resisting societal norms

Jill Sorensen

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## Prologue: Lives of Quiet Desperation

he American Dream died young and was laid to rest on a splendid afternoon in May 1862, when blooming apple trees heralded the arrival of spring. At three o'clock, a bell tolled forty-four times, once for each year of a life cut short. Dismissed from school, three hundred children marched to the funeral under the bright sun. Those with luck and pluck would grow up to transform American capitalism during the Gilded Age. But on this day the scent in the air was not wealth, but wildflowers. Violets dotted the grass outside the First Parish Church. The casket in the vestibule bore a wreath of andromeda and a blanket of flowers that perfumed the sanctuary with the sweetness of spring.

Townsfolk and visiting notables crowded in to hear the eulogist admit what many had thought all along: the dearly departed had wasted his gifts. Neither a deadbeat nor a drunkard, he was the worst kind of failure: a dreamer. "He seemed born for greatness . . . and I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition," the speaker grieved. Rather than an engineer or a great

general, "he was the captain of a huckleberry-party." When not picking berries, the deceased had tried his hand at a variety of occupations: teacher, surveyor, pencilmaker, housepainter, mason, farmer, gardener, and writer. Some who congregated that day in Concord, Massachusetts, thought it tactless to say such things of Henry Thoreau at his own funeral, however true Mr. Emerson's sermon about his dear friend was: Henry's quirky ambitions hardly amounted to a hill of beans.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps no one present fully understood what Ralph Waldo Emerson was saying about ambition, least of all the children fidgeting and daydreaming in the pews. Someday they would rise and fall in the world the sermon presaged, where berry picking was a higher crime than bankruptcy. If a man could fail simply by not succeeding or not striving, then ambition was not an opportunity but an obligation. Following the casket to the grave, stooping here and there to collect petals that wafted from it, the children buried more than the odd little man they had seen in the woods or on the street. Part of the American Dream of success went asunder: the part that gave them any choice in the matter.

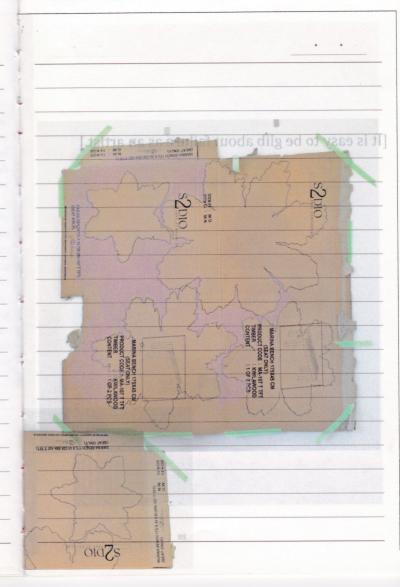
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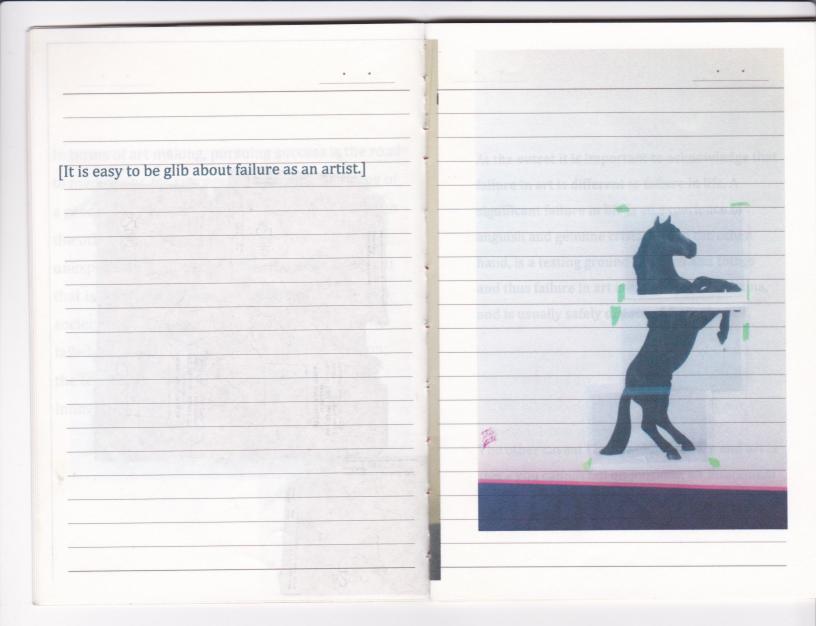
Born Losers: A History of Failure in America Scott A. Sandage. Harvard University Press, 2005

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In terms of art making, pursuing success is the road to mediocrity, for success is merely the attaining of a predetermined and expected outcome. Failure on the other hand has the energetic force of the unexpected and undesired. Failure falls outside all that is normal, expected and acceptable in a given society or community, consigning the failer or the failed item into a nether-land of non-expectation; the territory of desolation, desperation and innovation.

