice that, alternatively – and this would fit the Wiseau case better – we could claim that W1 has been appropriated by someone other than the artist (e.g. critics) and turned into a different work (W2)” (Elisa Caldarola, personal communication). However, this attempt to defend intentionalism fails, because it multiplies entities unnecessarily. As the case of Wiseau precisely teaches, his work is only one: *The Room*. There are not two works with this title, but only one: a work that is successful thanks to its failure. Intentionalism fails to explain this case, so it must be dismissed.

While abandoning causal/mental intentionalism, one could nevertheless support attributive intentionalism by defending a *categoricalist/contextualist view* according to which the plausibility of the assessment of work's artistic value depends on considering it based on the correct category. Judging *The Room* along the lines of this reasoning, famously defended by Walton (1970), it could be argued that the consistency of the judgment of its artistic value depends on placing it in the *right* category and this may in turn depend on the reference context. Indeed, as Danto (1981) argues, artistic properties change according to the reference context: they are not reducible to perceptual aesthetic properties. For this reason, two materially identical objects can be two different artworks or one of the two can be a work and the other not. Or even the same artwork can be successful or failed depending on the reference context, as well as on the category on the basis, of which it is judged⁸.

Hence, how can the judgment that a failed artwork is actually an artistic success be justified? One may think that a necessary condition for the justification of this judgment is to find the correct artistic category the artwork belongs to. This category would provide the basic reason for the judgment, according to which the artwork can firstly be considered as a failed artwork and secondly as a successful one. However, which is the right category in which *The Room* must be placed, in order to consider this failure as a success? Tooming (2020) argues as follows. Considered as *movie*, *The Room* is simply bad; but considered as a *bad movie*, it is a good, indeed an *excellent* bad movie. While its main striking aesthetic quality can be its bizarreness (as claimed by Dyck, Johnson 2017), its artistic value depends on its aesthetic appearance being the unexpected result of its maker's glaring incompetence. While a bad film (and generally a bad artwork) can be the result of intentional competence – only those who know how to do well, can intentionally do bad – only an incompetent “artist”, i.e. someone who fails to realize her artistic intentions due to lack of competence, can make a *good* bad artwork.

As Tooming (2020) argues, bad art can be good because and when it expands the perspectives on what is possible to do artistically by working in/with an artistic medium. To appreciate it, one must consider it not in

⁸ A strong reading of that thesis (in the Waltonian spirit) would be that when we judge *Y* as belonging to *x*-category we assume that *x* is the right (or, the correct) category – also in ontological terms – to experience *Y*. In this paper, however, we would like to remain neutral towards such a reading.

terms of natural beauty, but in terms of art. The reason for this is twofold: (1) bad art can be appreciated only if and only because it is viewed as *artistic* failure regarded as successful – which means that it is not the outcome of natural events, but results from an intentional agency which is attributed to an agent, although the agent failed to achieve her purposes; (2) due to the artist's failed attempt, the artwork becomes, differently, successful. In this sense, as recognized by Tooming, it is a case similar to *artistic luck* (see Bertinetto 2013). In both cases artistic merit is realized independently from an artist's intentions and, more generally, from an artist's competence and performance. Nonetheless, the artist's agency is necessarily involved in the result; otherwise this would simply not be art at all. Actually, success due to failure as a result of incompetence is not only similar to artistic luck: it is rather *a case of artistic luck*. Incompetence (which is a question of degree) may or may not be a component of artistic luck. The crucial point is that something that should jeopardize the artist's achievement becomes the cause of the artwork's success. Here is a famous example: as told by Pliny (1938: 102), the sponge thrown against the canvas casually painted the dog's foam that Protogenes was unable to paint intentionally⁹.

More radically, what would have been wrong based on previous intentions and standards of value, turns out to be unexpectedly successful due to different criteria and meanings emerging out of the (interpretational interactions with the) artwork itself and its vicissitudes. The point is, then, that, in a sense, the artwork develops artistic normativity by establishing its own purposes and standards of success based on itself (as reflected in the audience's interpretations), while taking a position with respect to the normative criteria in place in artistic practices. These standards may be realized and interpreted independently from the purposes and standards of value that guide the artist's attempts of producing the artwork¹⁰. Hence failing in accomplishing the artists' purposes may be a way to satisfy the artwork's *own* purposes¹¹.

