PERCEIVING FAILURE: THE ABSURDITY OF A CULTURAL OBSESSION

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Introduction

Until the emergence of an avant-garde in nineteenth-century Europe, there existed consensus on what constituted “good” or “bad” cultural products, aligning with the interests of the institutions in power – the Royal Academies, museums, and universities – and making it easy for past producers to maintain standards that aligned with the lifestyles of the successful middle and upper classes. However, in the middle of the nineteenth century¹, art of the establishment became, in popular esteem, synonymous with having “sold out” or relinquished one’s values, completely altering the perception and interpretation of “good” and “bad” art. I plan to argue that these new perceptions of success and failure have flourished in Western – primarily Canadian and American² – culture, notably in the proliferation of the belief that one can be entirely responsible for one’s own successes or failures. This belief has, in part, motivated the “American Dream” – the idea that one person can rise from rags to riches through hard work and sheer force of will – while rejecting the powers of the establishment. This dream, however, is ultimately rendered cynical when confronted with the abject impossibility of its attainment, and the precarious nature of its reliance on our culture’s shifting notions of success and failure.

Subsequently, a culture obsessed with this fantasy has been (and is still) accentuated by society’s progression into and through American Capitalism, marked by an increased esteem for economic success. Regarding success in the art world, “economic success” can consist of *commercial success* as well as *critical success*. “Success” and “failure” are to be understood subjectively, but on a case-by-case basis where an assessment of the success is aligned with ‘popular esteem’, to establish an effective departure point for analysis. In addition, this culture is self-perpetuating: in a society that esteems success with such an aversion to failure, it follows that there will exist *perceptions* of success and failure independent of the actual event. These

perceptions will be presented in this paper in two parts: *Interpersonal*, which posits case studies of failure and success as observed by another, and *Intrapersonal*, which establishes perceptions of one's own success and failure. Of the interpersonal, emphasis is placed on the precariousness of notions of success and failure; *ambition* and *exertion* are both promoted as Capitalist characteristics, for example, but, as we will see, *overambition* and *overexertion* readily become common causes of failure. Of the intrapersonal, perceptions can be either grounded in reality and aligned with popular esteem, or an illusion of superiority or inferiority, informed by a cognitive bias.

The majority of this paper's scope will reference art and economic theory from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and will explore contemporary case studies of "success" and "failure", to investigate a period of the past few decades that incorporates the rapid evolution of Postmodernism and Capitalism and reaches to the present day. It is also critically important to acknowledge that this is a very North-American centric investigation of success and failure, supplemented by case studies and experts that together identify a parallel obsession in contemporary Canadian and American societies. Quentin Bell writes "In order to avoid confusion, it must at once be conceded that arguments concerning bad art are no more conclusive than arguments concerning good art. In the last analysis, they must rest upon assertions that cannot be proved...Unanimous judgements are not always reliable, but they do at least provide a point of departure".³ Establishing *popular esteem* as my "point of departure" was a very deliberate decision, and I chose to establish this parameter in part to remove the responsibility from myself as arbiter of good taste.

My research is informed by Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism*, which provides historical context to the popularization of Capitalism and its implications, Sky Goodden's 2013

review of Shary Boyle's pavilion at the Venice Biennale, for which Goodden attributed significant blame to the "overambition" of the show's directors and curators, and Andrea Fraser's *There's No Place Like Home*, an artwork in the form of an essay that critiques the art world's complicitous relationship with the art market. This paper will also be supplemented by transcripts of interviews with leaders in the fields of contemporary art and its criticism: the artist Micah Lexier, critics Sky Goodden and R.M. Vaughan, curators Stephan Hancherow and David Liss, and Professor Andrea Fatona. These voices contribute subjective experience to the otherwise theoretical discussion of an external occurrence. This paper will also examine a number of case studies: Claire Bishop's review of Danh Vo's pavilion at the 2015 Biennale, Murray Whyte's critical article on the Art Gallery of Hamilton's Ken Danby retrospective, Ingrid Jenkner's forthcoming review of Micah Lexier's *More Than Two (Let it Make Itself)*, the closure of Jessica Bradley's downtown gallery, and R.M. Vaughan's piece lauding the "revival" of Canadian Peter Wilde's artistic career. The paper will also reference a number of well-known theorists to provide historical context to the contemporary issues at hand, including Christopher Lasch, Charles Taylor, Sigmund Freud, Theodor Adorno, Charles Harrison, Judy Van Wagner, Judy Collischan, Russell Ferguson, Jane Gallop, and Clement Greenberg.

