NOTES ON FAILURE: MISTAKES, ERRORS, AND FAILURE IN THE PERFORMATIVE TACTICS OF ART AND PRODUCT DESIGN

Troels Degn Johansson[1]

[1]Denmark's Design School, Copenhagen, Denmark, tdj@dkds.dk

ABSTRACT:

Failure, mistakes, mistakes, mishaps, errors, etc. are something that the modern designer usually seeks to avoid and eliminate in his/her practice. In a sense, Modernity is fundamentally about the systematic realisation and elimination of mistakes from the systems of production and organisation; a tendency which—mistakenly—was applied to society and had monstrous and traumatic results. Method development in user centred design and related disciplines today also seems to be driven by the motivation to eliminate mistakes and errors as early as possible in the development of a new product so that the stages of development and production will be as effective as possible. However, whereas product development obviously has good reason to eliminate mistakes in respect of developing functional products that may perform well on a traditional market, failure may lead designers (and consumers) to think differently about designed objects and indeed the role of design in contemporary societies and cultures. This presentation

will present the preliminary results of a research project on failure in design and art that is currently being undertaken at Denmark's Design School in association with Superflex; a group of artists which have been internationally leading in the field of relational or social art (http://www.superflex.net) by combining product design, technological innovation, and artistic communication strategies. The author of the paper has followed Superflex since 1999 on various art and design projects as well as a critic and art theorist. In this paper, the preliminary results of this joint research project on mistakes, failure, and errors in design will be presented with reference to the creative and critical use of failure, mistakes, error, etc. in other creative disciplines such as comedy, cinema, and fine art.

1. INTRODUCTION: FAILURE AND DESIGN

Supposedly, most people take an interest in failure, errors, mishaps, mistakes, and the like, in order to avoid them—to learn from own mistake as well as other's, and to identity sources of error, emerging mistakes, and possible failure in order to eliminate such sources and to make success more likely. Failure is meaningless, it seems; people may find own mistake regrettable, failure painful and devastating. It is true that some people may divulge in other people's failure for some reason or another, and of course failure may also be amusing and fascinating—not because of evil intent but because it confirms such things as the limits of reason, the power of chance, and a basic absurdity of being. We might thus ask ourselves what on earth made Austrian tailor Franz Reichelt believe that his clumsy and apparently heavy overcoat parachute would make out a fully functional parachute for a normal size adult when he jumped out from the lower platform of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, February 4th, 1912, before the press and a film crew that documented the—obviously tragic—event by means of a short cinematographic record (Fig 1 and 2).[1]

---

[1] According to my references, Reichelt forms part of the history of "bird men"; a tradition that sought to combine technological invention with spectacular stunt before the public. According to some sources, his jump took place in 1911. However, according to the April issue of the magazine Popular Mechanics, it happened on the day after F. Rodman Law's parachute jump from the Statue of Liberty in New York, which is dated February 2nd, 1912 (cf. http://www.oldmagazines.com, observed on August 25th, 2007).

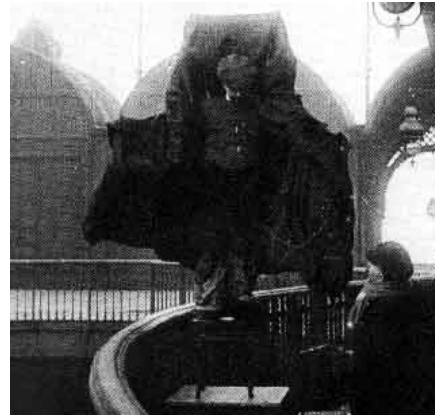Figure 1: Franz Reichelt presenting his overcoat parachute.

Figure 2: Franz Reichelt demonstrating his overcoat parachute, February 4th, 1912 (film still).

Also designers take an interest in failures, errors, and mistakes in order to avoid and eliminate them. Design is supposed to be "artistic expression with a purpose" as a former director of the Danish Design School (1990-1999), Kjeld Ammundsen had as his motto (Ammundsen 1995).[2] According to this definition, design would in principle—negatively—be about risking failure, avoiding mistakes, and eliminating errors so that the designed artefacts would serve the particular purpose intended. Sources of error and possible mistakes would thus be something that should be eliminated as early in the design process as possible, and failure thus something that the practising designer should know about as part of his or her basic training. This idea is firmly rooted in Modernity's belief in effective organisations, the rational calculus of industrialism, and the ideals of functionalism where form is subordinated and is supposed to express function. These ideals are still present in contemporary design practice's orientation towards the user-centred design, where design companies like IDEO distinguish themselves by methodologies that have been developed in order to eliminate as many sources of error as early in the design process as possible in order to be effective and innovative; effective in the sense that their products find a marked and a use that corresponds with the original strategy and economic calculus.