⁹ According to Xhignesse 2020, *artistic luck* does not exist, because, as he defends, there is no accidental art. But this is only true if artistic success and failure are understood, as he does, solely as the success or the failure of the artist's attempt. But as we are arguing in this article, this is not the case. The artistic success is importantly also that of the artwork and, being so, the artwork can be successful despite the failure of the artist: this can be a genuine case of artistic luck.

¹⁰ Naturally, we are able to distinguish the artwork *Y* and *Y*'s interpretation by the audience.

¹¹ See also Bertram's paper in this issue of "Studi di Estetica".

Architectural ruins offer an exemplary case¹². They may be seen as failures, when considered in relation to the building whose deterioration and destruction they exhibit. However, their general artistic meaning as ruins, can be considered differently. Not simply as “art returned to nature”, but rather as an exemplification of the transience, caducity and fallibility of human agency and the results thereof. Once the artist’s intentions about artistic meaning of an artwork are entrusted to an artefact exposed to the natural-physical and the cultural-historical events beyond his control, they cannot be understood as solely responsible for the work’s value. So the failure of intentional agency can turn out to be an artistic success after all. Yet, this does not make the successful quality of good failed art and of ruins merely aesthetic (as argued by Dyck, Johnson 2017). The focus of appreciation (Davies 2004) is not exclusively the aesthetic quality of the artifact, but the artifact’s aesthetic quality, as resulting from an agency, which has lost control over its effects¹³. Good failed art, ruins, and other cases of artistic luck thematize, as it were, this aspect of artistic value, by directing our attention on the way, in which the artist’s failed or ineffective intentionality is contrasted by the (physical and/or cultural) vicissitudes of the artwork that become part of its very artistic content, (trans)forming it. Of course, the goodness of a failure is an evaluative matter. Yet, evaluation is inescapable in aesthetic issues and the point we want to highlight is that when bad art is, after all, recognized as good, artistic value is in play. Which means, it is (if implicitly) mobilized by the (evaluated) artwork.

1.2. *The emergence of artistic success (out of failure)*

If this is the case, the contextualist framework on which Tooming’s proposal is based must be revised. Contextualism is certainly a step forward compared to intentionalism (and, especially, to causal/mental

¹² See Somhegyi’s article in this issue of “Studi di Estetica”. Another possible architectural example is the leaning tower of Pisa.

¹³ Moreover, we would like to follow Amie Thomasson’s view (2005) on artworks and knowledge in aesthetics. In short, the ontology of art (concerning e.g. questions regarding the ontological category to which an artwork *Y* belongs to) is not similar to natural science. That is, in the ontology of art we do not “discover” anything as independent from us (artworks are not similar to natural kinds). Rather, artworks’ nature is determined (at least partly) by what we think of them and by how we appreciate them. See also Margolis 1999.

intentionalism). But it is still too short a step. The point is that contexts and categories are not like boxes in which, so to speak, the artworks are to be inserted, so that all, which needs to be done, is to put the artworks in the correct categories. Artistic normativity is a more dynamic and self-regulating process (Bertinetto 2020). While new artworks are not simply placed in an artistic context, but take position towards the context, impacting it and potentially transforming it, artistic judgment mobilizes artistic categories, thereby taking a position towards them and transforming them as well. Contexts and categories are constructed by artworks and aesthetic judgments. Judging the success or failure of an artwork amounts to contributing pragmatically to the articulation of the artistic normativity. For this reason, that an artwork fails with respect to standards of value and artistic categories valid in a cultural context does not exclude the possibility that, precisely for this reason, it can contribute to transforming the context by creatively bringing out different artistic values. This is why artworks may succeed despite the failure of the realization of artistic intentions: they can be (taken as) artistically successful, because they are accepted as successful in a sense other than that implied in the (alleged) intentions of the art maker. Artistic value does not depend on intentions, but on artistic practices, including appreciators' interpretive practices¹⁴.