In the Introduction of *Postmodernism*, Frederic Jameson establishes working definitions for each of the (rather contentious) terms he navigates; he writes that this is particularly important for terms like *postmodernism* and *Capitalism*, which can have multiple definitions across multiple disciplines, and spark instinctive reactions from their supporters or critics.⁴ We must also acknowledge the fact that there is no universal notion of many of these terms, and that our understanding of them has been gleaned from our cultural understanding of their relevance. Consequently, I have created a lexicon specific to this paper, with which you, the reader, may

familiarize yourself for additional context into this investigation.⁵ Failure pervades the increasingly-digital world in which we are constantly performing our lives to one another, claiming success only when we can feel some sort of power over another. Western society's obsession with success – or, more accurately, the avoidance of failure – seems in conflict with the ever-innovating art world that promotes innovation, risk, and “new-ness”, but their affinity to Capitalism and its precarious notions of success and failure connect them. Ultimately, we must ask ourselves the “big picture” question: how does this model perpetuate failure in the pursuit of success, and, what are its greater implications?

Part I: Interpersonal Perceptions of Success and Failure

An investigation of success and failure can only be conducted through the perceptions of those involved, of course, as “success” and “failure” are not inherent qualifiers of accomplishment. When these perceptions address the success *of another*, rather than of oneself, they can be categorized as “interpersonal”, which typically legitimates critique more than any perceptions of oneself – the intrapersonal – would. Large numbers of shared perceptions - widespread disapproval of an exhibition, for instance – can then be used to establish the general esteem of a certain subject by a certain group of individuals. General, or public, esteem is useful as a departure point for this investigation, as Quentin Bell wrote, but it can also be problematic. Unanimous judgements, although representative of a large group of people, fail to acknowledge the institutionalized systems that often make these judgments inequitable. As we will see, Malcolm Gladwell wrote his “Art of Failure” to examine failure in athletes who choke, panic, or falter under pressure,⁶ but failure isn’t always so clearly delineated. Sometimes – oftentimes – the failure lies in a system that emphasizes the winner-loser dichotomy with such stress, tempting the winner with fame, money, and power, and taunting the loser with social castration, debt, and helplessness. Therefore, it only follows that a rational and informed investigation of this dynamic can only be constructed through remaining cognizant of the fact that we are studying these perceptions within the context of our society’s unique brand of Capitalism. As professor, curator, and critic Andrea Fatona expressed so eloquently:

Capitalism wouldn’t have gotten to this state without the appropriation of Indigenous lands; we wouldn’t have gotten to this state without the use of Black labour, and the slave economies used to create the Capitalist economy; it wouldn’t exist without the status of females being less than males, hence the caregivers of kids, so it’s predicated on a whole set of inequalities that fail when you think about them. We now see the folks that aren’t gaining the spoils of Capitalism ... light right up at the bottom, whether or not it’s poor white women, black women, the list goes on and on. And without those people, Capitalism cannot survive.⁷

On the Perception of Interpersonal Success and Failure

Malcolm Gladwell's 2000 article for *The New Yorker*, "The Art of Failure", looks at the ways in which "implicit" and "explicit" learning affect one's performance in situations of stress. He categorizes three common causes of failure: i) panicking, where the implicit system takes over and leaves you with only instincts, ii) choking, where the explicit system takes over and removes all your instincts, and iii) stereotype threat, when one falters under the pressure of defying a stereotype (e.g. that white men can't jump).⁸ Although the clean simplicity of the first two categories originally motivated me to write this paper, the influence of stereotype threat has become a much larger piece of the study. Gladwell's article is uniquely constructive in two distinct ways: it was written for a relatively uninformed public, and it is one of the few texts that examines failure as its own subject – most notably its perceptions. He writes "Isn't pressure supposed to bring out the best in us? We try harder. We concentrate harder. We get a boost of adrenaline. We care more about how well we perform",⁹ which serves to stress the significance of interpersonal perceptions of success, because one's perceptions of oneself aren't – in practice, at least – the most accurate arbiters of one's success.

The arbiters of today are, for the most part, very similar to those that existed for the nineteenth-century avant-garde and earlier; institutions, primarily museums, universities, and the media, hold severe influence over our perceptions of others' successes and failures. However, the integrity of this system could be said to be in danger, due to a widely acknowledged "crisis in criticism" that esteems description and objective observation over any actual criticism.^{10 11 12} Critic and curator Sky Goodden founded the art criticism platform Momus in 2014 after realizing the extent of her dissatisfaction with the state of criticism, particularly in Canada and Toronto. Previously, Goodden worked for *Blouin ArtInfo*, for which, in 2012, she interviewed *The*

Toronto Star's sole art critic, Murray Whyte, on the "current climate for criticism in Canada". She asked generally "What needs work, and in what ways do we succeed?", to which Whyte posited that the arts are constantly in danger of being written off due to Canada's "tight media market", and credits this inaccessibility to a lack of venues, a lack of critical voices, and a lack of international attention. As we will see later on, the issues of an inaccessible market are contentious simply at face value but can also serve as overwhelming obstacles for the non-mainstream artists on the periphery, severely limiting resources for artists of colour, artists with disabilities, and others who don't fit a certain, rather arbitrary, standard. These issues, although challenging to many markets, are uniquely difficult for Canadian artists who must contend with our specific model of Capitalism.

