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## Preface

*Sorry losers and haters, but my I.Q. is one of the highest -and you all know it! Please don't feel so stupid or insecure, it's not your fault*

Tweet by @realDonaldTrump, 8 May 2013.

Surveying the Twitter feed of U.S. President Donald Trump, it is impossible to ignore the rhetoric of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, of success and failure, by which he has consistently defined his public persona. Over the course of his controversial rise to power, Trump, a self-characterised success story, has repeatedly railed against the failures of those who have criticised him: from his ‘loser’ political opponents (2016), to the ‘failing’ outlets of ‘FAKE news media’ (2017). Elsewhere, this rigid binary of success/failure can be seen to have informed the wider discussion surrounding Trump’s presidency: in the months since his election to office, the Trump administration has been marked by its own litany of errors and missteps (as tracked, for example, in

*The Guardian's* retrospective on the president's first '100 Days of Failure' (2017)).

Looking beyond Trump, we can see how this rhetoric of failure and success has defined public responses to other recent political upheavals: the vote for Brexit in 2016, for example, has been widely characterised as an expression of collective discontent from a significant proportion of the U.K. public, who feel that their government and political institutions have failed them. Thinking in broader terms, these specific examples are indicative of a public discourse in which categories of success and failure, winning and losing—and, indeed, the question of how these categories are defined—have taken on an unprecedented urgency and significance.

In this context, then, it is perhaps no surprise that the concept of failure has been gaining traction as a subject of critical attention. Across the essays which comprise this issue of *Excursions*, we find our authors articulating a shared concern: together, the essays present a collective attempt to interrogate the nature of failure, to explore the various permutations and manifestations of this concept across disciplines. The sheer range of this enquiry is illustrated in the first two essays of the issue: Rebecca Calvert-Giddings begins by exploring the ethical failures which lay behind the 2008 financial crisis, questioning the extent to which these failures have been addressed or alleviated in the years that have followed. Andrew Kingston, meanwhile, offers a wholly different perspective on failure in his investigation of the (potentially necessary) philosophical problems which underpin Hegel's treatment of the Egyptian pyramids in his *Aesthetics*.

Running through many of the essays in the issue is a desire to explore and articulate the constructive possibilities of failure, to respond, perhaps, to Jack Halberstam's assertion in *The Queer Art of Failure* that '[u]nder certain circumstances 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, p.2). Joshua Adair utilises

Halberstam's work in his exploration of Sarah Waters's portrayals of 'queer failure' within her neo-Victorian novels. In a very different setting, Halberstam's ideas resonate with the notion of 'failure as learning' in Gombert, Douglas, Carlisle, and McArdle's essay. They detail how the apparent failure of research methods in their study of young people's eating habits actually reveals much about the nature of the study and its participants.

Kristen Carter further questions the characterisation of failure as inherently negative in her study of the performance artist Lygia Clark: Carter explores how Clark's work is engaged in a rethinking of notions of collectivity in the face of an apparently 'failed' revolt (the period of civil unrest in France during May 1968). Alice Vernon, meanwhile, explores how notions of 'failure' have come to inform contemporary discourse around sleep, investigating the ways that popular journalism has constructed sleeplessness as a kind of 'failure', and how fiction writers reframe this failure as something constructive. Finally, Matthew Alexander addresses failure within the writing of David Foster Wallace, detailing how the apparently flawed portrayals of female characters in Wallace's work can be read as part of the author's wider, self-conscious interrogation of his own limitations as a male writer.

While these collected articles are diverse in subject, style, and discipline, they are united in their sense of establishing a shared pursuit: a desire to rethink failure, to position it as a subject worthy of extended academic focus. In this, the essays can be seen to contribute to a wider developing critical conversation. This emerging field of what might be termed 'failure studies' was evidenced further in *Excursions's* Failure symposium, which took place at the Keep at the University of Sussex in October 2016. This one-day event—which included papers covering subjects as varied as modernist poetry, contemporary moving image art, 'disaster capitalism', and internet cat videos—provides a further example of the diverse ways in which

contemporary scholars are exploring and responding to failure. This diversity was encapsulated in the keynote by Adam Rounce, which investigated a developing ‘aesthetics of failure’ in artwork ranging from 1700–2012.

Throughout this issue, we are confronted with a desire to address and articulate the inherent complexities and ambiguities of failure, to trouble the simplistic, binary distinction between failure and success which characterises so much contemporary discourse. The varied research collected here carries a common thread, as failure is repeatedly positioned, in Gertrude Stein’s terms, as a concept which ‘does not need an excuse’, one which might in fact constitute ‘an end in itself’ (1947).

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