Hence, *The Room* does not necessarily have to be regarded in the category of bad art in order to be appreciated as good. "Good" and "bad" seem to be too general predicates in this case: they simply imply the difference between successful and failed art. Furthermore, if "good" performs some relevant function, it is plausible to argue that "bad" recedes. According to Dyck and Johnson (2017: 292) "we appreciate the way that these works fail despite the attempts of the work's creator(s)." However, this view is wrong. In reality, we rather appreciate the artworks' value due to their makers' failure: we appreciate the emergence of their artistic value based on their failure. In other words, to appreciate the artwork as good means no longer see it as bad: that is, it seems to be a case of a "duck/rabbit image". In a moment we can see it in one way or

¹⁴ In a certain sense, our proposal falls under what, following Dyck, Johnson 2017 (288) is called "aestheticism". But on closer inspection, our position would be aestheticist only if we defended artistic intentionalism. However, our thesis is contextualism extended in an emergentist sense. What is more, interpretation and ontology of art are, at least often, closely connected. That is, how we interpret artwork (e.g. where it "begins" and "ends") is crucial for artistic practices and aesthetic appreciation. See Kraut 2011 and Bertram 2019.

in the other, not in both, although we can understand the relation of both views. There is a first stage, in which a kind of Wollheim's "seeing in"¹⁵ occurs and the artwork is seen as a "success in failure"; afterwards the artwork is seen as a success (despite its having been engendered by a failure), and it is not seen as a failure anymore, but as a success. At the level at which the artwork is seen as a success it is not seen as a failure (and *vice versa*). In any case, what needs to be done to support the judgment of the artwork as a "successful failure" is to specify the reasons for the judgment's justification. For instance, it can be argued that *The Room* can be considered as a good movie, if you see it not as a Hollywood-style romantic melodrama but as a black comedy or, more precisely, as an example of the performative reflection on melodrama that can lead to a black comedy. In this way, however, the film is not only included in the group of films that can be labeled as "black comedy", but contributes to developing the category itself of "black comedy" further, as a specific possibility of artistic value, by means of including the vicissitudes of its production and reception in the artistic content. At the end of the day, the point is not whether the film fails as a film and/or succeeds as a bad film, but whether it succeeds as art or as a result of a creative doing which, in itself, escapes the intentional control of the artist, thereby mobilizing artistic normativity.

Therefore, by extending contextualism in an emergentist sense, and supposing that it is possible to apply to art in general what has been argued with respect to cinema, it can be stated that a failed artwork can be artistically successful, if it contributes to "creatively" feed the artistic normativity of artistic evaluation back.

Not only that. Even a blatant artistic failure, apparently without any possibility of redemption, can succeed in providing a valuable perspective on the meaning and the value of art, thereby being, under this aspect, a valuable artistic outcome. This may happen by giving impetus to the creation of other works of art, as in the case of the film *The Disaster Artist*, whose artistic success depends on the narration of the crazy story of the production of a surreal soap opera, that is, on the narration of a wonderful fiasco, which receives unexpected artistic dignity and value in this way.

¹⁵ *Seeing-in* is the twofold perceptual experience entertained by viewers of pictures, who simultaneously grasp the picture's physical basis and the objects presented in the picture. See Wollheim 1980.

2. *Experiencing Failures as Failures (But Somehow Pleasant Ones)*

As we have shown, the line between failure and success is often thin, indeed. Not only that: failure and success are — (1) definitionally and (2) metaphysically — bound to each other. (1) Each of them cannot be conceptually understood without its opposite and (2) when experiencing failure or success, we are often aware that the possibility of such experience is grounded in the possibility of a completely reverse experience, although, as it is trivial to say, the phenomenology of failure and success is marked by the inner dynamics of the two: it's quite natural to say that people usually treasure and remember experiences associated by some kind of success, whereas experiences of failure are often painful and something we desperately want to forget. Unfortunately, in many cases, reminiscences of failures are the most lasting memories.

However, failures are not just mere sets of important flaws in the object. If that were the case, there would be a certain "level" or "limit" of flaws that can be reached or absorbed by a given work of art. And beyond/over that level the artwork would always be doomed for failure. Nevertheless, many artworks do have some minor (or, from time to time, even major) flaws which in fact do not prevent them from being beautiful and satisfying. Sometimes, it's even the opposite: we say that an artwork is really a masterpiece *despite* its flaws¹⁶. In other words, judging *Y* as an artistic "failure" is not logically or causally connected with formal or contextual shortcomings of *Y* (there might be none), nor is it always associated with a technical or historical mistake *per se*. Although, naturally, failure might be accomplished through mistakes and flaws as well¹⁷.