For David Liss, the Curator Advisor of the Museum of Contemporary Art_Toronto_Canada (formerly the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art), the issue of Capitalism presents a quite different set of challenges and opportunities. He argues "It is no coincidence that the fact that there are more artists working today, and more artists and galleries making a living today that at any other time in human history completely mirrors the dominance of unfettered Capitalism".¹³ He addresses the model's strengths (from an art world perspective) and its weaknesses (notably wealth inequality and exploitation) and then specifically addresses the tradition of donor-based funding, which can acutely reflect perceptions of any given artist's success:

Sponsorship has become a competitive field, and philanthropy always has been, but I'd say even more so today. There are tax benefits and social status associated with the art world, which can be motivating factors - aside of course from the simple and noble act of supporting something that one believes in for its own artistic and cultural merits ... but it seems that more so than 20, 30 years ago, people want something tangible in exchange for their generosity; a clear, evidenced-based 'return on their investment' so to speak. But of course, artist and cultural outcomes aren't always predictable - nor should they be, and that's what's exciting and important about art and culture - that it resides in the realm of the imagination and spirit.¹⁴

A provocative implication of this statement places donors, along with other supporters of the arts, within their own distinct compartment apart from artistic production itself. So then, why does it have such influence over our perceptions of these artists' success?

On Ambition, and Overambition

The model of Capitalism that currently dominates in Canada and the United States encourages ambition, hard work, and perseverance in its pursuit of economic success. Ambition, though, heightens the risks and rewards of failure and success; the capacity for ambition is admired as a strong Capitalist trait, but it alone cannot guarantee success. In fact, ambition without the necessary skill or creativity often reads as an *overambitious* failure, as we will see.¹⁵

¹⁶ ¹⁷ To look deeper into the frailty of the ambition / overambition balance, we turn to Claire Bishop's review of Danh Vo's Danish pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale, for which she credits her tedium in part to the reliance of Vo on many of his previously successful tendencies, including his "hermetic" representations of personal and biographical information.¹⁸ She then asserts this as "a symptom of [our society's] information overload", expressing uneasiness at his success in creating "seductive sculptures" despite a failure to properly resolve their open-endedness.¹⁹ We can ask ourselves, although Vo's works were ultimately celebrated as successful - why does his success make Bishop feel uneasy? It follows that she feels unsettled at the presence of successful work without any presence of the minutiae that typically make successful works work. This under-ambitious reliance on previously successful methods is criticized even in the article's title, "History Depletes Itself", but Bishop acknowledges that Vo is not the first to rely on the momentum of past success; "It is worth recalling that the Benjaminian model of history is fundamentally curatorial, revolving around the novel juxtaposition of preexisting objects that jolt the viewer into new awarenesses".²⁰ This model is represented

through Benjamin's recommendation of taking a "tiger's leap into the past", by citing successful historical moments strengthened by contemporary concerns and contexts.²¹ Although this practice seems to conflict with Capitalism's desire for innovation and ambition (with a forward momentum), the two ideologies seem to result in success for artists with the necessary acclaim to support it.

Cultural producers with less fame, however, – as is often the case with Canadian artists – are much more critically received when producing work that practices past notions of ambition – hyper-realist painting, for example. *The Toronto Star's* art critic, Murray Whyte, wrote a critical review of this inclination in the Art Gallery of Hamilton's 2016 exhibition of the realist painter Ken Danby, writing that "it smacked of the institution retreating to a neutral corner".²² He critiques the Gallery's delicacy in curating the posthumous retrospective, admitting that yes, Danby's work is very skilled in its realism, but arguing that the works could have been positioned more successfully with a more ambitious spin on the collection.²³ This lack of ambition resulted in an underwhelming and bland exhibition that failed to embody, in any sense, Capitalism's esteem for innovation.

