

Academy of Failure



**25-27 May 2018
Beijing**

@ Institute for Provocation

For more information, please go to:
<http://chinacreative.humanities.uva.nl>



Academy of Failure - Programme

Day 1

- 10.00 – 10.30: introduction by organizers and of HaB programme
- 10.30 – 11.30: introduction of participants (chair: Jeroen de Kloet)
- 11:30 – 13:00: 5 x 15 minutes talks sharing (chair: Yiu Fai Chow)
- Elaine W. Ho: Notes on the Open Platform: Failure as Anti-Gentrifying Discourse
 - Pak Sheung Chuen: Failure and Artistic Intervention in Hong Kong
 - Wu Mali: Failure, Feminism and Artistic intervention in Taiwan
 - Giseline Kuipers: Failure, aspiration and resignation in the peripheral cultural fields
 - Li Bowen: Failure and Artistic Intervention in Beijing
- 13.00 – 14.30: lunch
- 14.30 – 16.00: Tsinghua students' presentation (chair: Feng Fan)
- 16.00 – 16.30: tea break
- 16.30 – 18.00: workshop in 6 groups (including coffee and tea, introduction: Yiu Fai Chow and Jeroen de Kloet)
- 18.00 – 19.00: plenary roundtable + wrap up (chair: Yiu Fai Chow)
- 19:30: Dinner Yunnan Restaurant 大理人家, 宝钞胡同

Day 2

Field visits to two migrant villages around Beijing (Song Yi and Zoénie Deng Liwen)

Day 3

- 10.00 – 11.30: 5 x 15 min talks (chair: Zoénie Deng Liwen)
- Kingsley Ng: Failure and Artistic Intervention in Hong Kong
 - Alena Alexandrova: Failure and Anarchic Infrastructures
 - Chuong-Dai Vo: Failure and Archiving
 - Alice Ko Nien-pu: Failure and Spaces
 - Chen Yun: Failure and Urban Intervention in Shanghai
- 11.30 – 13.00: Book of failure preparation session - individual or in groups, entirely up to participants, to contribute one item to the multimedia book.
- 13:00 – 14:30: lunch
- 14:30 – 16:00: Open stage to present contributions to the book of failure (all formats are possible, including dance, video, photography, *etcetera*) (chair: Jeroen de Kloet)
- 16:00 – 16:30: tea break

- 16.30 – 17.30: Wrap up and future plans, collectively rethinking the pedagogical projects as developed on day 1 (chair: Yiu Fai Chow and Jeroen de Kloet)
- 17.30 – 19.30: Film screening ***Hills and Mountains*** by Zhao Xu + q&a (chair: Hu Wei)
- 20:00: Dinner Sichuan restaurant 兄弟南锣鼓巷

Reader

- 1./ Appadurai, A. (2016). Introduction on Failure. *Social Research*, Vol.83(No.3): xxi-xxvii.
- 2./ Summary of: Dweck, C. S. (c2006). *Mindset : the new psychology of success*. New York : Random House; Harford, T. (2011). *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Lester, S. (2016). *The Value of Failure. Learning Strategies for Success*. Lewis, S. (2014). *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*. Simon & Schuster; Maxwell, J. C. (2007). *Failing Forward*. Thomas Nelson Incorporated.
- 3./ Mindmap Zoenié Deng Liwen
- 4./ CV of failure by Johannes Haushofer
- 5./ Halberstam, J. (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press: pp 1-25.
- 6./ Abbas, A. (2015). *Keynote at 6th Moscow biennale*, 26 September.
- 7./ Zsigmond, A. (2016). The Imagery of Failure. *Social Research*, Vol.83(No.3): 537-547.

Academy of Failure

Creativity, Activism, Pedagogy

“...failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”

Jack Halberstam, 2011: 2

“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter.

Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.”

