4.1. Erratic diversity: Failure as feedstock creative

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Abstract

This paper seeks to approach failure as a strategic resource for innovation, taking into consideration its propensity to serve as a means to deviate from the norm, and what is it that instigates artist and public towards the exploitation and appreciation of such practices in an artistic point of view, with special emphasis towards technic and technological subjects, but not restricted to it. In this way, examples are presented in order to illustrate how such approaches have already produced results among our daily experience, as well as a historical perspective of normativity in art.

Keywords: failure, normativity, art, technology, diversity.

1. Introduction

> Without deviation from the norm, progress is not possible. Frank Zappa, 1971.

The exploitation of technological errors and failures has been a common feature in the arts for more than 50 years (Kelly, 2009; Iazzetta, 2009). With a wide range of references quoted by its practitioners that go from artistic avant-garde movements to political activism, the works inscribed among these practices, which include the unusual usage and customization of technological gadgets, software/hardware hacking and the whole DIY culture, might act towards building a better understanding of the man-machine relation and the influence of the medium in the everyday life, viewing this reality where the physical and the virtual begin to merge as one with a much more critical eye. As the black box which is technology (Flusser, 1985) is opened, the user has access to its core, and even though not necessarily knowing precisely how to operate it, messing around with it constantly leads to a wide variety of unexpected results, thus allowing for a greater understanding and appropriation of both medium and process, opening doors towards the different, the new. The deviation from the norm presents itself as an alternative to progress (Zappa, 1971); the error becomes essential: the flaw is a synonym to innovation.

In this presentation I won't be going into details regarding defining the concept of the failure or other erratic creative approaches, nor onto analyzing specific repertoire and practical matters related to it, as there is a good number of works already that delve into such matter. What I'll try to do in this lecture is to cast a light upon some of the different approaches to failure in art as to what is it that instigates producer and public towards the appreciation of the error and the flaw in such condition, failure, in special those related to technological matters, the man-machine relationship.

The questions that arises from these practices are as many as they are diverse, but this presentation will focus mainly on three different basic aspects that can be recognized among these practices as art, which constantly permeate each other in this appreciation process, and which cannot be easily separated from one another: the fetish for the perverted use of the tool; the aesthetic interest in the produced material; and the poetics inherent to the failure.

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2. Tradition and normativity

In a collection of contemporary art writings named *Failure* (2010), that being the central subject, Le Feuvre, the organizer of such publication, begins her introduction with:

> Uncertainty and instability characterize these times. Nonetheless, success and progress endure as a condition to strive for, even though there is little faith in either. All individuals and societies know failure better than they might care to admit — failed romance, failed careers, failed politics, failed humanity, failed failures. Even if one sets out to fail, the possibility of success is never eradicated, and failure once again is ushered in (Le Feuvre, 2010, p. 12).

Art has, traditionally and in a general sense, always been an ever-ending quest for perfection, about getting it right, about achievement through learning the techniques and producing according to the norm: about building a masterpiece that cannot be perfected any further (Le Feuvre, 2010). But, as Le Feuvre puts it as she goes on, artists have long realized the utopia of such task, turning their attention towards experimentation and eventually even failure itself as a means of rethinking the world and evading the dogmas established through normative practices (Le Feuvre, 2010).

Ever since the figure of the artist managed to separate itself from that of the artisan, which produces according to demand (Dereziewics, 2015; Blunt, 2001), in the eyes of society, the possibility to explore the novelty, for experimentation, became a reality. After all, there is no demand for something we can't describe or predict until it's actually done: it is not an option until that option actually exists.

Why then produce according to the norm if there was a whole world of possibilities left untouched? What would the better novelty be? Well, if we consider that society, our culture and even the educational system of most areas tend to be quite normative, we can probably understand why one would think that such systems have already been refined to perfection. And "perfection offers no incentive for improvement" (Whitehead, 2001, p. 57).

We are taught what is "right" and how to reproduce it in the same "righteous" way, but there is no point in perfecting something which is already a closed system in itself. All the same, accidents happen, for better or for worse, intentional or not. But the true difference for which will be the case, in special for an artistic piece, lies on the way we choose to interpret it. Was it not the case, we would probably only have figurative visual artworks and tonal/modal instrumental and vocal music. Was it not the case, we wouldn't have penicillin, as that would have been discarded as a contaminated bacteria colony. Was it not the case, we wouldn't have guitar distortion, champagne... You get the idea.