Lastly, we must consider the artists who have achieved success without appealing to the Capitalist model, but who ultimately falter as a result of its peripheral influence. Shary Boyle is one such Canadian artist, who achieved international acclaim for her delicately detailed ceramic works, which then positioned her to represent Canada at the 2013 Venice Biennale. In a review of the exhibition for *Blouin ArtInfo*, Sky Goodden writes that the exhibition was disappointing for many reasons, repeating the uniquely Canadian challenges that can make or break an artist: "a lack of funding; difficult housing; a stark, safe, and removed curatorial direction, the result of governmental jurisdictions", etc.²⁴ However Goodden ultimately credits the failure to the artist's

“outsized ambition”, facilitated by a lack of involvement by the show’s directors and curators.²⁵ Here we can investigate two facets of this criticism: a) Goodden was unique among critics with her explicit disappointment in Boyle’s exhibition, and b) Boyle’s overly-ambitious Biennale pavilion failed while Danh Vo, as just seen, achieved success with an under-ambitious reversion to his previously successful tendencies. The first concern pertains to the “crisis in criticism” discussed earlier, which sees a lack of critical stance in art writing and theory. In a lecture, addressing the Boyle pavilion, Goodden says “everyone was talking about it but no one was writing it ... the silence was its own criticism”, reflecting the pervasiveness of non-critical writing.²⁶ The second concern cites Vo’s under-ambitious success in Venice in relation to Boyle’s overambitious failure, a seemingly reversed dichotomy that reflects the unique platform of the Biennale: “this is not the moment for experiment, this is the moment for expertise”.²⁷ This difference, combined with the amalgamation of critics, curators, and artists from around the world, highlights the effects and consequences of the uniquely Canadian and American²⁸ models of Capitalism in relation to the international art world. The avant-garde-inspired, Capitalist-influenced esteem for ambition and innovation was the foremost consideration for Canadians Goodden and Boyle, while the Vietnamese-born Dane, Vo, and the British-American Bishop concerned themselves more with the reputation and history of an acclaimed success.

On Exertion, and Overexertion

A few brief things must be said on exertion and overexertion, as reflected in the Capitalist myth of hard work. This emphasis on exertion and hard work, or rather, this emphasis on maintaining *the interpersonal perception* of one’s exertion or hard work, occurs throughout theory and throughout popular culture. It has become fashionable to brag about how little sleep you got the night before; not getting enough sleep is a source of pride for many and a successful

person only getting a few hours every night is glamourized across pop culture. However, exertion is only interpreted as a qualifier of success when success itself *is also present*. This can be inferred through the popular idiom “give it 110%”, which is not only a physical impossibility, but the spent exertion goes unrecognized when “110%” of one’s effort is still unable to achieve a successful outcome. In this way “overexertion” can be said to rest on the periphery of overambition, representing one’s intentions without possessing the necessary tools for a climactic success.^{29 30}

On Stereotype Threat, Phallocentrism, and Cognitive Biases

Gladwell’s “The Art of Failure” categorizes the three most influential causes of failure by athletes in moments of acute stress: panicking, choking, and stereotype threat. For Gladwell, stereotype threat describes the tendency for an individual who is being directly confronted with a stereotype about their demographic (e.g. white men can’t jump) to falter under the pressure they place on themselves, in the desire to “prove” their worth against any perceived bias.³¹ Although stereotype threat as an impetus for failure is predominantly a result of *intrapersonal* perceptions, its greater implications and applications show that the success or failure of an individual can be predicted solely within the mind of an observer with little or no prior knowledge about the subject. Gladwell writes about a study wherein two researchers at Stanford University gave a group of students a standardized test, telling them “that it was a measure of their intellectual ability”. White students in the class performed consistently, while their non-white peers performed much worse. But, Gladwell writes “when the same test was presented simply as an abstract laboratory tool, with no relevance to ability, the scores of blacks and whites were virtually identical.”³² Biases of the observers (of race, gender, [dis]ability, etc.) can either sway towards “failure”, based on the assumption that an individual was doomed to fail due to a factor

out of their control, or “success”, that an individual stands out from their demographic due to their “unusual” merit, in some instances simultaneously.

This stereotype threat can be broken down into smaller, previously-established, notions of biased perception, notably Phallocentrism, the obsession with the phallus and a belief in man as the superior sex. In her essay, *Reading Lacan*, Jane Gallop opines that Phallocentrist thought reflects the attempted covering of one’s inadequacies in order to have the right to speak or take up political space. Female artists and scholars, who “have always been considered “castrated” in psychoanalytic thinking”³³ traditionally do not represent the same force as their male counterparts, and as such do not demand the same space and attention to assert this Phallocentrism, as Gallop posits, referencing Jacques Lacan. Gallop is careful to establish that this “castration” does not implicate the sexual; for instance, despite the assumption that male and female artists ought to “fail” at the same rate, “failures” by women are disseminated more frequently in art journals, publications, and written reviews than those by their male peers, despite an overwhelming disparity in the representation of male and female artists by Canadian galleries and museums.