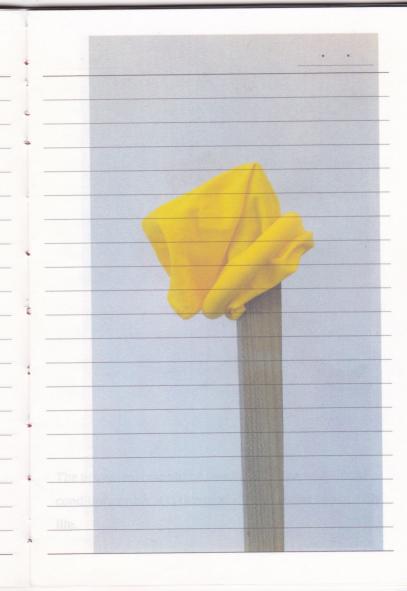




At the outset it is important to acknowledge that failure in art is different to failure in life. A significant failure in life is an experience of anguish and genuine crisis. Art, on the other hand, is a testing ground for ideas and things and thus failure in art is a conceptual dilemma, and is usually safely distanced from the self. The other caveat I have around failure and art is this - you cannot fail on purpose; an intentional fail is conceit.

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In art, the problem of both success and failure rests on judgement. A judgement of either success or failure is by definition based on an expected outcome, either achieved or missed. In either case the assumption behind the judgment is not challenged. However, if judgement is postponed, the possibility of a third option arises, a position that that wavers between the two: the shaky territory of the provisional. The provisional allows for a mitigated success; something that holds together, just, but contains its own failure within it. It holds the door open to uncertainly, to multiple attempts, to selfdoubt. It acknowledges the very human possibility that this is one of many tries at solving the problem on hand, and that this attempt is not necessarily the best but merely the most recent.

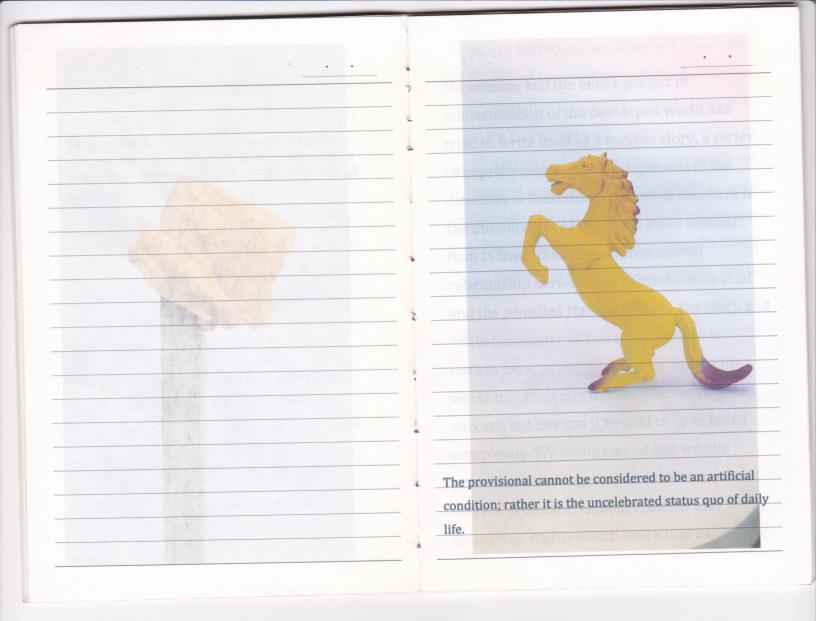


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consumer. A provisional space that can be Modernism and the entire project of modernisation of the developed world has tried to write itself as a success story, a series of improvements and developments in the direction of Betterment. However nowhere is the dubiousness of this claim more evident than in the increasingly dysfunctional relationship between the Western individual and the so-called Natural World. The black and white barometer of success-or-failure is useless here, as our mandate to subdue the world has evidently not been an unmitigated success, but nor can it be said to have failed completely. We occupy an ad-hoc middle ground cobbled together from our inherited roles of protector, exploiter, owner and consumer. A provisional space that can be