In this essay I would like to address notions of failure, error, and mistake as a theoretical, creative, and—notably—a *critical problem* in design. The critical aspect of failure amounts here to what I designate as the performative tactics associated with the idea of challenging implicitly and/or artistically the modern idea of design; tactics that suggest that we should reconsider

---

[2] In Danish: "Design er et kunstnerisk udtryk med et formål", or simply: "Design er kunst med et formål": 'Design is Art with a Purpose')

critically our basic notions and resolve them from their possible ideological formation. Failure makes out a fascinating phenomenon as an unforeseen symptom of error and an ironic and painful contrast to the efforts, which have been put into an enterprise and to a strategy, a plan, and a procedure that might have appeared plausible and entirely rational. Moreover, and that is the thesis of this study, failure make up a paradoxical problem in design and management since these modern disciplines, in their attempt to serve purposefulness and to rationalise processes and organizations, more or less implicitly have to construct various notions of failure as an undefined negative to a given, defined aim. Positively defined, design should be perceived as an agency which is based on a principle of elimination of errors and which is tied up with rationality of Modernity and the functionality of industrial mass production. In this understanding, the modern development of design should be defined in accordance with the development of Modernity in general and the development of industrial societies into new stages of socio-economic modes of organisation. And the negative definition of design would, accordingly, be an agency that eliminates errors, avoids mistakes, and observes the risk of failure.

In the light of this negative definition, Reichelt's fatal jump with his overcoat parachute from the lower platform of the Eiffel Tower, the symbol of the modern Man and the modern nation,[3] becomes a peculiar enigma; a ridiculous as well as thought-provoking enigma in its blind challenge of the very idea of Modernity. Ridiculous for apparently obvious reasons; thought-provoking because Reichelt's jump in a performative fashion addresses the negative definition of design and Modernity. Not only does Reichelt jump the Eiffel Tower; he leaps from a crucial moment in Modernity where rationalism coincides with "futurism"—a typically less rational belief in radical change and future opportunities; where industrialism is boosted by world war, and where war at the same time is shaking and deflating existing values. By asking ourselves, 'why did he do it?', we might thus as well ask ourselves, what made the masses of Europe celebrate the initiation of the First World War and cheer the smiling soldiers marching to the battlefields two years later? The question of why he did it might be trivial—Reichelt might possibly have wanted to outdo F. Rodman Law's successful parachute jump from the torch of the Statue of Liberty in New York that took place one or two days earlier, or he might have wanted to benefit from the public attention that this event attracted to spectacular stunt performances in general; supposedly the first stunt performance recorded on film and thus the first stunt-man performance ever. However, as a cultural icon, Reichelt is interesting to a theory and history of failure in design for other reasons.

---

[3] The Eiffel Tower was inaugurated in 1889 to commemorate the centenary of the French Revolution; a crucial event in the development of the modern Man.

The short cinematic record showing the tragic event is now a popular feature on the Internet, where it can be downloaded on sites like youtube.com and where it is an item to refer to by bloggers and other commentators, for instance as the "roots of Jackass";[4] Jackass the television comedy that were produced for the MTV. In a certain sense, perceived retrospectively as a performative act (recognising that the historical context must be different—and indeed not easy to understand), Reichelt's stunt does indeed anticipate our days' "jackasses." However, having said this, Reichelt's status as a cultural icon and especially as a figure in the history of Modernity, failure and design cannot simply be reduced to vulgar humour. In my view, *Jackass* and thus also, in a certain sense, Reichelt, should be understood as forming part of a tradition in comedy, where performative self-degradation may serve a "higher" purpose; that may be an artistic, communicative, and critical cause. In this paper I would thus like to suggest the term "performative self-degradation" in order to capture a certain creative and critical tactics by which an "author" (e.g. an artist, a designer, a comedian, etc.) in a demonstrative fashion points at own failure (in a broad sense) in order to establish a point of enunciation by means of which this author may accomplish "something else". I shall seek to demonstrate how this orientation of self-degradation has established itself within the modern stand-up comedy and seems to have inspired performative tactics in the field of fine art, design, and cinema; and I shall do so especially with reference to a Danish cultural context where the field of comedy seems to have inspired a leading agent in the field of art, film directors Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth, who have emphasized self-degradation (and perfection) as an important theme in their life and work.