To quantify this inequitable representation of artists in Canada, Professor Andrea Fatona references a 2015 article by Canadian Art, which begins “We’re past the point where these kinds of statistical analyses are shocking. But they remain necessary, since, apparently, nothing changes”.³⁴ The article criticizes the disparity between the number of non-white and female artists, and the frequency of their showing at Canadian institutions. On average, 56% of solo exhibitions since 2013 have been of white male artists, while white female artists “place second” at 33%. Non-white artists, male and female, were represented in 8% and 3% of solo exhibitions, respectively. These numbers vary greatly province-to-province and institution-to-institution,

from the Vancouver Art Gallery's startling tendency to exhibit white male artists 77% of the time, to The Room's (Newfoundland and Labrador) and the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's lack of *any* representation of non-white artists, to the Winnipeg Art Gallery's relatively generous history of exhibiting white male artists, non-white male artists, white female artists, and non-white female artists 60%, 10%, 30%, and 10% of the time, respectively.³⁵ These issues of representation risk perpetuating themselves through confirmation bias, wherein institutions and media only support successful artists, who themselves are only successful through the support of these institutions and media.

Part II: Intrapersonal Perceptions of Success and Failure

Perceptions of one's own success and failure have traditionally relied on the same criteria that mark the success and failure of others: critical acclaim, wealth, social comfort, etc.

However, with the emergence and acceleration of an economic model that esteems success with such fervor, it follows that perceptions of one's own performance can become skewed and disparate from reality, due to a number of factors. Also, not unlike the interpersonal perceptions of failure motivated by stereotype threat, biased intrapersonal perceptions of performance can either be swayed towards failure (based on negative cognitive biases and insecurity), or success (motivated by positive cognitive biases and narcissism). It is the precariousness of these perceptions, and their reliance on a unique model of Capitalism, that will be investigated in this section.

On the Perception of Intrapersonal Success and Failure

Calculation dominates the practice of Toronto artist Micah Lexier, who seeks out opportunities to collaborate with curators and artists in bringing his concept-based projects to life. His practice, as described in Ingrid Jenkner's forthcoming review of his exhibition *More Than Two*, is situated as "idea-driven art" motivated by American Conceptualism of the 1960's,³⁶ and carefully balances intuition with calculation in producing successful work.

Reflecting upon the acquisition and perceptions of success by artists, he says "It's safe to say that no artist is truly content with their situation. We always want more for ourselves, there is always a show that we think we should have been in, there is no end to the wanting. And this is true for even the most successful artists you can think of".³⁷ In her text, Jenkner acknowledges Lexier's intuition-based approach, stressing the importance of his collaborations in exploring the delineated roles (artist-as-critic, artist-as-curator, etc.) that have traditionally been seen as "self-

aggrandiz[ing]” for artists to navigate.³⁸ Lexier is able to skirt around this conflict by maintaining his identity as an artist with creative intentions in all of his roles. When asked about his perceptions of success and failure, Lexier responded “like all things in life the important thing is to find the joy in the experiences that you do have ... and by this I mean in the making of the work itself. I have to remind myself over and over again how lucky I am and how to appreciate the opportunities that I have been given, rather than lament the ones I have not.”³⁹ This ideology is humble and optimistic, and reminiscent of the lessons learned in childhood; parallels cannot help but be drawn between Lexier’s (critically successful) practice and the schoolyard dictum: “you only lose if you don’t have fun”. In this respect, Lexier, along with Danh Vo, have managed to etch out successful careers that challenge the priorities of our Capitalist model while still achieving critical success along its terms. His current curator-collaborator Stephen Hancherow, however, holds a more tangible perception of success, centered on visibility and aligned with the other opinions explored thus far:

“success” in the contemporary visual art world requires an artwork to be visible or seen (or attempts to critique what is visible/invisible, e.g. Michael Asher among many others); it becomes open to interpretation from multiple publics, either positive or critical. It is part of the system of art, and success for some artists can be hinged on that resulting interpretation.⁴⁰

The most remarkable implication of these two, slightly opposing, beliefs is that the artist Lexier’s perceptions of success are almost entirely *intrapersonal*, while the curator Hancherow relies on the *interpersonal*. Again, as with David Liss’ assessment of the two halves of the art world – production (by artists) and funding (through donor and institutional support) – we can identify two distinct worlds with their own gauges for perceiving success: cultural producers (e.g. Micah Lexier) who are capable of embodying their own perceptions of artistic success, and those outside of cultural production (e.g. institutions, critics, curators, donors, and so on), who assign themselves the responsibility of arbitration in the absence of artistic production.

The former gallerist and dealer Jessica Bradley is another Torontonion who acts as a cultural producer to claim and embody her own notions of success. She has thrice chosen the Canadian representative for the Venice Biennale, enjoyed a prolific career as a curator and critic, and opened Jessica Bradley Gallery in 2005. Her practice engages deeply with intuition, and she credits her success as a critic and curator to “timing” and “a good eye”. On the launch of her gallery, in a 2005 interview with *The Globe and Mail*, she says “In this, as in everything else in the art world, timing is all.”⁴¹ The Gallery was open for ten years, during which time Bradley represented Shary Boyle and enjoyed critical acclaim. In a 2015 interview with *Canadian Art*, she seems to find peace in the closure of her gallery, acknowledging that this is simply a period of her life ending naturally.⁴² Ultimately, Bradley is successful in simply finding *fulfillment* in the event, much like Lexier’s fulfillment in enjoying the process as much as the final work.

