FAILURE: A POSTCONCEPTUAL POEM

> *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"

I have failed miserably, over and over. In fact, this reading, about my failed presentation, will be a complete failure. And by choosing this form of a quasi-essay—a form that I am neither comfortable with nor practiced in, I am more or less guaranteed to fail. The presentation of this failure might uncover some ideas about the nature of these poetry events and other aspects of our poetry institution, but I doubt that. My guess is that this presentation will fail at doing any of that work in a serious way. I was planning to present an awkward slide presentation from SPRAWL—the latest installment of my poem *Metropolis*. This presentation would have included random online images of shoppers in conjunction with my voice reading a text appropriated from online shopping chat rooms. But this idea would have failed miserably. It would have failed to say something, *anything*, more useful about the very consumerism it points to. It would even fail, believe me, at exposing the emptiness that continues to get filled as I speak. SPRAWL, even as a text, fails because it is ethically suspect—it seems to make fun of the shoppers who are being duped by the very corporations they chat about. And then, if I did show the images—which I'm not because I failed to get that together—there is the ethical problem of association—e.g., is it random that the Southeast Asian woman is linked to Payless ShoeSource? What kind of responsibility am I taking for this association? Clearly not much. The failure, here, cannot be rescued or

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excused by randomness. If it is a purposeful association, that's a worse failure. And what if, somehow, she *were* directly linked to a *Payless ShoeSource* site? Would that make a difference, would that be justified by some sort of authenticity? No way! But I have failed miserably to get that technology to work—so you're not seeing anything. This is an especially unfortunate failure given the fact that technology is so central to my whole thing here.

As a corrective to this problem of how appropriated images and text from people online could be viewed as condescending, I thought to write about the ethics of appropriation in the parking garage section of SPRAWL (because while parking we do ask a lot of questions). But this text also fails because it explains too much and compromises the conceptual frame of the whole project. At the very moment that I'm hoping to deconstruct this practice of appropriation, my own concession fails because it sounds too self-righteous and too obvious. It fails to bring home any of the complexities that sympathetic practitioners also face in their own practices to catalog or document mass information. One might argue that this is a non-issue and that I fail to grasp the dimension of this no-win situation or that I fail to recognize the blatant fact that appropriation is ubiquitous in all aspects of contemporary culture—both in a general, historical sense and specifically in the use of found materials from the Internet. Had I not failed to to present the powerpoint, you could be looking at the woman in the V-neck tennis sweater photographing herself in the mirror. But you don't need to see this image because it's a complete failure—it doesn't challenge the viewer to look beyond the role of spectator—we see these images all the time and we may get some creepy feeling of the appropriator exploiting the subject here, but do we, as viewers, feel

complicit? Do we think about our own roles as appropriators, culture makers, consumers? Not here we don't. I've failed to push the reader beyond his or her sympathies and into the space of complicity. From a more theoretical angle, I have even failed at suggesting new ways to destabilize the authority of the author. Some writers and artists may argue that this whole dialectic of the "I" and the authority of the author is an outdated or misguided dialectic and that there is no radical shift in the reception of our works if we destabilize the authority of the author. But my text, here, does precious little to further this debate on either side. In fact, it fails at destabilizing the authority *and* it fails at carrying out any authority of its own.

When I realized the dead-ended-ness of this failure, I thought the best way to rectify the dilemma would be to go online and join a shopping chat room myself. In this way, my hope was to create some equal ground and encourage a conversation even as I was making an intervention. What a waste! The idea was doomed to fail, because the poems that I posted were already appropriated from previous postings by other online authors, and then reformatted as poems and re-posted by myself. The result was a complete and total failure. Here's what I posted:

GNC

Most of us
are trying to get the best

out of our bodies   everday

through work
and play.   Mine is mainly

through work.

Getting older
my body tires faster and my

joints and muscles take longer
to recuperate.

And here is the first response to my post:

Dear Iggy Z - What da fuck?! Is there something way
wrong with your word processing program or is this
some kind of poem - which would be cool - Either way,
GNC sucks!!! don't trust anybody who works there.
Dan the Man.