The background and project context of this study is a local Danish one as well, i.e. my collaboration with Danish art collective Superflex, which I have been hosting as artists-in-residence at Denmark's Design School in the academic year 2006-2007 by means of funds obtained by the Danish Arts Council's artist-in-residence program.[5] During their affiliation as artists-in-residence, Superflex organized a seminar series on the issue of failure (in Danish: "Fejl-seminaret"; the 'failure seminar') where design students were invited to discuss cases and concepts of failure in design and to contribute to the development of a set of categories that might capture the nature of failure, mistakes, errors, etc. in the field of design and art (Spring Term 2007). The results of this exploratory work is set to be published in a book this autumn (Superflex 2007) and is supposed to form out a piece of research work that the artists may draw on in their

---

[4] Radio station WFMU's blog, December 28th 2005, http://blog.wfmu.org/freeform/2005/12/roots_of_jackas.html, observed on August 25th, 2007.

[5] Kunststyrelsen, URL: www.kunst.dk, observed on August 30th, 2007.

future work. Superflex thus addressed the concept of failure in their proposal for a main theme of the 2008 Berlin Biennale of contemporary art; a proposal which however was rejected by the chief curators.

To sum up, this essay seeks to outline the performative tactics of self-degradation and thus to contribute to the development of failure as a creative, critical, and theoretical problem pertaining to design and related disciplines such as management, engineering, and art. Creative in the sense that mistakes may challenge the artist's understanding of his own orientation, formal material; critical in the sense that mistakes and failure in performative tactics might lead to an understanding of how design develops as an ideological construction in modern times, and theoretical in the sense that such study of failure, mistakes, and errors, may be generalised and contribute to our understanding of what design and designers may be.

In the first section below I would like to discuss the notion of failure with reference to Modernity, management, and design pedagogy. Here I seek to demonstrate that design should be seen as an ideological construction that forms part of what I would like to designate as Modernity's discursive strategy of exclusion. Secondly I seek to identify how failure as theme has become part of a performative strategy in stand-up comedy and how it relates to traditions of comedy and performing arts in general. Thirdly I discuss failure with reference to some of the basic assumptions in product semiotics, and fourth and finally I point at some artistic strategies in the field of design that has sought to explore the critical potential of the symbolic economy of failure.

In the first section below I would like to discuss the notion of failure with reference to Modernity, management, and design pedagogy. Here I seek to demonstrate that design should be seen as an ideological construction that forms part of what I would like to designate as Modernity's discursive strategy of exclusion. Secondly I seek to explain how failure as theme has become part of a performative tactics in stand-up comedy and how it may inspire other cultural fields. Thirdly, I present some of the results from Superflex' Fejl/Failure project that took place during their affiliation as artists-in-residence at Denmark's Design School. Here I seek to identify how Superflex and the Failure Seminar, by setting off from similar ideas in art and cinema have contributed to the development of a discourse on failure and a performative tactics of failure and self-degradation.

2. FAILURE, DESIGN, AND MODERNITY

Obviously, design is very much a modern project. Bauhaus and Ulm are formative not only to our contemporary concept and institution of design, but also to Modernity's development in the 20th Century. Having said this I would like to argue in this part that Modernity is also characterized by its attempt to eliminate sources of error and potential failure—to avoid errors and mistakes in production, communication, organisation, etc., and to construct a dominant perception, ideology, of what is proper and what is a failure, an error, and a mistake; a perception of normality, standard, and of deviance, abject. This approach to design directed itself primarily towards systems and processes of production, distribution, management, and communication but in some instances also culture and society; instances with tragic ends which not only demonstrated the problems of such application but also problematised the very ideological foundation of modern design.

Although failure might pertain to the negative definition of design addressed above, it did thus play a big part in the development of design as disciplines of practice as well as study. In order to optimize design systems (systems of production, distribution, service, information, etc.) one had to "learn from own mistake" and to map out the world of errors and to develop organisational methods to deal with human error (mistakes, etc.). In engineering, Henry Petroski's (1985, 2006) analyses of spectacular design failures from cathedral building in the Middle Ages to the failure of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge in 1940 and the loss of two space shuttles lead to the conclusion that whereas one generation of engineers have had direct experience of developing a given theory and thus had practical experience of failure modes, the next typically lacks this experience and thus is reckless in its approach to innovation with the same technology. His point is ultimately that engineers seek to "unmask of failure", realize that possible and actual failure should be the starting point for the engineer, and that design should consist in taking "one failure at a time". Failure analysis has been dominant in the industries of electronics and manufacturing as well as in business management and warfare. In automated functional systems such as mechanics, software, etc, maintenance is based on a system of error codes by means of which malfunction may be diagnosed as a symptom and treated with pre-defined problem solving service routines. Today, moreover, we witness an increased focus on forecasting analyses where failure is studied pro-actively in terms of e.g. risk management, failure mode and effect analyses in order to prevent malfunction, cascading failure, of large vital systems such as those of economy, the distribution of power, etc.