Hence, failure is not experienced as an easy to swallow flaw or as a mistake that can be overcome or simply neglected. It's rather something total, overwhelming: real failure, in this sense, is a disaster, a catastrophe, obviously an artistic disaster (as in the case of *The Room*) that also may have existential consequences. From the point of art criticism discourse we could talk of "tiny" or "huge" failures, but metaphysically speaking being a failure is a one-zero state. Similarly, an *almost* realized art-object attempt is just a failed artwork (Mag Uidhir 2010). This point clearly highlights the irreversibility of failure; it cannot be fixed or corrected. In

¹⁶ Just for an example, think of the wrong proportions between limbs, head and trunk of the body of the dead Christ in Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ* (c. 1480).

¹⁷ See Arielli's article in this issue of "Studi di Estetica".

this sense, failures are final. Such a situation causes a feeling of deep dissatisfaction and disappointment. Aesthetic disappointment is the psychological state in which a subject thinks, or imagines, or feels that there might be an alternative way to get satisfied by aesthetically experiencing something, however this road is not taken. As Russell Quacchia describes it: “[...] feeling disappointment implies that we do not feel that there is all that much we can do about the unfulfilled situation [...]” (Quacchia 2020: §3).

2.1. *The pleasures of failures*

Yet, as we have already argued, artistic failures are characterized by a different logic. Is every failure something unpleasant by definition? Or is it possible to have rewarding experiences, even if everything is going down and apart? We do not want to say that such failures do not bring any sense of disappointment, dissatisfaction or even frustration. They mostly do. However, what we shall suggest here is an initial, explorative theoretical framework for understanding situations where our experiential response to failure could be described rather as satisfaction, pleasure or even relief and joy. In the previous sections we have shown that under strictly defined circumstances failure could be turned into success and — as such — being a subject of positive aesthetic appreciation and experience. Here, we would like to broaden the scope of the inquiry even more and shall claim that failures *qua* failures can be positively *artistically* (and sometimes even aesthetically) appreciated. In other words, artistic failure can be appreciated also when it is not transformed/upgraded into something different (in particular, *success*) but remains in our experience as it originally has been: just a failure. We will consider two situations where aesthetic pleasure is strictly connected with failed art *as* failure.

1. Artistic failures are not so bad after all, and sometimes even beautiful: we respect them and for some reason we enjoy them. That is, they are failures *simpliciter* but the *way* of failing is artistically and aesthetically rewarding. However, these positive evaluations — paradoxically — do not elevate such failures into artistic success at all. This happens, for instance, when witnessing the process of an artistic failure, while the artist is struggling not to fail. An extremely painful yet irresistibly funny example is a performance of the Polish National Hymn by the famous singer Edyta Górniak at the Mundial 2002 (Korea – Japan).

Górniak was desperately trying to manage her voice over the course of the entire song and her struggle was very disquieting for listeners, as well as for the football players. In the Polish pop culture it is often claimed that the Polish team failed *because* of that botched, yet very funny, song performance. Now imagine another example: you're watching a contemporary dance show and one of the dancers dramatically fights for keeping her body in shape, following the rhythm and properly synchronizing with fellow dancers. As we have argued earlier, the artwork's meaning is generated not by the artists' intentions but rather emerges via a dialectical process of self-establishing artistic norms. This is especially evident in case of performance art where the materiality of the artistic event is created through the interaction between performers and viewers (Fischer-Lichte 2004). In some cases, for example in a dance or theatre improvisation, we can witness an artist struggling to adapt to the interactive process that is taking place and that is articulating its artistic meaning in the moment: we see how she attempts to coordinate with others, trying to respond to the artistic affordances of others, yet she dramatically fails to do so; the artist truly fails to offer a contribution that becomes a constitutive part of the interactions through which an artistic sense emerges. And such a failed personal performance might weaken the value of the entire show *in toto*. Nonetheless, such a struggle with her own body and the final failure might be a valuable performance in itself. Her effort, even if unsuccessful, can be appreciated aesthetically and artistically: we are able to prize her determination as well as the beauty of gestures that are almost ideal and almost on time. Indeed, her failure can be appreciated aesthetically and artistically, not because of a sort of *Schadenfreude*, but because, for example, it highlights the dynamics of a performing creative process, thereby contributing to the whole artistic value of the performance. Nevertheless, it remains a failure.

