# Coloring in the Void: On Absurdity, Falling, Failing, and Contemporary Art

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*Boo Boo Bird* is a song, or a poem perhaps, or a song and a poem, by the Scottish poet, songwriter and humorist Ivor Cutler. This wistful ballad describes the plight and flight of a mythical bird, the Boo Boo bird. What we discover through the song is that the Boo Boo bird has no defining features, in fact — it has no features at all. The Boo Boo bird is invisible and recognized only by its call: ‘boo boo, boo boo’. The repetition of the word is important, and the absurdity of the invisible bird is amplified by its childish double name; boo boo, like an infant’s first attempts at vocalization, or that informal way of referring to a failure, a mistake, a booboo. There is something haunting about the way Cutler sings to this impossible creature and it is this element which makes the work so compelling; that it can be simultaneously ridiculous and also very moving.[[1]](#footnote-1) It straddles a certain border between irony and sincerity. And it is this border, or rather the oscillation between the states of irony and sincerity and between falling and failing, that features in the works discussed within this chapter, tracing a line between things and what is at the outermost edge of things, namely, the void.

The unlimited begins on the external border of the limit: and it does nothing but begin, never to finish.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This essay revolves around the expression of a thought, an idea that revolves around certain concepts within the philosophy of the absurd, drawn from the writings of Albert Camus. It also revolves around a selection of durational performance works, made between the 1970s and today. These examples have been selected as a way to help think through a questioning of failure within contemporary art and to offer a consideration of a new kind of absurdist tendency that might be emerging, or perhaps it is re-emerging. This ‘re-’ as a prefix suggests once more, and again, and as an image; from Sisyphus rolling his boulder, to Bruce Nauman walking around his studio,[[3]](#footnote-3) and onwards. The repeated gesture will be a reoccurring element in this chapter. Repetition, it seems, opens up a way of thinking about, and re-presenting, the *failuristic* tendencies that abound in absurdity.

I was already feeling uneasy. All at once, the silence stopped breathing.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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The word ‘want’ stems from *vanta*, an Old Norse verb that means ‘to be lacking’. We want something that we feel we are missing. Immediate pleasures in some cases, ambitious prospects in others, and unattainable fantasies for many. All contain within them something of a hope, a vision of a possible future that we might like to enjoy or visit or come home to. But from the want of a bar of chocolate, to wanting to spend time in the studio, to wanting to be happy, attractive, caring, or powerful, to even wanting to be wanted: there is something else that we would need to want above all of these desires, for without it, they are nothing. All of these desires are based on life. We need to want to live.

And yet, we must live knowing that at some time we will no longer be living. The journey between birth and death will have been our life and all our other hopes and wants are measured against this end bracket that is undefined yet indisputable. When reminded of this issue of time and finitude, certain desires can be put into perspective against our own life spans and against the historical backdrop of so many brackets that have opened and closed before us and before them. If we choose to really think about the details of our lives, the wants and needs that occupy our thoughts and determine how we choose to fill the hours of each day, and if we choose to think about these as tiny flecks of molecules floating in an ever-expanding universe, many things that have so much meaning for us can suddenly appear a little strange and insignificant. Meaningless. For Albert Camus, it here at this moment of conscious awakening, in this act of looking in and asking ‘why’, that absurdity is first recognized:

It happens that the stage-sets collapse. Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, according to the same rhythm — this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. ‘Begins’ — this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows.[[5]](#footnote-5)

And if and when the stage set collapses, and we are asking *why* and choosing to consciously face the absurdity and meaningless of existence, one might wonder: is there anything we can do but weep? The Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader cries silently and alone. *Too Sad to Tell You* is the handwritten note that introduces this short 16mm film shot in 1971. He just weeps and weeps — we do not know why. Endless crying on infinite replay. Why is it that such prolonged gestures, repetition stretched out to looped eternity, can cause us to question the very nature and entrapment of gesture itself?