Samuel Beckett, 1983

The Background

Welcome to the reader that we have compiled, pompously hoping to inspire you for the upcoming Academy of Failure. In this short introduction, we – Jeroen, Yiu Fai, Hu Wei, Feng Fan and Zoénie – would like to explain why we opted for these texts and what we want to arrive at during these three days in Beijing. The most logical place to start this introduction is the *Humanities Across Borders* programme initiated by the Leiden-based International Institute for Asian Studies, also the main funding body for this academy. This scheme, funded by the Mellon Foundation, is a four-year-programme involving researchers, academic institutes, activists and NGOs in East, South, South-East Asia as well as in West Africa. In its proposal, the following objectives are formulated:

The proposed four-year programme entitled ‘**Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World**’ calls for expanding the scope of the humanities by mobilizing the knowledge in everyday practices that have remained largely unrepresented in the contemporary academy. It will connect a global network of individuals and institutions capable of generating such knowledge in Asia and Africa in order to develop alternative pedagogies for teaching, research, and dissemination of humanistic knowledge across

disciplinary, national, and social borders. The aim is to contribute to the realignment of the social role and mission of institutions of higher learning toward the humanistic values that inspired their establishment in the first place.

By **humanities** and humanistic knowledge, we mean forms of cognitive and subjective agency that endow human actions with critical meaning and significance in relation to a complex array of causalities and contexts. **Across borders** refers to the need to transcend artificially constructed conceptual and epistemological categories, whether disciplinary, linguistic, ideological, national, or political. The focus on **Asia and Africa in the world** responds to the need to situate knowledge forms outside and beyond the West in our interconnected world.

The programme aims to establish a transregional network and develop methodological and pedagogical interventions. In the words of the proposal, “One of the key objectives of the programme will be to make its participants the co-contributors of alternative situational pedagogies for use in multiple educational settings.” It is on this blog that you can find the network partners and their activities:

<https://humanitiesacrossborders.blog/blog/>

The Academy of Failure is the first activity to take place under this scheme in the region of East Asia. The aim is to jointly work towards pedagogical tools that can be used inside and outside the classroom. We opted for the theme of failure as we believe this to be a theme that has so far been outflanked by its assumed binary opposite: success. In a time when universities all aim at excellence and innovation, what are the possibilities left for us to fail? Or, to repeat the general statement we issued earlier:

Our global, and some may say neoliberal, mindset has excluded the possibility of failure, in its constant validation and celebration of notions of progress, development, innovation, and improvement. In particular East Asia seems to be hooked to the idea of progress and development – more is better. But is it really? How can we rescue failure from its negative connotations? How can we bring it back into and beyond the classroom as a valuable tool for thinking, for knowledge production, and also for creative production as well as political activism? According to the late Marc Karlin, politics is a learning process about how to live with pessimism and how to work on yourself in relation to that pessimism. We may think the

same of failure. This workshop aims to explore to possibilities and impossibilities of failure for three different domains:

1. Pedagogy
2. Creativity
3. Activism

All three domains are driven by a teleological idea of progress, newness and change; the notion of failure can be seen as a potential threat of this underpinning rationale, but in our view, failure can also be mobilized as an enabling technique, a tactic that resists the demand for more and better, a way to recuperate different forms of education, different modes of being creative, and a different kind of politics.

This seems to be a quite timely concern, not only given the reception of Halberstam's publication on failure, but also when witnessing different initiatives around the world that are now contemplating the idea of failure. South African artist William Kentridge, for example, has started the independent centre for less good ideas in Johannesburg, a space for artists to learn by failing.ⁱ At Smith college, failure is now part of the curriculum.ⁱⁱ And in May 2018, at the Institute for Provocation in Beijing, we will further explore the creative, political and pedagogical potential of the notion of failure.

This workshop will bring together academics, artists, activists and students to explore and develop different pedagogies and strategies of failure. Failure, we argue, is part and parcel of knowledge production, creative work and political activism. To insert the possibility of failure in our pedagogies, our research, our creative practices and our politics, will help to open them up to alternative possibilities, ideas that may privilege slowness above speed, stagnation above progress, amateurism above professionalism, and experimentation above modelling. In this workshop, we wish not so much to celebrate failure, as to bring it back as a possible source of inspiration, as an intervention that can help to counter the drive towards always better and always more.