Finally we come to the Canadian artist Peter Wilde, who moved to Berlin after being declared ‘too old’ for the Canadian art world. Exploring more international notions of success and failure, Wilde shares the same ideology as Stefan Hancherow, positing that our culture’s obsession with snap judgment derives from the omnipresence of pop culture and the celebrity status of the art world. In a 2014 interview with R.M. Vaughan for *Canadian Art*, Wilde says “I was told outright, “It’s too late for you.””⁴³, which carries the weight of an arbiter without any constructive criticism. Vaughan since has said “When I started writing about art, my writing was published in magazines and newspapers that just by their existence bore at least the semblance of arbiters. Really, it was a status not earned but merely given to them. People read what was “good” or “bad” from these vehicles out of habit, not any real belief in the vehicles’ reliability, or an earned “chronicle of record”. Could it be that this arbitration is meaningless in the absence of

a desire from cultural producers to be arbitrated, as we have seen in the successful practices of Vo, Lexier, and Bradley?

On Narcissism

Christopher Lasch, in his book “The Culture of Narcissism”, argues that narcissism⁴⁴ is a realistic and practical approach to “coping with the tensions and anxieties of modern life, and [that] the prevailing social conditions therefore tend to bring out narcissistic traits that are present, in varying degrees, in everyone”.⁴⁵ It is for this reason, among many others, that I will preface this section with the disclaimer that this paper does not presume to diagnose pathological narcissism, nor will it address any specific failure for which narcissism was responsible. Narcissism has presented itself as an unavoidable condition of our economic model; social conditions today perpetuate a “survival mentality”, according to Lasch, that creates a climate of competition and esteem for economic success where there otherwise would be none.⁴⁶ In fact, the “American Dream” itself is based on a narcissistic presumption: the concept that success is achievable through hard work and sheer force of will “rest[s] on its claim that the destruction of hereditary obstacles to advancement had created conditions in which social mobility depended on individual initiative alone.”⁴⁷ This context, along with Lasch’s theories of narcissistic thought and behavior, can be expanded to draw parallels between the interpersonal and intrapersonal perceptions of one’s performance. It can also serve to further legitimate the affirmative action policies that attempt to subvert the institutionalized modes of discrimination and “hereditary obstacles” that may exclude a cultural producer from a platform on which they otherwise belong.

Robert Greene’s book “The 48 Laws of Power” approaches the acquisition and maintenance of power in a way reminiscent of Niccolo Machiavelli, but absent of *The Prince*’s anachronisms. The “Laws” he establishes serve to guide one on a quest for power while

discounting any tendencies for empathy, selflessness, or non-lucrative collaboration; select examples include “Law 6. COURT ATTENTION AT ALL COST ... Law 27. PLAY ON PEOPLE’S NEED TO BELIEVE TO CREATE A CULTLIKE FOLLOWING ... Law 30. MAKE YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS SEEM EFFORTLESS ... [and] Law 46. NEVER APPEAR TOO PERFECT.”⁴⁸ These “laws” all exhibit signs of narcissistic thought: acute self-insight, calculating seductiveness, fear of dependence (while exhibiting dependence on others), and contempt for one’s peers, among others. But, for all its faults, narcissistic behavior does “make for success in bureaucratic institutions, which put a premium on the manipulation of interpersonal relations, discourage the formation of deep personal attachments, and at the same time provide the narcissist with the approval he needs in order to validate his self-esteem.”⁴⁹ So, narcissism exhibits traits conducive to achieving economic success in a Capitalist model – but not much else. As previously articulated, Capitalism esteems economic success *over all else*, including the empathy, selflessness, and non-lucrative collaboration that makes societies function.

On Cognitive Biases

Intrapersonal perceptions of success and failure can, like stereotype threat, be greatly influenced by one’s preconceptions of oneself (and others). These cognitive biases are often influenced by a myriad of factors: interpersonal perceptions of others, socioeconomic context, the extent of one’s [in]security, and others. The most prominent of these biases appears in the Dunning-Kruger Effect, which describes

A cognitive bias in which low-ability individuals suffer from illusory superiority, mistakenly assessing their ability as much higher than it really is. Dunning and Kruger attributed this bias to a metacognitive incapacity, on the part of those with low ability, to recognize their ineptitude and evaluate their competence accurately. Their research also suggests corollaries: high-ability individuals may underestimate their relative competence and may erroneously assume that tasks which are easy for them are also easy for others.⁵⁰