There he is now swinging from a tree, arms stretched to the point where it is a matter of the inevitable ‘when’ he is going to splash into the river below. Off he goes on his bike headed straight for the canal. Watch as he falls off his chair that is precariously balanced on the peak of a roof and is soon to come crashing to the ground. These are choreographed falls, we know from the films’ titles what to expect. As soon as the artist has fallen, the clips end. When asked why he made these works, Ader’s response was that he was overpowered by gravity. As with life, falling too involves a beginning and an end. Ader’s falling works are set up to fall, to fail, and to fall again. Of course, this ongoing repetition of a task that is inevitably doomed to fail and is performed over and over and over again could also describe the famous punishment of King Sisyphus, who according to Greek mythology, was condemned to roll a giant boulder up a mountain, only to have the rock roll back down again every time he reached the top, and to repeat this act for eternity.

For Camus, Sisyphus offers an archetypal portrait of the absurd hero. What particularly interested Camus was that moment when Sisyphus is watching the boulder rush down the hill. As he heads down the mountain, briefly free from his labor, he is conscious and aware of the absurdity of his fate:

The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This figure of Sisyphus, sentenced to toil for no reason and towards nothing, as a metaphor for the human condition has been echoed in artworks and continues to do so in various guises: from Marina Abramović’s 1975 black and white video *Art Must Be Beautiful / Artist Must Be Beautiful,* through to Francis Alÿs’s 1997 durational performance *Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*)*,* to Rebecca Moss’s *Frog* from 2016, which sees the artist adorned in a frog suit and jumping on a lurid green pogo stick, desperately trying to remain upright as she boings, slips, and splats across a large puddle in the English countryside.

In the iconic *Exergie — Butter Dance* work by the Indonesian performance artist Melati Suryodarmo, the artist walks into a dark gallery towards a carpet of butter block bricks gleaming treacherously under a spotlight. Standing with her back towards the audience, she then turns dramatically to the front and begins stepping on top of the butter. As she performs her dance to the audience, the butter melts and spreads below her scrambling, high-heeled feet. The moment of inevitable crash is spectacular and violent. It certainly must have been painful, yet up she gets, again and again. Drawing on her experience of training in Butoh dance, Suryodarmo has described the work as a short kind of ‘haiku’, a poetic action with only three basic movements: dancing on the butter and standing up, with the fall happening somewhere in between.

It is an intensely powerful — and painful — performance, one which seems to encapsulate what it means to be a woman, an artist, or simply a person in the world today. The choice of butter as a material was a comment on the artist’s relocation from her homeland of Indonesia to Germany. Suryodarmo has said that she both loves and hates butter at the same time. It is not something that is commonly consumed in Indonesia and it has changed her body since arriving in Europe, in that she developed a hypothyroid condition that became active at the time of her moving across the world. The butter thus represents the cultural confrontation she is experiencing, on the one side adjusting into the culture she is living in and on the other side experiencing a number of rejections; in this case, an apparent bodily rejection to this foreign substance. In a comment that seems to be highly related to the idea of Sisyphus as proposed by Camus, Suryodarmo notes that in the piece, she was seduced to enter a particular time, an instance where her body related with a very specific delicate moment — that of the instant just before falling down. She says: ‘in that moment all my consciousness controls my body, but at the same time the risk becomes unpredictable. I might lose control, but the will to get up again is more important to me’.[[7]](#footnote-7)

We could certainly these rather nihilistic approaches: performances that perform the undoing of meaning demonstrate a sense of futility. The point is pointlessness, yet pointlessness is still a point. It could even be said to have become an unthinking style. But how else can the absurd be represented? Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* contains a chapter specifically on the absurd creator or artist. Art is an expression of freedom, according to Camus, because it highlights and helps relate the meaningless of existence. It is an absurd act of rebellion, and it offers no answers to the absurdity of life:

Art can never be so well served as by a negative thought. Its dark and humiliated proceedings are as necessary to the understanding of a great work as black is to white. To work and create ‘for nothing’, to sculpture in clay, to know that one’s creation has no future, to see one’s work destroyed in a day while being aware that, fundamentally, this has no more importance than building for centuries — this is the difficult wisdom that absurd thought sanctions. Performing these two tasks simultaneously, negating on the one hand and magnifying on the other, is the way open to the absurd creator. T[he]y must give the void its colours. [[8]](#footnote-8)