More radically, we can also appreciate the global failure of an artistic process that does not realize the artistic meaning it suggests (as in the case of *The Room*). By listening to radical musical improvisation, for example, we can witness attempts to bring an artistic sense out of musical interactions on the spot. Yet this does not happen. However, despite the failure, we can appreciate the artistic intentionality that the attempt still manifests. Hence, although intentionality, as artistic sense, emerges through the artwork or the performance, in the above situation we still have a chance to see a failure *according* to suggested intentions:

the artistic intentions that transpire from what happens, even if what happens – the artistic result – does not seem to satisfy them.

In addition, one could ask, when exactly such failure is just a mere failure or when it becomes an *artistic* failure. Obviously, this cannot be predicted in advance, since every artwork generates its own meaning and criteria for success/failure¹⁸. However, we are certainly able to point out what facilitates our recognition of artistic failure: it is knowledge of the artistic medium associated with each artform and, thus, with each artwork (see Binkley 1977: 269-71). To put it simply: an artwork *Y* has both a physical and an artistic medium. The former is a material from which *Y* is created, whereas the latter is a set of parameters that determines a way of distributing the material (Davies 2001). The artistic medium sets conditions according to which *Y* should be experienced and judged. Now, we do not claim that we need to have any special knowledge about the artistic medium of *Y* in order to appreciate *Y*. What we suggest instead is that this knowledge of the medium allows us to see the norms of a given artform and that these norms are not fulfilled or broken¹⁹. In other words, with this knowledge about constraints and affordances of a medium at our disposal we are more in a better position to judge when *Y* is a failure or not. Here we propose an initial understanding of such an artistic failure: *x* is artistic failure of a work of art *Y*, if (i) *Y* possesses at least one aesthetically relevant property²⁰; (ii) *x* prevents *Y* from achieving aesthetic success; (iii) *x* is generated through insufficient realization of *Y*'s artistic medium; (iv) when perceiving *x*, a viewer is able to imagine *Y* being *x*-free as a possible artistic success; (v) aesthetic demerits resulting from *x* do not always influence the overall judgment of *Y*, that is, they are not necessarily responsible for the failure of the work of art as a whole. In other words, in

¹⁸ Of course, (some of) the criteria for the outcome of an artwork or a performance depend on the relevant artistic practice (see Lopes 2018), but the very validity of those criteria is questioned (and perhaps then reconfirmed or disowned) by the artwork itself, that at the end of the day reshapes artistic normativity. For reasonings along this line see Bertinetto 2020 and 2021.

¹⁹ This is also the case when we treat “norms” as something flexible and related to the history of artistic practices.

²⁰ We have borrowed this notion from Bence Nanay: “[...] if attending to *P* makes me appreciate my experience more (or less), *P* is an aesthetically relevant property. It is important that if attending to *P* of a particular itself makes me appreciate this particular more (or less), this does not give us reason to think that *P* is an aesthetically relevant property — what is required for *P*'s being an aesthetically relevant property is that attending to it would make me appreciate *my experience* more (or less).” (Nanay 2016: 72f).

the mentioned case of contemporary dance performance (Y) failure would be the dancer's lack of a proper synchronization with fellow dancers (x) which is a result of not sufficiently mastering rules and contentions determining what contemporary dance is and how it should be performed (artistic medium). When experiencing this failed dance we are able to imagine the whole performance as perfectly synchronized (x-free) and, thus, as a possible artistic success.