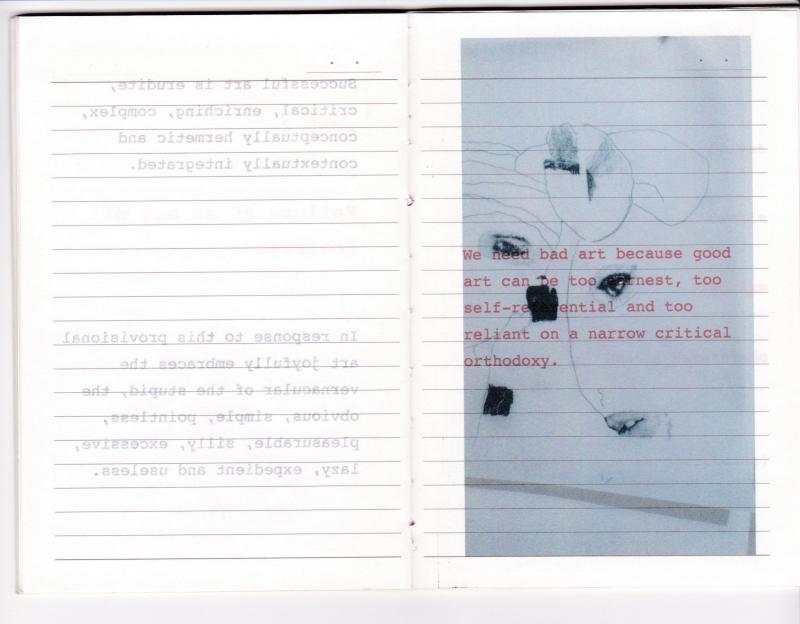
consumer. A provisional space that can be neither tolerated nor addressed by the dominant cultural model and subsequently exists as an ongoing state of crisis. If art, as we claim, sits alongside life as a testing ground for ideas and things, there is some possibility that the things tested and trialled could educate life in the subtle mid-ground of the mitigated success and the partial failure.

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#### part 2

Failure as an act of resistance

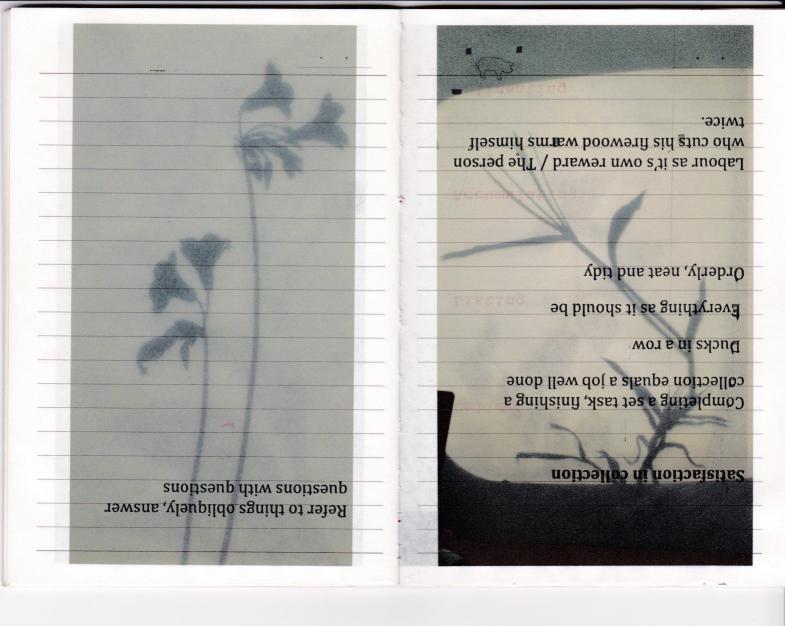
Successful art is erudite, critical, enriching, complex, conceptually hermetic and contextually integrated. Failure as an act of In response to this provisional art joyfully embraces the vernacular of the stupid, the obvious, simple, pointless, pleasurable, silly, excessive, lazy, expedient and useless.

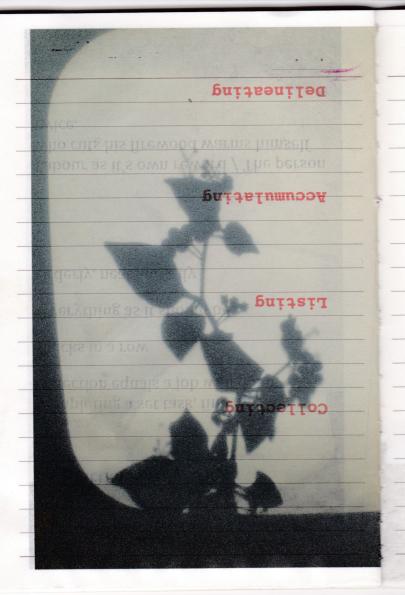


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Feeling overwhelmed by scale of lists

Avoidance through collecting

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of control because it becomes a demand physical / If something is listed I feel out control of it because it is tangible, Lists stand between self and the world / between a void and me A collection becomes something Resistance throughicollectings on state Avoidance Shick Avoidance Shick Feeling overwhelmed by scale of the CONTENT OR 2 CONTE

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Through Collecting

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