It follows that in a society that emphasizes economic success to such a degree as ours, there will exist individuals who misjudge their proximity to success or failure. This Effect, however, practically perpetuates failure; the low-ability individual lacks any desire for self-improvement, and the high-ability individual is condemned to misunderstand the competences of those around them. Additionally, narcissism perpetuates the same obsession with oneself as is reflected in the Dunning-Kruger Effect; together, the two phenomena stress self-awareness and self-involvement without any inclination towards empathy, democracy, or participation, an occurrence deeply indicative of Capitalism. Charles Taylor's essay "The Need for Recognition" in his book *The Malaise of Modernity* criticizes this individualism in the absence of an attached social ethic. He identifies a search for self-fulfillment as indicative of modernity, and a consequence of our society's esteem for high culture and a desire to emulate the success of others. Ultimately, then, we can understand the intrapersonal success we seek as merely a metaphorical manifestation of the admiration we subconsciously hold for the success of others.

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<https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2016/12/03/ken-danby-exhibit-does-artist-and-gallery-no-favours.html>.

Appendix A: Lexicon of Contentious Terms

Capitalism

Noun

1. Indicating the unique model of capitalism that emerged to complement the North American modernist period, and which now dominates its postmodern culture, predominantly that of Canada and the United States. Refers to the actual current model rather than an ideal or isolated system. Rarely used to indicate an economic model coincident and synonymous with postmodernism. *See Frederic Jameson.*
e.g. *Industrialization boomed under the economic model of Capitalism, pioneering new consumer goods faster than they can be used up.*

2. *dated, pejorative.* [Late Capitalism] Indicating capitalism as an economic model in decay, particularly by neo-Marxists. Originated with the Frankfurt School, citing Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, to refer to a theoretical model of capitalism with two emphases:
 - (1) an omnipresent web of bureaucratic control, and
 - (2) the consolidation of the government with major companies, also referred to as *state capitalism.*
 e.g. *That we are in a model of state, or Late, Capitalism, proves that Capitalism is simply another historically-limited model that evolves along with the needs of society.*

3. Indicating the pervasive condition of the Western world, predominantly of the United States, referring to both economic and cultural consequences, which can include new divisions of labour, influence over Second and Third World debt, enhanced computers and automation, gentrification, and an increased concentration of wealth.
e.g. *Capitalism's esteem for consumerism has pervaded all of Western society, exploiting the resources and labour of "the Other".*

Failure

Noun

1. Lack of success.
e.g. *His failure to finish the project resulted in a mark of zero.*
2. The omission of expected or required action.
e.g. *The supervisor was shocked by their failure to comply with industry safety standards.*
3. The action or state of not functioning.
e.g. *The doctor warned her of the symptoms of heart failure.*

Postmodern[ism]

Noun

1. Indicating an historical era of change across the arts and culture,¹ originating in the mid-to-late 20th century and referring to the movement in the Western world, predominantly the United States.

e.g. *The pavilion, dating to the 1980s, was classic postmodernism: architecture that made reference to older buildings and used decorative elements from other eras.*

- 1.1. Indicating the cultural complement of the economic model of Late Capitalism.

e.g. *The Postmodern period created the perfect climate in which to launch her new business venture.*

2. Indicating a stylistic era of change in the arts and culture marked by a rejection of the tendencies of the 20th-century Modernist movement, and referring to the movement in the Western world, predominantly in the United States.

e.g. *Postmodernism promotes a diverse range of ideologies that were misrepresented - or even ignored altogether - during the utopian period of Modernism*

Adjective *postmodern-ist*

1. Reflecting a reaction to the ideologies and events of the 20th-century period of Modernism.
e.g. *He agreed with the postmodernist notion that the focus should be on Modernism as it is realized in social practices and institutions, rather than as a self-contained, and hypothetical, theory.*

- 1.1. Indicating characteristics in direct opposition with those of Modernism, most notably increased skepticism and a critical response to the influence of ideology in acquiring and maintaining political, social, and economic power.

e.g. *The church is not immune from the postmodern suspicion of authority.*

¹ Some theorists, such as Frederic Jameson, extend the influence of the postmodernist period to include developments in the fields of economics and its theory.