The Reader

When we started preparing the programme of the workshop we soon discovered that the theme of failure is unexpectedly slippery and difficult to grasp. Part of the problem lies in its slogan-like quality. This is exemplified by the way the issue of failure is folded back into the

neoliberal ethos of individual responsibility and growth: in order to become stronger, better and even more successful we need to learn how to fail. The opening quote by Samuel Beckett has become very popular among the global start-up community. As **Arjun Appadurai** also writes in the text that opens this reader, “there is also a direct line from this embrace of innovation and volatility in capitalism to the peculiar centrality of potential failure in the recent design technologies of the postindustrial West.” (p. xxiii) The text of Appadurai, which introduces a special issue on failure in the journal *Social Research*, engages with the theme in conjunction with the globalization of capitalist modernity. This is relevant for our workshop, as we do hope to unpack the specific implications of failure in the context of mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The words with which Appadurai ends his essay are worth quoting, as they straddle the binary between the universal and the culturally specific (p. xxv11):

“This emotional feature of failure may be the only thing about it that is truly universal, for everything else about failure—how it is measured, who is seen as authorized to pronounce it, and how much we are prepared to live with it—appears to vary culturally and historically. So failure is excellent grist for social thought and critical reflection, for in it we are sure to find ever-new ways to understand what humans seek and how they cope when they do not find it.”

As a somehow lighter (or darker) textual intermission, we have included a short summary of five **self-help books** on failure in this reader, to familiarize ourselves with this particular strand of failure discourse.

The subsequent text by **Jack Halberstam** is the introduction chapter of his book *The Queer Art of Failure*. This book has been an important source of inspiration for this workshop. Halberstam traverses different cultural domains, in both art and popular culture, to substantiate his claim that, as we also refer to in the opening quote, “failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.” (2011: 2) His words on the same page may well summarise the aim of our endeavour as well, when he writes that

“Academics, activists, artists, and cartoon characters have long been on a quest to articulate an alternative vision of life, love, and labour and to put such a vision into practice through the use of manifestoes, a range of political tactics, and new technologies of representation, radical utopians continue to search for different ways

of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subject.” (p. 2)

Halberstam forges a connection between the hopes offered by failure and the desire to develop what Stuart Hall calls low theory: “Low theory tries to locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop.” (p.2) In his introduction, Halberstam connects the creative elegantly with the political, be it the queer, the feminist or the Marxist struggle, and in turn poses the question of pedagogy. He writes, “*Privilege the naïve or nonsensical (stupidity)*. Here we might argue for the nonsensible or nonconceptual over sense-making structures that are often embedded in a common notion of ethics. The naïve or the ignorant may in fact lead to a different set of knowledge practices.” (p. 12, emphasis in original) The book thus claims to be “a stroll out of the confines of conventional knowledge and into the unregulated territories of failure, loss, and unbecoming.” (p.7) Like Halberstam, we also hope to look for “childish and immature notions of possibility and look for alternatives in the form of what Foucault calls “subjugated knowledge” across the culture: in subcultures, countercultures, and even popular cultures.” (p. 23) Unlike him, we look for these in a different context from that of the United States. This, we believe, will confront us with different challenges, social, political, and pedagogical. It may well be in everyday life in the city, rather than in popular culture (as foregrounded in Halberstam’s book), that we can articulate the creative and political potential of failure.

The possible dimensions of failure are manifold, and to visualise this multiplicity we have included the mindmap created by **Zoénie Deng Liwen**, as a visual intervention that may help us position our own ideas on failure. In addition, we include a CV of failure, posted by **Johannes Haushofer**, Assistant Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs, who ironically concludes his CV with the statement that “This darn CV of Failures has received way more attention than my entire body of academic work.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The text by **Ackbar Abbas**, a keynote lecture he delivered in Moscow in 2015, brings the theme of failure back to China, and connects it to volatility. He wonders what art can do to change society, and refers to Minima Moralia who claims that “[i]t is the principal and creative way in which art fails, that we find the promise of happiness.” For Abbas, failure “is not the opposite of success. It calls success into question, through a complex relationship to

happiness.” Failure helps Abbas engage with the quite impossible question of “how to act particularly in spaces that we do not accept or do not feel that we can live with.” After describing the alleged failure of protest in the context of Hong Kong, Abbas concludes by stating that

“Failure, we have to say, is the moral heroism of our times; in social life, as we as in art. This is what allows us to act and create under conditions of impossibility. To act not because we have hope, but because we refuse to give in to despair.”