Unfortunately, the most disturbing outcome of design as an ideology consisted in the transference of design ideals from the field of production and distribution to that of society and culture. During the 20th Century, we thus also saw how the desire for an ideal, standardized society in some cases led to the exclusion and annihilation of elements that did not fit into the picture; human beings of another race, sexuality, ethnic origin, nationality, etc. than the dominant one. In the cultural field, the admiration of design ideals thus also brought about a particular fixation on what was seen as wrong or erroneous, deviant and abject. The exclusion of the other, the so-called deviant, manifested itself in early Modernity in terms of objectification—as in the so-called freak show and its exhibit of the abnormal body—and in the phobic and idiosyncratic discourses that both objectifies and excludes human beings of a certain race and sexual disposition. Danish novelist Thorkild Bjørnvig (1960) has aptly characterized this ambiguous fixation in terms of an aesthetic idiosyncrasy; an abnormal sensitivity to phenomena that for entirely idiosyncratic reasons haunts the subject and thus must be eliminated. Bjørnvig's main example is the depiction of an eye, the neighbor's 'eye of a vulture--a pale blue eye, with a film over it', that became an obsession to the main character in Edgar Allen Poe's novel *The Tell-tale Heart* and lead to murder. Aesthetic idiosyncrasy seems characteristic of what Slavoj Žižek (2003) has coined the "culture of victimization"; a culture based on a proto-fascistic discourse, where a subject constructs an object as a threat for entirely irrational, idiosyncratic, reasons in order to legitimize action; in truly fascistic societies: war or genocide.

Modern societies still seem to have a somewhat ambiguous relationship to error and failure. In a sense, Modernity lives on by means of what Karen Lisa Salamon (2007) recently has designated as a general "managementification" of Society and Life; an ideology where modern principles of management come to encompass most aspects of human life including our everyday life, personal relations, etc., with the aim of making us more "effective" (in terms of time, resources, etc.), flexible (ready to adapt to a changing environment), and pro-active (ready to identify and react to threats and options earlier than necessary) in any aspect of life, that is, not only in our professional field. The dichotomy of standard and abject manifests itself clearly in pro-active evaluation which is an integral part of modern management, and which seeks to identify inappropriate performance in terms of certain measures as early as possible in processes in order for management to facilitate change and avoid emerging failure. According to Salamon, such pro-active evaluation is pervading every aspect in modern life. However, for her the obvious problem is that not all qualities in life may be subjected to pro-active evaluation with standard systems (e.g. love) and thus that decisions may be taken on conditions that are—erroneous, falsely perceived.

Salamon thus finds that the pervasion of management is leading to a dehumanisation and, paradoxically—bad management.

By now, it should be obvious that the ambiguity of failure in design and modernity is an extremely complex matter. With Petroski, however, we might point at a development of the approach to failure in design from a first cautious stage of innovation based on direct experience of failure modes, to a second reckless stage where the success of a technology may mask possible failure, and a third stage that is based on forecasting and which is characterized by flexibility, pro-activity, and pervasiveness in a dynamic, complex, and potentially catastrophic environment (cf. the concepts of cascading failure and "domino theories"). In the following I shall demonstrate that failure as a performative tactics in art and popular culture seems to have established itself as a reaction to such third stage innovation with its pro-active failure and risk management in complex environments.

3. FAILURE AND SELF-DEGRADATION AS PERFORMATIVE TACTICS

Something might indicate that failure is about to assume a new, somewhat altered position in society. In sharp contrast to the pervasion of management strategies in contemporary societies, failure seems to have attracted a peculiar interest from some of the most powerful institutions in society, namely media and the markets. Whereas the faulty, abject other earlier became victim to objectification or exclusion, as in the freak show's contrast between displaying and hiding away the object, failure seems to have attained a very different position as forming part of a performative tactics. Failure and the unsuccessful—from the awkward foozle and the spectacular blunder to the definitely hopeless—has become part of the gesture by means of which a performer may conquer a stage and address an audience. Especially, the popular re-emergence of stand-up comedy in the late 90ies seemed—at least in Denmark—to be inextricably bound up with a certain sense of self-degradation and underlining of own defects, flaws, and mistakes. Such profiles as the male nerd and the excessively defected cultural *habitus* (Sasha Baron Cohen's figures "Borat" and "Ali G"), the neurotically fixated and socially awkward male (talk show host David Letterman, stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld), and of the Danish context: Frank Kvam in the television series *Klovn ("Clown",* 2005-), the clownish male juvenile (or slightly infantile) daredevil (MTV's *Jackass*) or swashbuckler (Ashton Kutcher in MTV's *Punk'd* and *The Real Wedding Crasher*, in Denmark such figures as Casper Christensen and Jan Gintberg's shrilling and reckless voice in Danish Radio's "speak to the nation")—all emerged in the popular media

