



Queers Fail Better – Q/A with Steve Giasson

August 31, 2012 by Dina Del Bucchia

In her book 'The Queer Art of Failure' Judith Halberstam offers alternative ways of knowing and becoming. Instead of valuing the conventional paths of belonging, achievement and completion, she thinks about and champions the ways of "failure": losing your way, giving in, being excluded, forgetting, awkwardness, coming apart. Not just rejecting the "normal," Halberstam shows alternatives to success as paths that have always been there, moving away from mastery and coherence. In this series of Q&As with contributors to our upcoming Queer issue, we play with these ideas. When we aren't trying to finish first (or finish anything) where do we end up?



Think back to when you started writing. What's an earlier influence you outgrew, abandoned, or turned against?

Reading Samuel Beckett made me want to write. I remember I venerated him and William Burroughs, almost as if they were saints or rock stars. For years, I had their portraits on the wall of my room. I still admire both of them.

Then I discovered Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Marguerite Duras. I had incredible admiration for their stylish lyrical prose at this time. And I was certainly in love with David Bowie's cut-up lyrics and Francis Bacon's violent expressionism.

In a sense, they were all lyrical artists, and, even if I don't believe in self-expression now, or do not find it really interesting anymore, I'm sure I took lessons from their radical experimentations, (from Céline's desire to be seen as a chronicler and not as a novelist, for example, or in the extreme deconstruction of language in Beckett and Burroughs' oeuvre)... I'm still an artist's artist anyway (or should I say an appropriationist's appropriationist...) – a Warholian lesson this time – I'm constantly paying homage to my predecessors and to some of my contemporary, by stealing their works. But, as many conceptual writers – who don't write their books – I'm also plagiarizing/reframing a large

amount of worthless language directly from their sources (like the world wide web). Writing this, I'm almost paraphrasing Kenneth Goldsmith. He once defines himself as "a word processor" (and he surely is a brilliant one!) I should say I'm a producer of ghosts.

When a piece of writing doesn't work out, what do you do with it? Discard? Fold it into another project? Salvage parts?

Sometimes, I forget it, or look for the best way to fix it or remake it. For one poem that "works" out, I discard – let's say – 10 or more...

Sometimes, I publish it, and then regret it...

What do you do with your rejection letters?

Nothing... Nothing, at this time... If I were as clever as my friend Robert Fitterman, I would make a poem with them, as he did in *Collective Task*, as it really shows the workings of the institution: the editorial line, the preformatted letters, their polite ways to say no, etc.

Do you plan out the piece beforehand or find your way as you go along? A combination of both?

Most of the time, the idea behind the poem is intuitive and/or irrational and subsequently, "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art"... (To be honest, it's not as simple as it seems... And, even if I try to be as less present in the process as I can, I always have numerous decisions to take that I didn't plan at first... Michael Snow is reported to have said: "I fixed the rules and when they don't work, I change the rules." But I'm afraid of baroque; I struggle to avoid it; as a conceptualist I try to be as "pure" as I can^{[1] (# fn1)}, even doing this exercise of a "post-conceptualist" Q & A.)

When a project is finished, how do you start the next one? Or do your projects overlap?

I'm always working on various projects at the same time. I'm truly a frenetic artist. Maybe, it will sound incredibly pretentious or megalomaniac, but my dream is to have an assistant to help me do all these projects, like in the Factory... But I'm afraid it's only a castle in the sky... Another fantasy could be to work on a unique task for the rest of my life, like Roman Opalka's project or On Kawara's *Date Paintings* in a monastic, ascetic and luminous way...

Have you ever not sent a piece of writing somewhere because it seemed "too gay/queer" for that publication?

Never. I'd be more afraid that my piece might be seen as inconsistent, or banal, than "too gay"...

What do you do to procrastinate?

Watch porn or compulsively check my email and Facebook, like many other people I suppose...

Has anyone ever said something completely discouraging to you as an artist? Did it take the wind out of your sails or did it drive you forward? Or both?

Yeah, one of my friends even told me that she didn't understand why what I make is poetry, mostly because everybody could do what I did (i.e. appropriating/reframing large amounts of comments on YouTube to make two poems with them: *Psychosis* and *11*). And, in fact, it was true, but everybody didn't do it at this time, so...

Even if these kinds of remarks could be discouraging at first, I think they could be also stimulating. They compelled me to find and to define my poetic. And I suppose that certain work could be frustrating, if the viewer, or reader, or thinker does not believe he or she has the keys to understand it. Moreover, conceptual poetry is probably outrageous^[2] (# ftn2) and shameful^[3] (# ftn3) and/or lazy^[4] (# ftn4) for people who think that poetry is only and could only be "Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre"...

Can a piece of writing fail, or is that a bullshit notion?

I think many pieces of writing do fail for various reasons, (even really good ones...) Ethical questions, for example, are always a concern when I work and when I read. But I think the only way to see if a piece fails is to do it or even to publish it.

Vanessa Place & Robert Fitterman stated in *Notes on Conceptualisms* that: "Failure is the goal of conceptual writing." It's probably because conceptual writing does not imply mastery or craftsmanship and because it is "de trop" and "pour rien". If conceptual writing shows something (not "says" something) it's probably the failure of language itself, its incapacity to reflect anything else than itself, its tautological essence, its emptiness.

I'm not sure if "Queers Fail Better"... But I'm sure some poets do. Poetry is dead, isn't?

^[1] (# ftnref1) "If the artist changes his mind midway through the execution of the piece he compromises the result and repeats past results." Sol LeWitt, *Sentences on Conceptual Art*.

http://www.ubu.com/papers/le Witt_sentences.html (http://www.ubu.com/papers/le Witt_sentences.html)

^[2] (# ftnref2) Let's think of Vanessa Place's *Tragodia* in which she self-appropriated some disturbing legal documents that were all originally written by her as an Attorney at Law.

^[3] (# ftnref3) Let's think of Rob Fitterman's poem list *Rubber Ducks (For Sale)* in *Metropolis XXX* or Steven Zultanski's *Pad* in which he enumerates every object he can or cannot lift with his penis.

^[4] (# ftnref4) Even there are works that necessitate incredible amount of time and energy to produce, like Kenneth Goldsmith's *No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96* in which he copied and organized by syllable count every sentences that ends with the letter "R" he found in 3 years. Or Christian Bok's *Xenotext Experiment* that "strives to "infect" the language of genetics with the "poetic vectors" of its own discourse" (I cannot resume it in a better way as Bok himself). Or Craig Dworkin's *Parse* in which he transfigured Edwin A. Abbott's *How To Parse: An Attempt to Apply the Principles of*

Scholarship to English Grammar into descriptions of grammatical structure. Or derek bealieu's elegant arabesque concrete poem *Prose of the Trans-Canada*. Or my own *Vox* in which I transcribed all the sentences I heard outside of my apartment in one year (from July 25th 2009 to July 24th 2010)...

[Steve Giasson](http://www.stevegiasson.com) (<http://www.stevegiasson.com>) is a multidisciplinary artist (conceptual poetry, installation, video, performance, theatre, photography). He has published 19 books and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Étude et pratique des arts (UQÀM). His work has been shown in Canada, United States, Mexico, England, Spain, and France. Le Centre des arts actuels Skol (Montréal) hosts Giasson's first solo exhibition, called "11" (7 September - 6 October 2012).



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