Notes

- ¹ Rosenfeld, Jason. "The Salon And The Royal Academy In The Nineteenth Century". *The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. N.p., 2016. Web.
- ² Referring to the nation, The United States of America - not the American continent
- ³ Bell, Quentin. *Bad Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. Print.
- ⁴ Jameson, Frederic. 1984. *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic Of Late Capitalism*. 1st ed. London [u.a.]: Verso.
- ⁵ See Appendix A.
- ⁶ Gladwell, Malcolm. "The Art Of Failure". *The New Yorker* 2000: n. pag. Print.
- ⁷ Fatona, Andrea. Failure, Capitalism, and Artist-Run-Centres. *Interview*. 2017. In person.
- ⁸ Gladwell, Malcolm. "The Art Of Failure". *The New Yorker* 2000: n. pag. Print.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Elkins, James. 2011. *What Happened To Art Criticism?*. 1st ed. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- ¹¹ Davis, Ben. 2013. *9.5 Theses On Art And Class*. 1st ed. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- ¹² Goodden, Sky. Failure, Capitalism, and Momus. *Interview*. 2017. Telephone.
- ¹³ Liss, David. Failure, Capitalism, and Institutionalization. *Interview*. 2017. Email correspondence.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Kruger, Justin; Dunning, David (1999). "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 77 (6): 1121–34. CiteSeerX 10.1.1.64.2655. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.77.6.1121. PMID 10626367.
- ¹⁶ Greene, Robert. 2000. *The 48 Laws Of Power*. 1st ed. London: Profile Books.
- ¹⁷ Weir, Stephen. 2005. *History's Worst Decisions and The People Who Made Them*. 1st ed. Millers Point, N.S.W.: Pier 9.
- ¹⁸ "Claire Bishop On Danh Vo At The 2015 Venice Biennale". 2015. *E-Flux Conversations*. <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/claire-bishop-on-danh-vo-at-the-2015-venice-biennale/2372>.
- ¹⁹ Bishop, Claire. 2015. "History Depletes Itself". *Artforum.Com*.
<https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201507&id=54492>.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Whyte, Murray. 2016. "Ken Danby: Good, Bad And Ugly". *Thestar.Com*.
<https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2016/12/03/ken-danby-exhibit-does-artist-and-gallery-no-favours.html>.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Goodden, Sky. 2013. "VENICE Report: Shary Boyle's Missed Opportunity". *Blouin Art Info*.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Goodden, Sky. Proseminar Critics and Curators: Sky Goodden. *Lecture*. OCAD University. 2017.
- ²⁷ Goodden, Sky. 2013. "VENICE Report: Shary Boyle's Missed Opportunity". *Blouin Art Info*.
- ²⁸ Referring to the United States of America.
- ²⁹ "Japan Firm Considers 3-Day Weekends As Nation Rethinks Culture Of Long Work Hours". 2017. *Todayonline*. <http://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/japan-firm-considers-3-day-weekends-nation-rethinks-culture-long-work-hours>.
- ³⁰ Freud, Sigmund. 1962. *Civilization And Its Discontents*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton.
- ³¹ Gladwell, Malcolm. "The Art Of Failure". *The New Yorker* 2000: n. pag. Print.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Ferguson, Russell. 1990. *Discourses*. 1st ed. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art.
- ³⁴ Cooley, Alison, Amy Luo, and Caoimhe Morgan-Feir. 2015. "Canada's Galleries Fall Short". *Www.Canadianart.Ca*.
<http://canadianart.ca/features/canadas-galleries-fall-short-the-not-so-great-white-north/>.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Jenkner, Ingrid. 2017. "More Than Two (Let It Make Itself)". *Forthcoming*.
- ³⁷ Lexier, Micah. Success and Failure in the Arts. *Interview*. 2017. Email correspondence.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Hancherow, Stefan. Success and Failure in the Arts. *Interview*. 2017. Email correspondence.

⁴¹ Milroy, Sarah. 2005. "Looking For The Aha! Moment". *The Globe And Mail*.
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/looking-for-the-aha-moment/article18226751/>.

⁴² Balzer, David. 2015. "Jessica Bradley Discusses Closing Her Gallery - Canadian Art". *Canadian Art*.
<http://canadianart.ca/features/jessica-bradley-discusses-closing-her-gallery/>.

⁴³ Vaughan, R.M. 2014. "Peter Wilde's Berlin Spring: A Midlife Art Manifesto". *Canadian Art*.
<http://canadianart.ca/features/peter-wilde/>.

⁴⁴ For the purposes of this paper, a narcissist will be understood as one who: exhibits "dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied oral cravings", "pseudo self-insight, calculating seductiveness, [and] nervous, self-deprecatory humour", and withdraws themselves from "certain characteristic patterns of contemporary culture, such as the intense fear of old age and death, altered sense of time, fascination with celebrity, fear of competition, decline of the play spirit, [and] deteriorating relations between men and women". (Lasch 74-75)

⁴⁵ Lasch, Christopher. 1978. *The Culture Of Narcissism*. 1st ed. New York: Norton.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Greene, Robert. 2000. *The 48 Laws Of Power*. 1st ed. London: Profile Books.

⁴⁹ Lasch, Christopher. 1978. *The Culture Of Narcissism*. 1st ed. New York: Norton.

⁵⁰ Kruger, Justin; Dunning, David (1999). "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 77 (6): 1121–34. CiteSeerX 10.1.1.64.2655. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.77.6.1121. PMID 10626367.