The thing is, it seems that several cases of discoveries, inventions, innovations, arises from an accident or a failure that, instead of being simply rejected, went through a different appreciation process. One that instigates curiosity, promoting a different approach towards a different situation. As Cascone puts it, regarding mainly digital productions:

> Indeed, 'failure' has become a prominent aesthetic in many of the arts in the late 20th century, reminding us that our control of technology is an illusion, and revealing digital tools to be only as perfect, precise, and efficient as the humans who build them. New techniques are often discovered by accident or by the failure of an intended technique or experiment (Cascone, 1999, p. 13).

3. Technology, society, power and progress

Since the 1950's, the western world has seen a particularly different reality arise. Technology became a fetish as it had seen several conjecture changes in the post war era. The boom of science fiction productions fed the minds of many, allied with customization and DIY cultures that were

already becoming a more common practice, for example in the whole amateur radio and vehicle customization cultures (Iazzeta, 2009). Iazzeta points out that:

> Part of the fascination exercised by atomic and space technologies reflects clearly the positivist conception of belief in progress and in the infallibility of science. And the more complicated the results of this progress, the bigger the feeling that some advancement was achieved. This scientific esotericism, instead of creating some sort of insecurity towards that which cannot be comprehended, had the opposite effect of disobliging the individual of understanding the behavior of these technologies and, mostly, of realizing the context in which they were produced[2] (Iazzeta, 2009, p. 107).

In art, this technological fetish would develop in two ways. One which would deify technology and have it used as a symbol for progress, and another, radically opposite, which would criticize it and act towards destroying the aura of perfection built around it, opening the black box (Flusser, 1985) which technology had become, several times through destruction itself.

Events such as the Destruction in Art Symposium and the manifestos written by Gustav Metzger, the festival's organizer, puts such approach as a "programmatic effort to confront destructive processes in society as well as the dialectic of destruction and creation in art" (Stiles as cited in Kelly, 2009, p. 129). Would a broken piano create new and unique piano sounds or would that be not a piano anymore, but something new?

These deconstructive and sometimes destructive approaches, which recognize in artistic movements such as Dadaism and Futurism their predecessors, begin to be systematically incorporated in artworks in the 1960's (Kelly, 2009). Noise, unpredictability and loss of total control over the process and product are part of this approach which understands man not as dependent of machines, but in a more symbiotic relationship with it. It understands that this technology is nothing more than a product and reflection of man itself (Iazzeta, 2009). As Kelly puts it: "Statements such as 'technology changes the way we see' miss the social and cultural significance of technologies and the way the social and the cultural shape the manner in which we use the technologies themselves" (Kelly, 2009, p. 27).

4. Failure in art

This perspective of empowerment of the human as an opposition to the deification of technology is the point where artists begin to grow interest not for the magic of technology, but for its errors, flaws, misuses and several other situations where this aura is broken through new and unintended uses.

Iazzeta points out that "[t]he fetish around technology has roots in its connection to some dimension of power"[3] (2009, p. 24). That is made clear for example in marketing strategies applied by the music industry which consists in constantly trying to associate its production to the latest technologies and, consequently, with the idea of progress, of novelty (Iazzeta, 2009) — new and better/new is better.

This power, on the other hand, is also constantly taken in an oppressive way. The power that establishes the patterns, the possibilities and the limitations. The machine, as a mediation device that is frequently dealt with as an artificial interactive life form, dictates what we can and cannot do based on what it does and what it does not understand. "Technology has no intuition, reflexivity

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[2] Back-translation from the original: Uma parte do fascínio exercido pelas tecnologias atômica e espacial espelha claramente a concepção positivista de crença no progresso e na infalibilidade da ciência. E quanto mais complicado o resultado desse progresso, maior a sensação de que foi realizado um avanço. Esse esoterismo científico, ao invés de criar algum tipo de insegurança em relação àquilo que não se pode compreender completamente, teve o efeito inverso de desobrigar o indivíduo de entender o funcionamento dessas tecnologias e, principalmente, de dar-se conta dos contextos em que elas eram produzidas.