2. Failure may bring imperfection into art, although, as we saw above, this is not always the case: artistic success may happen in spite of or thanks to failure. Conversely, it is worth noting that not every imperfection is a sign of failure, especially when deviation from an artistic norm is intended and/or purposefully provoked. Yet, it seems that many failures produce imperfections and manifest themselves as imperfections. This is especially intuitive when we consider specific forms of art demanding a great deal of perfection (e.g. ballet) or particular styles (e.g. landscape painting at the time of French Academy)²¹. Sometimes, artistic success requires aesthetic perfection, in terms of precision of formal structures, coherence between the parts of a whole, exactitude in the execution of a project. The imperative of achieving beauty, which may be an important ingredient of artistic success, is in many cases closely linked to the demand of pure perfection. Nevertheless, perfection is not the standard of artistic success²². Thus imperfection – understood as a deviation from a formal canon – is not always an artistic mistake. In any case, imperfection, being or not a failure, can fuel the aesthetic pleasure for artworks. For this reason it is possible to enjoy failures as imperfections as well. For example, imperfection due to failure can open up the possibility to exercise our imagination, thereby receiving aesthetic pleasures. When perceiving (or, more broadly, experiencing) Y (a movie, a musical piece, a theatrical play....) as an imperfect failure (or a failure due to imperfection) – compared to ideas of a successful plot, development, coordination, and structure in terms of coherence, efficacy, insight, depth, intensity etc., which are standards for a given

²¹ The “tolerance” for imperfection varies in degree depending on the particular artform, genre or style.

²² This would make creativity determinable and predictable, and would make all artistic practices explicitly adverse to beauty – understood as formal perfection – unsuccessful (as is the case with Twentieth century artistic avant-gardes), which would be patently absurd. The normativity of artistic practices and of artistic appreciation is not regulated by an abstract standard of perfection. As we have seen, it is the single artwork that establishes the criterion of its own success.

artistic practice – appreciators are given the opportunity to imagine an alternative articulation to the ones actually taken by *Y* and to aesthetically savor their own imagining. In other words, a viewer or a listener is given the chance to imagine her own alternative solution, for example her own ending, to correct the failure and, thus, imaginatively make *Y* perfect (and successful) in reference to what she takes as the standard of success. The object of aesthetic appreciation is the imagined re-established status of *Y*, but this is possible only when *Y* is marked by a failure in the real world. And although the whole process of imagining an alternative artwork and savoring it is a subjective event, the pleasure is real: it is an affective aesthetic state that can be shown and communicated²³. Alternatively, failure as imperfection with respect to a predetermined normative aesthetic canon can simply overturn our expectations, taking us by surprise and provoking an aesthetic pleasure intensified precisely by lack of expectation. In this case, as claimed by Yuriko Saito, “Rather than imposing a predetermined idea of what beauty has to be, we are letting the object in various forms speak to us even if at first it may defy our usual expectations of beauty” (Saito 2017: §2)²⁴. What is more, accepting and appreciating failures as imperfections, as a positive contribution to the aesthetic quality of the artwork, but still as imperfections, does not imply the simple rejection of the significance of pure beauty and formal perfection for artistic appreciation. It rather invites us to more open-minded ways of experiencing art (and broadly, aesthetic objects), for instance ignoring the categories to which artworks belong²⁵. To sum up, appreciating failures as imperfections in the explained sense attests the failure of the logic of perfection in the arts, without asserting the success

²³ See Ingarden 1973 for examples of appreciating a work of literature along these lines.

²⁴ In this paper Saito refers mainly to everyday objects and phenomena, but there are no reasons preventing us from broadening the scope into the arts as well. Yet, the problem of the correctness of the aesthetic experience also arises in relation to nature, as can be seen from Perez Carreño’s contribution in this issue of “*Studi di Estetica*”.

²⁵ One may think that this would be a case in which the artwork is not experienced *as the artwork, which it is*. But since the artwork’s identity also depends on how it is appreciated, interpreted and evaluated, this is not the case. The identity of the artwork is historical and participates in the transformation of artistic normativity. Thus ignoring the categories of the artwork can potentially expand its ontological fabric. This interpretative enterprise can fail — an interpretation can simply be out of place and not be followed, remaining irrelevant to the identity of the work — or it can succeed and contribute to the evolution of the artwork (as Gadamer would have had it, as a stage of its *Wirkungsgeschichte*; see Gadamer 1989).

of an aesthetics of imperfection – which would be just the other side of the coin (see Bertinetto 2021). Rather, reflecting on this kind of appreciation invites us to endorse an *aesthetic of success* which shows the dialectical relationship between success and failure, thereby making clear the transformative and emerging dynamics of artistic normativity.