spectacle in the mid-90ies and onwards as characteristic elements of a revitalized stand-up comedy genre and an innovative contribution to satire and performance. In his analysis of contemporary American stand-up comedy, *Stand-Up Comedy in theory, or Abjection in America*, John Limon sets off from the paradox that whereas the typical stand-up stage is clearly demarcated as an invisible circle before an audience; an audience from which the comedian in a sense just has "stood up" from, the stand-up comedian as a figure has been established in terms of being 'outrageous, that is to say (etymologically) outré, outside the circle.' (2000:13). In his analyses of comedians such as Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, and David Letterman, this outrageous "outsideness" is established by means of references to a obscene world, that is a sexual, excremental, and aggressive content (cf. Bruce's non-joke about threatening to piss on the audience). Limon interprets this "topographical" paradox in terms of Julia Kristeva's concept of abject; the obscene element that the subject has to exclude in order to come into being. For Limon, Letterman distinguishes himself here by displaying the awkward, and at times, aggressive attitudes that one would expect from a male heterosexual neurotic; symptoms which are supposed to originate from a repressed sexual content. Interestingly, this "outrageous", self-degrading tactics in stand-up comedy resembles, and might originate from, the Catskill Mountains tradition in stand-up comedy where a culture of comedy developed in an intellectual Jewish diaspora (the so-called Borscht Belt just outside New York City that have fostered prominent comedians such as Woody Allen, Lenny Bruce and Mel Brooks. Self-degradation as a theme is here supposed to be present in terms of bad luck, physical complaints and ailments; the male heterosexual Jew being the preferred character.

A particularly reflected example of this new performative tactics of failure is, in a sense, Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek, whose ideological criticism of "liberal, multi-culturalist democracies of tolerance" became inseparable from a performative style where dirty jokes played a significant part:

the only way to react to excessive political correctness, I claim, is propagating dirty jokes.[/] Dirty jokes are ambiguous. … It's a kind of dialectical double reversal. … somehow you can return to the worst starting point, racist jokes and so on, but they function no longer as racist, but as a kind of obscene solidarity.[6] (2003)

---

6 Žižek continues: 'To give you an extremely vulgar example, I met a big, black guy, and when we became friends, I went into it like, [assuming a naïve, awe-filled whisper] "Is it true that you have, you know [makes gesture signifying a gigantic penis]?" and (this is a racist myth I heard in Europe) "Is it true that you blacks can control your muscles so that when you walk with a half erection and there is a fly here you can BAM! [slaps thigh] snap it with your penis?" We became terribly close friends! Now, I'm well aware of how risky

Interestingly, to Žižek tolerance is a key issue for his post-modern ideological criticism because this term paradoxically has come to capture a contemporary "culture of victimisation" and hence a delicate, typically idiosyncratic relation to the "other":

What bothers me about so-called tolerance is that, if you combine tolerance with opposition to harassment, what do you get? You get tolerance that effectively functions as its opposite. Tolerance means we should tolerate each other, which practically means that we shouldn't harass each other, which means I tolerate you on the condition that you don't get too close to me! (2003)

Obviously, Slavoj Žižek is widely recognized in academic circles as well as among left-wing critics despite the fact that his philosophical arguments are saturated with dirty and racist jokes. Those deliberate "mistakes" make Žižek a perfect example of what I have referred to as a performative tactics of failure. A similar example is Sasha Baron Cohen's "Borat" figure, whose anti-Semitic racist jokes contrast the fact that Cohen himself is a practicing Jew who was raised in an orthodox Jewish family. John Waters' trash movies with their depiction of rock'n'roll outcasts from working class environments of the 50ies' America seem to make use of a similar tactics.

4. SUPERFLEX' "FEJL"/SUPERFLEX' FAILURES

In the final chapter I would like to demonstrate how a performative tactics of failure was developed in the course of art collective Superflex' "Failure Seminar" series at Denmark's Design School during the academic year 2006-07 and compare this with the perspective on design, modernity, and failure outlined above.