Give the void it colors. It’s quite a beautiful notion. One that exemplifies Camus’ stance that we must not have hope, yet we cannot anguish over the hopelessness of it all. We should live without appeal, he says. But how is it possible to color in the void? How do we color in a lack, openness, a vacuum? How do we color in the endless and unknowable expanse of empty space that lies beyond the outline of our own limitations? Camus was careful to be very clear that he certainly was not suggesting that art should become a sterile illustration of absurd notions. However, he did believe that if we are to accept absurdity in the rea l world, then it must not be denied in an artist’s fictional world. For the absurd artist:

it is not a matter of explaining and solving, but of experiencing and describing.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson often features in his own work, but for the durational performance piece *A Lot of Sorrow,* it is the band The National who take centre stage. For this event, Kjartansson invited the band to play their three- minute song titled *Sorrow* repeatedly for six hours as part of MoMA PS1’s Sunday Sessions in 2013. The lyrics, which begin with ‘*Sorrow found me when I was young / Sorrow waited, sorrow won*’, speak to the yearnings of unrequited love, of ‘*not wanting to get over you’* and endless, unsatisfied desire and waiting. Playing such songs on repeat, over and over again, at the end of a relationship or just for the thought of wanting more, is not such an unusual occurrence. But staging it so the actual band is playing the song for you over and over on repeat causes something quite different to happen.

*‘I don’t want to get over you*’, the ultimate refrain of the song, speaks to exactly what this act of musical endurance is about. It is like an extended moment of heart bleed. ‘*I don’t want to get over you*’. But it’s not quite a perfect act of repetition, is it? We watch the band, The National, in all their human and physical and vulnerable forms become tired and sweaty and perhaps even start to go out of their minds at the task. And then finally, hours in and towards the end, something seems to change, even within this act of monotonous repetition. The performers become reinvigorated. They feed off the audience, the audience who have mostly stayed and endured this durational performance with the band. It’s the audience who sing most of the final song. *The one and only encore.* Within this endless loop, we still see some kind of arc. From initial readiness for the task, to exhaustion, breathlessness, and bewilderment, to some kind of communal elation at having achieved something, something quite absurd, together. Meaning is made, broken, and remade through the repetition. And perhaps, not surprisingly, this leads us back to Camus and that certain type of conscious awakening that he describes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

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The choice to stop wanting does not lie in a magic potion, in willpower, or even in refusing the world of the living. To stop wanting, we must fail at believing in wanting. An awareness of the absurdity of a system of seeking value in horizons that are continually shifting inside out does not negate the idea of values themselves. For Camus, the value lies in our individual freedom, passion, and revolt. To stop wanting is to recognize the character of Sisyphus within ourselves. But again, if we are able to choose to fail at wanting, this will not necessarily result in despair. To recognize absurdity, to see such *failurism*, is to call present reality into question. The embodiment of absurdity continues to be called upon by artists and writers as a response to global anxiety, inanity, and horror. As Jennifer Higgie states, ‘absurdity is both a challenge to convention and a reflection of what it is to be human: has anyone ever lived a truly rational life? How could we, on such a messy planet? And *why* should we?’[[10]](#footnote-10)

Remember Camus’ words: one must imagine Sisyphus happy. Art is seen as a means to support and sustain a lucid consciousness in the face of absurdity and of failure. *What appears absurd to us today calls our present reality into question — provided we see something as absurd at all.* To be absurd is to be out of tune, the etymological roots of the word tell us this. Out of tune, and therefore irrational. Failing to follow the right footsteps, falling, and flailing in the act. In a world that increasingly feels out of tune, it is possible that what we might have previously associated with absurdity is no longer absurd at all. It could be that absurdity-as-failure is invisible, like the Boo Boo bird. Or perhaps it is constantly shifting in form. And it needs to do this. Let’s not forget that when Donald Trump made plans to buy Greenland in 2018, of all the insults he received, the one that irked him the most was when the Danish Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, called his idea absurd. Absurdity retains its power still. Do (not) fail to use it wisely.

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1. With thanks to Sarah Jones for the reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘The Sublime Offering,’ in Simon Sparks (ed), *A Finite Thinking*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (dir. Bruce Nauman, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, ed. Richard Zenith, London: Penguin, 2002, 355. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *EXERGIE – butter dance* (dir. Melati Suryodarmo, 2000), <https://www.melatisuryodarmo.com/works_Exergie_Butter_Dance.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jennifer Higgie, Chantal Faust, Hardeep Pandhal, and Bedwyr Williams, ‘Talk: Absurd Cosmos,’ *Goldsmiths CCA*, <https://goldsmithscca.art/channel/absurd-cosmos/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)