Dan the Man seems to sniff me out as either a poser or a loser or both. My aim to confuse identities here is way off the mark—a huge failure. To think critically about my own identity in relation to these others identities is also filled with fundamentally failed thinking. Even when I am not entering the dialog of the chat room, but only appropriating the language of online anonymous authors, one might argue that these identities are also shared, and that, somehow, the Internet offers us the possibility feel like we are engaged in a collective identity. But this, too, is a failed premise and the act of borrowing online identities is more like Identity Theft than a meshing of subjectivities. I am a failed avatar just waiting for the delete key.

So, my failed text and failed powerpoint presentation travels the flawed road about the proposed ethics of appropriation, but it's like a service road to the main road because it fails all over again at visioning a larger worldview. The demarcation between the appropriated and the authentic is an obviously failed distinction; failed because in "real" life we don't make such distinctions, so why we would we do so in art? I could imagine

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someone coming to my defense here to explicate the notion that these empty, appropriated texts in a consumer context reverbrate differently in a new context. But, right now, I fail to see why that is meaningful.

And this this failure in mind, I have the messy job of returning to the ethical question which I failed to respond to in any satisfactory way. I've tried to consider how I might borrow this language without having a superior relationship to it. I've even considered removing or avoiding online language that could make my relationship to the text seem condescending, but this too fails because I am intervening with a heavy editorial hand. By presenting a more sensitive, more PC or PG version of what anyone could read on the web, I've failed to minimize any of the superiority that troubles me. This dilemma is best exemplified in the conflicted decision of whether or not to correct grammar and spelling of online found text. If I leaves in the original errors, I take the risk of making fun of the online authors who might be less privileged in class or education, and if I *do* correct the errors, then I run the risk of controlling and purifying the found text. Either way points to failure all over the place.

There are issues, too, about labor and craft—all that work that did or did not go into the presentation and the labor of choosing or not choosing the right borrowed texts in the right combinations? If I had completed the powerpoint that I failed to produce, the viewer might notice the amateurish quality of the web images and the presentation, but since I have no real powerpoint to show you, the example is failed and my point about the amateur is ridiculously failed. In fact, the very notion that I'm talking about a visual example that you can't see and wasting a considerable amount of time on this explanation is a more prime example of the kind of failure we're talking about here—total, far-reaching, and unmistakable. Of course,

one could even argue that those adjectives I just used failed to describe the depth of this failure.

And yet this particular failure of presentation skills could have been an important failure to point to because it could illuminate something about the democracy of skills that one sees on the web: everyone and everyone's grandpa can be a consumer critic, or self-help advisor, or photographer or video artist or archivist or boardroom presentation specialist. Where does this leave poets and other skilled artist? I don't know because I fail to think through the ways in which this challenges our ideas about the materials we use and the skills with which we use them. I fail to do any significant investigation into how this plays out. There are compelling issues to consider here about labor, production, artists' skills, authenticity and reproduction... isn't there a rich theoretical body of work that might intersect these concerns... I'm not sure... that's the kind of failure I'm up against.

But it is a failure too, maybe a deeper failure, to then explain these paradoxical uncertainties. So, by explaining the project here, even in failed terms, I have failed to let the reframing do my talking for me. In effect, what we have here is a triple failure: once for failing to create a more direct critique; twice for a faulty commitment to letting the object be and speak for itself; and thrice for over-explaining these self-defined failures. In terms of conceptualism, where the idea itself might have steered the text through these troubling waters, I have failed by my own editorial hand—fixing and doubting and reshaping the found text instead of letting it to perform its conceptual duty towards the larger idea, without the inference of my authoring. So, as a conceptual poem, this works fails miserably because it does not resonate a compelling idea that stands outside the text. As a

crafted poem, this text is an obvious failure in that the materiality is not at all carefully composed—where's the rhythm, assonance, consonance, etc? As a result, I'm in a kind of conceptual purgatory. In other words, I might have once thought it was enough to reframe the language in order to shift the conversation to a discourse about network culture, but I keep intervening and so the text then fails over and over again. Let's not forget, too, the ways in which this text and the non-presentation itself has failed independently of the text it refers to. What we are left with is a presentation about a failed presentation of a failed text with the hope, I guess, that such a discussion might bear fruit—but don't count on it.

I had hoped that I might write a conclusion to this short piece—it even fails at achieving a respectable length—that brings together these ideas in a meaningful way so as to not to waste your time and mine own, but that convention, which offers the hope of resolution, has also failed me miserably, again and again.