Superflex' art is characterized by their interest in design and technologies that may facilitate and empower basic living conditions for people around the world that have currently become endangered by the forces of economic and cultural globalization. Exemplary projects of theirs are *Supergas*, a biogas plant for nomadic farmers in tropical regions that may provide one family with heat and electricity from the manure of an average size of an animal husbandry; *Superchannel*, an Internet television broadcasting system for the empowerment of retired working class people in tower blocks in Liverpool (Superflex: 2003), and *Guaraná Power!*, and *Free Beer*, a soda and a beer, that promotes the principles of fair trade, free exchange of ideas, and a liberal approach to current copyright legislation, by purchasing guarana extract for the production of

---

these waters are, because if you do it in the wrong context, in the wrong way, I'm well aware that this is racism.' (2003)

these goods from farmers of the Amazon region; the prize of whose product is supposed to have been dumped dramatically by dominant soda producing cartels.[7]

Superflex' artistic tactics clearly reflect some of the main characteristics of the socially oriented art of the mid-1990ies and onwards, which were identified by Nicolas Bourriaud in his outline of a relational aesthetics (2002); an orientation in which artists approach the social as a matter of form and seek to "stage" and explore it on a local scale in order to study its outcome (Johansson 2007). Although Superflex' group members usually take a sincere interest in the development of new technologies and methods—hence the term "tools" that they have referred to in the attempt to brand their enterprise in general (Superflex: 2003), their effort as artists first of all consists in raising political issues by means of tactical communication and in facilitating a project environment with various partners. Curator Åsa Nacking notes that 'Superflex' projects are such that they have to consult with specialists to execute them. Superflex comes up with the idea, but … the actual realization of the project happens together with the collaborative partners that they seek out.' (Nacking, in Gunér 1999: 43). Indeed, my own collaboration with Superflex was initiated by such kind of business relation. In 1999, during my PhD project on visualization and public participation in planning by means of new media (Johansson: 2003), I thus got involved as a counselor in their Supercity project; a public participation concept for urban planning which is based on a common 3D virtual worlds system and which were developed for smaller cities that are undergoing dramatic change. Likewise, Superflex' facilitating approach is very much about establishing new possibilities for communities and participating individuals that are undergoing change. As Austrian curator Barbara Steiner notes, 'It seems that all of Superflex' projects change everybody including themselves' (Steiner, in Jacobsen 2001: 135). The "natural" way of engaging oneself in these projects is precisely to realize that the options are there and simply take advantage of them in such a way that it will benefit all partners.

The aim of hosting Superflex as artists-in-residence was to provide these artists with a framework by means of which they could explore matters of interest that could become the foundation for future projects. This framework was in other words supposed to be separated from their usual artistic practice. The author of this article also hosted the group as artists-in-residence at the IT University of Copenhagen during Autumn Term 2004 when he was affiliated to this institution. During that period, the group had a different role in the sense that they actively took

---

[7] Further information on Superflex' work may be found on their website, URL: www.superflex.dk, observed on August 30th, 2007.

part in teaching (i.e. project supervision) and developed a new artistic concept; the *Our Beer* concept (later on re-branded as *Free Beer*). However, when we initiated the collaboration during 2006 by applying for funds at the Danish Art Council, we agreed that a project should be devoted entirely to research, that is, neither art nor teaching.

When Superflex came up with the idea to devote their residency to a study of failure, I was at first a bit bewildered. Given their artistic profile which, as mentioned above, is based on elaborate, tactical communication and the facilitation (or "staging") of collective processes of design and management, Superflex resembles a corporation rather than an art collective; a corporation, that is, with a seemingly rather smooth identity that perfectly illustrates, or mimics, the close bonds between design and modernity. Failure in this context seemed to be something that had deliberately been eliminated. In a conversation however, group member Rasmus Nielsen suggested that in a sense Superflex sat off from a kind of "original failure", namely their participation in artist Claus Carstensen's intertextual photograph *Flex Pissing* (1997) which showed the three group members with animal masks together with Carstensen urinating with his back towards the camera. Incidentally, this piece caused some public outrage as it was picked out by the tabloid press as an example of the power of a local "art mafia". For this reason it was subsequently chosen for a large exhibition of scandalous art works from the 20th Century at Aarhus Kunstmuseum (the former art museum of the city of Aarhus). In the rear-view mirror, Superflex' participation in Carstensen's work did not at all match the identity that the group sought to evoke, and whereas internationally Superflex has managed to maintain their characteristic business-like profile, they are still to some extend associated with scandal in their home country. One may thus to some extend identify a certain performative tactics of failure and self-degradation in their work. This tactics may in a sense also be said to be present in their *Supercopy* project, in which the group seeks to re-territorialize un-mapped grey-zones in the field of creative use of current copyright legislation and design icons. Here, a tactics of failure and imperfection forms part of their attempt to construct a sense of authenticity in their work. In the Supergas project, Superflex facilitated the production of copies of the Poul Henningsen PH5 lamp (1958, a popular icon of modern Danish Design). However, whereas these copies had an imperfect look (they were made out of cheap recycled metal and adapted for their biogas system) they did in a sense actualize the designer's original ideal of providing the new middle class with designed object that would enhance their life quality. This point seems to be evident in a picture of a Thai female farmer who is preparing a dish in the cosy (gas) light emanating from the lamp copy (Fig. 3). A similar sense of authenticity is established in another copy project where Superflex cuts off parts

from the back of a simple stacking chair in order to make it look like Arne Jacobsen's modern classic, *The Ant* (1952, Fig. 4). Superflex' interventions in the grey-zones of copyright legislation obviously challenge the collective's smooth business profile; not only because these products have a distinctly rough appearance but also because Superflex' activities in this field has lead to a number of law suits; threats—regrettably—that would make the impression of an economically sustainable project seem unlikely.

