



Hi, it is very nice to be here with you. Thank you for inviting me to this event. I must say that it is very challenging for me to sit here and speak. In my practice I have been mostly concerned with making objects — be they sculptures, collages or paintings — but not performances or any kind of life actions. Sometimes I produce sound pieces when I use recordings of my voice but still that has been done in a manner detached from me as a specific person. Here I feel that it is very much about me as a three-dimensional, animated form that performs. My color, my dress, my voice, my accent and my gesture matter, and that's intimidating.

The appeal of a performance, someone has said, is very much based on the audience's expectation of the performer to fail. The tension and excitement is located in the possibility of a momentary collapse and not in the perfection of the execution. That is why a "bad" performance piece is not the one that doesn't fulfill our aesthetic or intellectual expectations, but the one that seems to lack the risk of failure.

I would like to share with you some considerations on failure. "Failure has been an important issue in recent years," I recently read. "It may be a response to a historical moment in which the question of sincere engagement is increasingly urgent." Probably any explicit definition of failure fails since the value judgments change and what appears as success on one day on the other falls through. Even when sharing the same temporality, what some individuals see as accomplishment others question. But for this very reason it is important for oneself to situate failure in relation to desire for engagement and the violence of surrounding reality.

"The world we live in is identified with absolute insecurity" writes Paulo Virno. Similar conclusions can be found in writings by many other authors. In the reality where rules are not clearly defined and are

constantly changing the danger of failure is even more vivid and becomes an integral part of everyday experience. It is not only an individual anxiety but a social phenomenon and a dilemma for any kind of practice.

In art the risk of failure is its underlying principle. “Works of art can fail so easily; it is so difficult for them to succeed,” Bertolt Brecht wrote. But the judgments of failure and success in art are much more complex than in other disciplines and in many cases they are conflicting. Some artists try to ignore the established categories and propose new ones, very often using the idea of “nothingness” as a radical negation that would break the existing conditions.

Zbigniew Warpechowski is an artist who in the 70s did a performance called *10 Minutes*. By one account, “The lights went out for a moment in the gallery, and the artist grabbed and caught in his tightly clasped hands a ‘piece’ of the darkness, holding on to it for ten minutes after the lights came on.” Subsequently he used a photographic negative and a piece of plaster to reinforce a momentary sensation of “NOTHING” that would escape the “real” and its primacy of interest and usefulness.



I would like to pass around an object that I produced by squeezing a ball of clay between my palms. One can say that the idea of mystic essence as “nothingness” materializes in it. Implied sense of “nothing” in performance art — lack of an end product — becomes “something” in sculpture tradition. The possible failure of a performer is now mediated by the object and the risk of failure lies more on the side of the recipient. The object is obviously “nothing much” but still there is a tiny possibility that it is actually somehow “important” and it is the viewer who fails to recognize it and decipher its message.

Eva Hesse shared as well a desire to approach nothingness that she rendered in her objects. She wrote: “To get to non-art, non-connotative, non-anthropomorphic, non-geometric, non-nothing; everything. It’s not the new, it is what is yet not known, thought seen, touched; but really what is not and that is” (1969 catalog).

Don't these ideas sound beautiful? Certainly they do. They do sound as beautiful as they seemed impossible, especially when rereading Eva's words while looking at her pieces at Hauser & Wirth in New York recently. There was no way that I could then say that I was looking at nothingness. The reality of the gallery was too obviously manifesting the value of the work that could be easily classified as symbolic and economic capital.

I am not here to mourn the visible failure of ideas that position art outside of the socio-political sphere and believe in reinvention of the world via the concept of nothingness and abstraction. Similarly I will not weep for the demise of the seductive dichotomy of object versus performance; service economy has long proved that even the most ephemeral action does not escape the rules of commoditization. But these facts cannot conquer utopian aspirations. As long as they are activated they are alive.

In the present situation when anything — basically nothing — can be something, when even the unspoken thought becomes something — something rather dystopian — one cannot submit to defeat. Equipped with knowledge from the past it is easier to proceed and imagine — not only the near future but that of one's whole life span.

One does not want to finish like the KwiekKulik artists' duo which initially in their wonderfully experimental work “fulminated against conformism, lack of ideas, cynicism, and hypocrisy” but then got their careers summed up by an art historian in a following manner: “the early 1970s were a period of faithfulness to a truth of the event of a political, scientific, artistic and personal revolution, the successive years saw the faithfulness gradually die out in its different dimensions. First, science dropped out (around 1975), then the faith in the possibility of political change (1976 through 1981), then love (1984 through 1987).”

Let me talk a bit about the objects I produce and especially paintings. I feel that painting on canvas is the most complex and embarrassing medium in art making. That is however not because of the dismissive claims of “the death of the painting” and the common question of “why paint today?”. The reason for my peculiar relationship towards painting is its potentially limitless possibility for improvement that makes my own limitations painfully visible.

When attempting to make a new picture the conceptual methodology becomes clear in my mind but the image escapes my imagination. I have an idea of it but I cannot clearly visualize it. It signals itself but does not appear. The working process of painting is thus a struggle to excavate an ideal that remains intangible.