[3] Back-translation from the original: O fetichismo em torno da tecnologia tem raízes em sua conexão com alguma dimensão de poder.

or ability to know if something 'looks right', yet the purpose of machines is to increase efficiency beyond the ability of the human hand" (Le Feuvre, 2010, p. 18). But, unlike humans, when it is not capable of comprehending something, it is the user who is taken as necessarily wrong. There is a reason why so many monitor screens were smashed, why so many computers have been punched, kicked and slapped, why so many cell phones were thrown at the wall: the malfunctioning device; the cheap and poorly built equipment; the terribly programmed software; all the bugs and glitches; all the incredibly annoying situations where an user simply finds himself trying over and over again to do something simple and logic that the equipment simply won't understand and/or allow it, with no clear explanation. The cause/consequence relationship is separated by the abyss of alienation of the process.

These situations, which most people have already experienced themselves, this transposition of the maddening bureaucracy into the mediation devices, are some of the ones who motivate this kind of destructive approach. The fetish for the perverted use of the tool lies in a sort of soul cleansing vengeance against the machine, forcing it into failure and then exploiting it in an aesthetic way, a sort of sadist delight in torturing the machine as this authoritarian entity that has been dictating the rules for so long. As an inversion, the oppressed becomes the oppressor. All of this also a metaphor to the wide variety of violence and oppression suffered in the contemporary society, a.k.a.: The System.

The mentioned aesthetic exploitation, on the other hand, goes through a different path. Driven by a great deal of affective memory and associations of semiotic order from several everyday elements grouped into radically different contexts, the aesthetic appreciation of the failure is closely connected to Marcel Duchamp's *ready-made* concept as something that had already been designed and existed prior to its artistic approach/use, existing as an artwork, therefore, based mainly on a different perspective towards the same object/subject, many times even through some kind of nostalgia (Moradi, 2004).

There is genuine and considerably general aesthetic interest in a great amount of material produced from failures. Interest enough to justify building largely commercial tools, available to the average user, that generates outputs that follows such aesthetic orientation. Failure generates material that could not have been intentionally produced by man without an enormous amount of work to simulate a process that might still look like a simulation, rendering distinctions, for example among glitch practitioners, between glitch proper, produced through actually glitching a technology, and glitch-a-like, which exploits sampling and plugins that were already built for the purpose of appearing to be glitches (Oliveira, 2014, 2016).

Presenting and consuming a sensorial production that, was it not for this different perspective and/or context would still be an unaesthetic material, creates a whole new world of possibilities for any given medium. The idea of focusing the attention from the foreground to the background, reveals the blind spot of our perception which is the result of a constant process of filtering of the undesirable elements, these being unexplored. The abstraction process to which we are constantly induced teaches us to see only what is intended, as Iazzeta points out about the early days of phonography:

> As any illusionism spectacle, it was about making the public concentrate in that which was interesting (the fact that a machine could reproduce quality music) and let the clues (in this case, the reproduction noises and distortions) that it constituted an illusion escape[4] (Iazzeta, 2009, p. 91).

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[4] Back-translation from the original: Como todo espetáculo de ilusionismo, tratava-se de fazer com que os espectadores se concentrassem naquilo que era interessante (o fato de que uma máquina podia reproduzir música de qualidade) e deixassem escapar as pistas (nesse caso, os ruídos e distorções de reprodução) de que aquilo se constituía em uma ilusão.

As the accident that suddenly reveals new possibilities, failure in art opens new doors, specially due to the fact that it tends to produce something different in content every time. "The inevitable gap between the intention and realization of an artwork makes failure impossible to avoid" (Le Feuvre, 2010, p. 12). The loss of total control over process and product is a reality here. Chance and luck play an important part, and when dealing with technology, part of the sense of authorship should also be directed to the machine, the tool, and by consequence, to its programmer, designer, assembler, engineer, etc. No idea was born out of a single person. The user/agent might play an active role in the production but the result is also due to a much more active intervention of the medium, even tough, for several artists, the process, or even the tool itself (Cascone, 2001), has become the message. The poetics inherent to failure seems to be that of revealing a hidden world we were made blind to.

> When failure is released from being a judgemental term, and success deemed overrated, the embrace of failure can become an act of bravery, of daring to go beyond normal practices and enter a realm of not-knowing. (…) When the conventions of representation are no longer fit for purpose failure can open new possibilities (Le Feuvre, 2010, p. 13).

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