Figure 3: Superflex' copy of Poul Henningsen's PH5 lamp; re-designed for the Supergas biogas system.

Figure 4: Superflex' "copy" of Arne Jacobsen's *The Ant*; an un-named stacking chair with a cut-out back.

In the conversation, Superflex (Rasmus Nielsen) finalized his narrative of the project as (partly) a "failure story" by stating that today (late Autumn 2006) the three group members were approaching their forties and thus perhaps not as fit and energetic as earlier in their career (Nielsen used the Danish expression, "fyrre, fed og færdig", literally meaning "forty, fat, and done for"); something that could indicate that informally the artists were considering to pursue a new direction in their work.

The main activity during Superflex' affiliation as artists-in-residence was an ongoing, informal "failure seminar" ("Fejl-seminaret") that was held every other Monday afternoon at the Danish Design School. The seminar primarily attracted post-graduate design students, most of whom were preparing for their final thesis project and who seemed to use the seminar as a forum where they could scrutinize basic aspects in their work as designers. In order to participate,

students not only had to "confess" the failure of a previous project of theirs before the seminar audience; they also had to "commit" publicly to making mistakes[8] again in the future. Inspired in part by the confession and self-realisation oriented Anonymous Alcoholics meetings and in part by Ann Kerwin's so-called "Fiasco Hours"—a lecture series where leading researchers presented their most significant failures and laid out how these failures formed part of a career that also might have lead to a Nobel Price (Krogh: 2006)—the aim was explicitly to make the students aware of the performative powers of confession, the creative potential of committing to a set of restrictions, and possible failure as something that could be developed into a creative tactics as well.

Another important source of inspiration for the Failure Seminar was Danish film director Jørgen Leth's auto-biography, *The Imperfect Human* (in Danish: *Det uperfekte menneske*, Leth 2005), which was published one year earlier and which had caused an outrage in public life because of the author's depiction of sexual relations with a teenage girl in Haiti; his current home country. Referring to one of Leth's central documentary works, *The Perfect Human* (1967), this book contributes to the performative discourse of failure by outlining an outcast dandy whose aesthetic life style has brought the subject numerous pleasures but also led to restlessness, loneliness, and depression. A kindred spirit, Lars von Trier, has made equally important contributions to this discourse of self-degradation on numerous occasions earlier in his career. The manifestos accompanying the three feature films of the *Europe Trilogy* (*Element of Crime*, 1984, *Epidemic*, 1988, and *Europa* 1991) both ridiculed and idealized the director, who in the third manifesto "confessed" that 'I, Lars von Trier, am nothing but a simple masturbator of the silver screen.' (von Trier, in Johansson 1991, English translation from the original program) Interestingly, in the light of the Jewish heritage of more or less self-degrading humour, Trier's own parts in *Element of Crime* and *Europa* are both self-effacing Jewish characters ("eternal Jew" and hotel host in *Element*, and a deponent for the Allied in *Europa.*

Whereas his self-idealization has been falling in the later part of his career, the aspect of self-degradation is still present in von Trier. In *Dogma II: The Idiots* (1998), he experimented with "spazzing out", i.e. acting as spastics, as a improvisational technique and a fictitious theme in "order to give up control" (von Trier, in Lumholdt 2003, 117), and he supplemented this idea with a book where the manuscript was accompanied with a diary featuring all sorts of more or less

---

[8] The seminar was held in Danish with the title "Fejlseminaret". Whereas "fejl" in the Danish captures the English terms "failure", "mistake," and "error," the idea of confessing failure ("fejl") and committing oneself to making mistakes ("fejl") addresses the same term, that is "fejl."