Even in the moments when finally a canvas starts consolidating – becoming the ideal, the truth remains that it could be always pushed more and gain even sharper affective and conceptual force.

If I don't look hard enough, I don't see. If I don't process what I see well enough, I don't improve. If my hand is not able to follow what I've processed, I fail. Painting is an act of endurance. That might sound unattractive but for me to discover painting as described has been a meaningful event in my life and gave me hope in reconsidering other issues that seemed dead-ended, outdated and impotent.



Here is a painting of mine. As you can see I try to avoid a diversity of painterly effects and keep the handling of paints and brushes simple. There are no brushstrokes, no impastos, no transfers, in short no effects that would make the canvas enchanting in terms of diversity of techniques. It's just a plain glazing technique, not really orthodoxically executed. Some fields are painted in an opaque manner. Let me briefly point out the elements in my painting. Here are the figures, here is the mountain, here are clouds and explosions, here is the shoe of a soldier escaping. It took me months of painting this canvas that is 20" by 24" to come to this stage of its development so that at least I found some sort of satisfaction.

This painting was based on a photograph found on the Internet used to illustrate various articles about wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The photo belonged to the category of embedded journalism. The soldiers in action looked glorious, their situation seemed dangerous but there was an air of comradeship and heroism. The sharpness of their military outfit and equipment contrasted with the foggy clouds of explosions and the organic forms of the surrounding landscape. When approaching this photo and trying to deconstruct it, I just gave myself one order that would determine the composition. The lines in the places of the most contrasted lights and shadows were to divide the picture plane.

To my great surprise after conducting this operation and putting on the first layer of paint, an image reminiscent of Futurism revealed itself. Futurism that praised militarism and patriotism, the technology of warfare and admired violence. Futurism that was misogynistic. "We will glorify war - the world's only

hygiene - militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women.”

For a moment longer I would like to think about painting and look at it from the perspective of my experience as a woman. Baudelaire wrote about a female painter and complimented her work, saying she painted nearly as good as a man. Here is another male’s account of a female artist, that of Henry Miller in the “Tropic of Cancer”:

She was rather a fine person, his mistress; the worst that one could say against her was that she had lost her shape, and her ability to support him any longer. She was a painter herself and, among those who professed to know, it was said that she had far more talent than he. But no matter how miserable he made life for her she was just; she would never allow anyone to say that he was not a great painter. It was because he really has genius, she said, that he was such a rotten individual. One never saw her canvases on the wall - only his. Her things were stuck away in the kitchen. Once it happened, in my presence, that someone insisted on seeing her work. The result was painful. "You see this figure," said Swift, pointing to one of her canvases with his big foot. "The man standing in the doorway there is just about to go out for a leak. He won't be able to find his way back because his head is on wrong ... Now take that nude over there ... It was all right until she started to paint the cunt. I don't know what she was thinking about, but she made it so big that her brush slipped and she couldn't get it out again."



There is no point in discussing who can paint better cunts, a man or a woman, but for sure only a person with a cunt can paint with a cunt. I was a witness to such an activity, not at all within a contemporary art surrounding, rather that of a sex show. The woman was not Shigeo Kubota, not an artist at all but a go-go dancer who didn’t attach the marker to her panties but actually held it with her vaginal muscles. Then I didn’t really appreciate the outcome of her efforts– the picture looked like a bad cartoon, it was a palm tree



but it wasn't yet implemented just like the millions of plans for improvement and progress that went forgotten, since they offered no direct economic profit.

One can see this situation as tragic but one can as well see it as empowering, as awaiting a challenge. The crossroads of wish and necessity, reality and idealism, fact and abstraction, are a powerful place to start rethinking desires and opposing the violence of things as they are. Many different paths can be taken. Mine is the one of producing art-objects, testing their potential and seeing to which extent a form can become an attitude.



I've done what I've done and I said what I said. Withdrawal is not an option. It promises false freedom. Exodus from the existing institutions is a radical choice but it does not transform them; only sets free for further misuse and reproduction for coercive powers. Disengagement is a fancy pose but as well a very sad one. It falls either into hedonism that denies fullness of experience or becomes a bitter cynicism.

At stake is the genuine *uncoolness* and embarrassment, which show new possibilities out of the circle of seemingly totalizing oppressions. Nonconformity that acknowledges failure, but doesn't submit to it, is the way to go. "In art there is a fact of failure and a fact of partial success". Although works of art can fail so easily, failure is not an enemy. It is a comrade helping to produce and retain the tension that is necessary to keep up and live up to expectations for better days to come; it activates the audiences' interest. "Defeats should be acknowledged; but one should not conclude from them that there should be no more struggle."

This is the end of my presentation. Thank you for coming. Thank you for inviting me to this event. Thank you.

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Anna Ostoya, May-June 2010, 2010, performed at *Knight's Move Performance Program*, 2010, Sculpture Center, New York, and at The Power Plant, Toronto in 2011.