2.2. Failure as artistic strategy

Taking the above-mentioned pleasures of artistic failures, one could ask whether it is possible to adopt failure as an artistic strategy. Our answer is affirmative. Here we would like to distinguish two ways in which failure is treated as a meaningful way of artistic communication.

1. The strategy amounts to *accepting* possible failures when creating artworks. An artist really wants to succeed; however, when the outcome is exactly the opposite (that is, it is aesthetically judged as not matching his initial intention to succeed), he is (*post factum*) able to reinterpret and re-contextualize his work (as in the case of Wiseau's late declaration about his stylistic intentions concerning *The Room*). An outcome of that process might be acknowledging the artist's failure (according to her initial intentions) and the artwork's success at the same time.

2. An alternative option for using failure as a strategy is a situation when the artist *wants to fail*. This strategy has two versions: (a) the artist is *open* for failure, he is putting the work under such circumstances that are very much demanding and risky or he intentionally agrees to losing control over the course of the artwork's creation and/or interpretation. This was the case of Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint* (1987-2007), a series of artworks (photographs, drawings, paintings and sculptures) emerging from self-imposed obstacles. Alternatively, (b) the artist is driven by a *desire* to fail. That is, his goal is to fail and not succeed. This last option is endorsed by Judith Halberstam in her celebrated book *The Queer Art of Failure*: "We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities." (Halberstam 2011: 88) According to Halberstam failure is the only real strategy for queer art since only failure makes that art visible and yet not a part of logocentric discourse of success and meaning. One could object that queer art aims at contrasting the dominating norms and, as a result,

wants to be recognized as failed by those who follow these norms. Hence, this would really make queer art (successfully) successful. Paradoxically, however, the above point turns out to be a reinforcement of the strategy of failure, rather than a real objection. That is, queer art is just simply not interested in being successful, yet it is *very* much interested in being appreciated and judged by the artworld as equal to non-queer art. And as such, queer art contributes to the (trans)formation of artistic normativity.

Two things are evident regardless of a particular version of failure-as-strategy one may adopt. (A) Embracing failures in the art practice not only facilitates the idea of self-referential quality of artistic normativity (e.g. by undermining intentionalism), but also strengthens the autonomy of every *single* artwork as well: every artwork generates its own criteria of success and failure – that are found out by interpreting and evaluating the artwork through aesthetic judgment – and, as a result, cannot be judged just by referring to past or different artworks before the criteria emerge²⁶. Moreover, (B) it seems that artists are dethroned from their privileged position of deciding what a failure in their artworks consists of or not (Schmücker 2009). Failure-as-strategy is beneficial mainly for artworks in themselves, i.e. for the artworks' artistic meaning and value, and not necessarily for artists' personal career or artistic success.

3. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to sketch the framework for experiencing, understanding and interpreting artistic failures. We have argued that proper artistic failure may turn out to be artistically appreciated and even considered as artistically successful. By analyzing cases of the so-called “bad good” artworks, reasons for rejecting intentionalism in favor of emergentism have been suggested. We have shown that intentionalism not only prevents the explanation of artistic creativity, but also takes out the possibility of conceptualizing failure as success. As we have proposed, artworks may succeed despite the failure of the realization of artistic

²⁶ Please note that we do not claim that we cannot compare artworks to each other (e.g. to say that *Y* is better from *Z*). What we do claim, however, is that the validity of criteria of evaluation is not something *a priori*, because the artwork impacts on artistic normativity taking stance on criteria of evaluation and possibly, if slightly, modifying them.

intentions, because their artistic meaning (and, thus, success) does not depend on the artist's intentions: artworks, and their vicissitudes, generate their own criteria of success and failure. Such a rehabilitation of artistic failures as things not necessarily to be doomed has paved the path for clarifying the appreciation of failures as failures. We have explained that under defined circumstances it is possible to receive aesthetic satisfaction from failures. Moreover, as we have suggested, it is possible to consider failures as a potentially valuable, yet risky, artistic strategy²⁷.

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