obscene observations from his private life (von Trier 1998). In the film, *The Five Obstacles* (2003), he subjected Leth to the humiliating task of producing new versions of the *Perfect Human* on the basis of various rules; rules that Leth clearly did not approve of, and where humiliation and artistic degradation were basic themes. In the Failure Seminar, the idea that the students should commit themselves to making mistakes in their future work was directly inspired by this film and especially by a guest lecturer at the seminar, artist Olof Olsson, whose artistic method consists in "combining ridiculous consequence with the ridiculous inconsequence."[9] Being a contemporaneous student with Superflex' members at the Royal Academy of Fine Art in Copenhagen, Olsson is also primarily interested in political matters by making social sphere into an artistic material. In the ongoing project, *La Loko (2003-)*, Olsson and collaborating artist Daniel Solomon explores issues of globalization, modernity, and branding by means of promoting the artificial language, Esperanto; in a sense a hopeless endeavour which however is met with a charming enthusiasm, playful distance, and a (too/ridiculously) strong sense of consequence. The project title, *La Loko*, in English, "the place" refers to the artists' concept of staging "reality" as "places of art"—locations where art can take place and make a difference. In contrast to Superflex, however, *La Loko* seems more fundamentally based on what could be designated as a performative tactics of failure. The project logo thus depicts a snail—something that contrasts the performative enthusiasm of the artists and indeed the meaning of the term "Esperanto", in English: "hope". In this manner, La Loco establishes a charming performative tactics of failure by combining (ridiculous) consequence with (ridiculous) inconsequence.

CONCLUSION

The result of the Failure Seminar was supposed primarily to be formed out by a set of failure categories that Superflex has developed in the course of the seminar. This work is set to be published in a book this autumn (Superflex 2007). As mentioned, Superflex has already addressed the concept of failure in their invited proposal for a main theme of the 2008 Berlin Biennale of contemporary art, but this proposal has been rejected by the chief curators. In my view, however, Superflex' contribution to the development of a performative tactics of failure and self-degradation is just as important. Given the persistent "design hype" in our societies today,

---

[9] Cf. Olsson's lecture at the Failure Seminar, March 19th, 2007. Personal notes. Further information on La Loko on http://www.laloko.org, observed on August 25th, 2007.

given the hope and expectations of policy makers, investors, opinion makers, company owners, and other stake holders, it is more than ever necessary to develop a critical discourse of failure.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

REFERENCES:

Ammundsen, Kjeld. (Ed.) (1995) Design Is an Artistic Expression with a Purpose, Danish Design School, Copenhagen.

Bjørnvig, Thorkild (1960), Den Æstetiske Idiosynkrasi, J. W. Cappelens Forlag, Oslo.

Bourriaud, Nicolas (2002) Relational Aesthetics, Les Presses du Réel, Dijon.

Gunér, Tullan et al. (Eds.) (1999) Three Public Projects: Mike Mode, Superflex, Elin Wikström, Blekinge Museum, Karlskrona.

Jacobsen, Henrik Plenge et al. (Eds.) (2001) Remarks on Interventive Tendencies. Meeting between Different Economies in Contemporary Art, Borgen, 2001, Copenhagen.

Johansson, Troels Degn & Kimergård, Lars (eds.) (1991) Sekvens 91: Lars von Trier, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen.

Johansson, Troels Degn (2003) Landscapes of Communication: PhD Thesis, Danish Forest and Landscape Research Institute, Copenhagen.

Johansson, Troels Degn (2007) 'Home and Abroad. The Construction of Periphery in the Avant-Garde of Relational Art,' Nordlit No. 21, University of Tromsø, Tromsø.

Krogh, Erik (2006) 'Kreativitet og metode: Det vi ved, at vi ikke ved.' Akademisk Metode 2: Copenhagen Working Papers on Design No. 6, Denmark's Design School, Copenhagen.

Leth, Jørgen (2005) Det uperfekte menneske: Scener fra mit liv, Gyldendal, Copenhagen.

Limon, John (2000) Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Lumholdt, Jan (Ed.) (2003) Lars von Trier: Interviews. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson.

Olsson, Olof & Salomon, Daniel (2004) 'La Loko and Capital,' Scale Magazine, Bangkok. Also available at http://www.laloko.org, observed on August 25th, 2007.

Petroski, Henry (1985) To Engineer is Human: The Role of Failure in Successful Design, St. Martin's, New York.

Petroski, Henry (2006) Success through Failure: The Paradox of Design, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ and Woodstock.

Salamon, Karen Lisa (2007) Selvmål: Det evaluerede liv, Gyldendal, Copenhagen.

Superflex et al. (Eds) (2003) Superflex/Tools, Walter König, Cologne.

Superflex (Ed.) (2007, forthcoming). Fejl, Denmark's Design School and Superflex, Copenhagen.

von Trier (1998) Idioterne: Manuskript*, dagbo*g, Gyldendal, Copenhagen.

Žižek, Slavoj (2003) 'Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek', by Eric Dean Rasmussen, Electronic Book Review, http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/endconstruction/desublimation, observed on August 25th, 2007.