We are not so convinced by such an embrace of failure, mapped onto a rather unproductive binary of hope versus despair, also given that the concept remains as slippery as it is volatile.

We conclude the reader with a short visual essay that appeared in the special issue edited by Appadurai. **Alexandra Zsigmond** asks the question: “How does failure look like?”, a question we are likely to encounter as well during our workshop. She asked different people to make a simple, schematic drawing of failure and briefly describe their thinking. We hope this may give us some inspiration for our attempt to turn failure into a creative pedagogy.

The Workshop

Back to the workshop, allow us to briefly explain our – indeed slippery and fluid – thinking behind the programme. We like it to be an open, communicative and collaborative event, avoiding long lectures. We thus opted for short talks, or rather, sharing, by some of the participants, and, on **the first day**, a workshop in which we discuss and develop, in smaller groups, potential projects – combining creativity, activism and pedagogy – in relation to the theme of failure. Sources that we can use are your own experiences, the reader, the talks. The aim is to draft pedagogical projects that can be implemented presumably in Beijing and Hong Kong at a later stage – and ideally even at other localities, some day. In an intermezzo we like to perform “failure through story telling” for which we want to ask each of you to prepare a short text. This can be one line, a poem, it can be real, it can be fiction, the idea is that we all say something and thus create a joint story of failure. In a subsequent plenary round table, the ideas developed in the workshop will be further discussed.

The trip on **the second day** is meant to experiment different possible types of failure located in and outside the city of Beijing. Here we link failure to activism, environmentalism and

urbanism. We need to stress that we pose a question mark behind the word failure, hesitant as we are to attach such labels to very complicated processes of urban and social transformation.

On **the third day**, after another round of short talks, we aim to work on what we tentatively call a book of failure. The word book is somehow misleading, as it can also be a short movie, a photo series, or whatever fits. This can be done collaboratively or individually. In the afternoon, we have an open stage so that we can perform or show these contributions to each other. After that we end with a plenary session to wrap up our thoughts and discuss possible plans for the immediate future. One concern of the Humanities across Border programme relates to the sustainability of the ideas developed through the workshops, we share this concern and hope we can work towards something that can be disseminated, used and that can lead to more related events in the future. And we believe a convivial atmosphere, with good food and drinks, ample time to idle, dream, and explore, in a wonderful *hutong* in the centre of Beijing may well offer a good context to achieve that.

And if we fail, well, then we fail, gracefully and cheerfully...

We conclude the workshop with a public screening of *Hills and Mountains* by Zhao Xu, a movie about the quest for and inevitable failure to find meaning in art, religion and life, which results into a final escape into a dream like other world.

To conclude, during these three days we hope that...

“We will wander, improvise, fall short, and move in circles. We will lose our way, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds, but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which (...) no one gets left behind.” (Halberstam 2011: 25)

Finally

This workshop is part of the *Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World* (2017-2020) programme from the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), Leiden University, a programme funded by the Mellon foundation that calls for expanding the scope of the humanities by mobilising knowledge-practices that have largely remained unrepresented in contemporary academia. It is also linked to, and funded by, the *ChinaCreative* project, based on a consolidator grant from the European Research Council, on the current move from China towards creativity and innovation. Its partners, aside from the Institute for Provocation, are the IIAS, the University of Amsterdam, Tsinghua University and Hong Kong Baptist University. Additional funding comes from the Embassy of the Netherlands in Beijing.

We look forward seeing you all in Beijing!

Jeroen, Yiu Fai, Hu Wei, Feng Fan, Zoénie

ⁱ See <http://theartnewspaper.com/news/kentridge-opens-space-for-artists-to-learn-by-failing/>

ⁱⁱ See https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/24/fashion/fear-of-failure.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur&_r=0

ⁱⁱⁱ See https://www.princeton.edu/~joha/Johannes_Haushofer_CV_of_Failures.pdf as well as <https://www.nature.com/naturejobs/science/articles/10.1038/nj7322-467a>