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Kaleidoscopic Failure: The Regularity, Repetition, and Patterning of Failure in the Arts

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Abstract

This essay presents the argument that failure in the arts is kaleidoscopic, presenting myriad points and types of regular, repeated, patterned failures that are concealed by focusing on financial earnings as the primary way that failure is experienced by artists. This framework is useful as a way to examine and review knowledge about the arts through outlining how individuals, groups, artistic products, and ideas can fail to accumulate economic, human, social, and cultural capital.

Keywords: Failure; Artistic careers; Capital acquisition; Culture; Non-standard work.

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While sociologists of culture have often focused on elite artists, successful cultural producers, and celebrated cultural objects as the object of inquiry, the modal artist and the modal artwork are failures by most measures. Resulting theories of cultural production focus on rare events, non-normative experiences, and exemplary objects, leading to a deficit in understanding and theorizing artistic failures. Within the arts, culture, and creativity, failure is possible at every point from an idea's genesis to its creation, production, and reception. Art works can fail to communicate the artist's idea, sculptures can crumble, creative partnerships can erupt into rivalry, and massive, expensive failures can happen when a big budget movie flops at the box office or is panned by critics.

Anecdotal orthodoxies about failure in the arts are well known. These ideas about the arts as sites of frequent, severe failure form the setup for joke punch lines, push parents to dissuade their children from becoming artists, and discourage investment in the arts from public and private sources alike.[1] Popular perceptions of artists as uniquely subject to high levels of failure are centered primarily in understanding failure in the arts as the inability to earn a steady and sufficient salary to make a living and partially in the general public's unfamiliarity with the conventions and purpose of non-commercial contemporary art. The trope of the starving artist is well known, coloring perceptions of artistic careers and necessitating significant PR efforts by non-profit groups and universities who wish to promote the value of the arts and of artists in society. Though the trope of the starving artist focuses on failure to generate sufficient material earnings, I argue that failure in the arts is kaleidoscopic, presenting myriad points and types of regular, repeated, patterned failures that are concealed by focusing on financial earnings as the primary way that failure is experienced by artists. Failure is a normal reality in the arts, yet it is felt individually and can lead artists to self-doubt, low motivation, blocks in creativity, or exiting the field altogether (Gonithellis, 2018). Even if felt exceptionally and individually, failure in the arts is normal and widespread.

While status acquisition can appear to be a binary measure failure or success in the winner-takes-all art worlds, the nature and context of creative work and cultural production as collective action (Becker, 2008) introduces thousands of points of potential for failure along a number of relevant dimensions. That is to say that failure is a normal experience that is repeated in day-to-day ways and more exceptional ways for all artistic creators and for the things that they create. While economic capital is the simplest to proxy or measure in creative work, capital is fungible and creative workers regularly earn and exchange a variety of capitals to create and to connect their creations to audiences or clients (Childress, 2017; Frenette, 2019; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Scott, 2012). Toward understanding failure in the arts within a framework of capital non-acquisition, I discuss how the failure to accumulate or exchange various forms of capital is regular, repeated, and patterned in the arts.

When I say "arts", I mean it in the most inclusive sense, as a shorthand for all arts, cultural, and creative arenas, fields, industries, and markets, encompassing the people, groups, collectives, and organizations who create, produce, curate, administer, and teach within these realms, as well as the works and products that emerge from their collective action. This heterogenous conception of the arts is reflected in sociological theorizing about art worlds (Becker, 2008; Cornfield, 2015; Corte et al., 2019; Godart et al., 2020; Lena, 2021; Lingo & Tepper, 2013; Menger, 2001; Skaggs & Aparicio, 2023), as well as in arts and cultural policy as it attempts

1. For example, beyond memes and jokes about artists being unable to financially support themselves, Frenette and Dowd (2020) motivate their report about who stays and who leaves careers the arts after earning a college degree in an artistic major by quoting a speech made by U.S. president Barack Obama lauding technical training and calling out an art history degree as potentially less monetarily valuable.

to account for an expanded understanding of arts, cultural, and creative life (National Endowment for the Arts, 2019; Novak-Leonard et al., 2021; Tepper & Ivey, 2008). Given the complexity and diversity of art worlds, a theory of artistic failure requires a broad, flexible approach to understanding many reasons for, locations of, and ways that failure can occur.

In order to specify this framework across such an unwieldy category, I limit this article to understanding failure among artistic creators and works of art, as they relate to their artistic creators, though similar principles could be discussed to understand failure of artistic movements, of organizations, or of events. With many types of art and many pathways to success, there are many ways to fail within art worlds. Artists and creative workers themselves are exceptionally varied in terms of their skills, roles, education, social identities, aims, and earnings. They, and the work that they do, are incredibly diverse despite being collected into the same occupational group (Lena & Lindemann, 2014; Skaggs & Aparicio, 2023). Some kinds of artists will defy all generalities in this text; however, this is an attempt to conceptualize the commonalities of failure that characterize aspects of artistic or creative work that are characteristic of all artists at some point in their personal artistic process or their career.

Within the unwieldy boundaries and array of organizing structures that contain the arts and creative fields, failure is regular, repeated, and patterned, like the image that one sees when peering into a kaleidoscope. It is regular in that everyone who participates in the arts experiences failure as a routine feature of the endeavor. It is repeated in that failure is not binary, rather it happens multiple times to everyone. It is patterned in that it occurs and accumulates in expected ways according to the context in which it unfolds. The regular, repeated patterning of failure in the arts could be examined in numerous ways. For instance, invoking a different theoretical metaphor of a kaleidoscope, the term has been used in management scholarship, positioning the kaleidoscope as a subjectivist approach against the realist metaphor of a lens used to understand patterns of interpretation of social phenomena (Nord & Connell, 1993). However, the approach employed herein is based on a framework of normal, patterned failure in capital accumulation and exchange. This discussion is intended as a way to examine and review knowledge about the arts through outlining how individuals, artistic products, and ideas can fail to accumulate or exchange economic, human, social, and cultural capital. The resulting framework gives leverage for studying failure as regular, repeated, and patterned, and provides a synthesis of knowledge about the sociology of art focused on the importance of understanding failure to pair with the field's well-honed understanding of success.

1 Failure Is Regular: The Individual Experience

The work of art requires risk — creativity itself is an activity that generates something novel and useful (Amabile et al., 2018). There are numerous debates about the meaning of creativity and its connection to art, but according to this measure, any work intended to be creative that does not meet this bar is a failure. So even the most economically successful artist will have experiences at some point when a musical note does not land, when paint drips before it dries, or when a design is rejected by a client. Every artist experiences failure, so it is a routine aspect of activity in this field. Failure is rarely terminal, and all artists have to contend with failure, whether the failure is borne in the process of creation (e.g., an object or idea fails to meet specifications or realize the creative idea) or in the fields of production or reception (e.g., the artist does not like her work, an editor rejects a writer's draft, or an audience chooses to listen to someone else's song, making a singer's single a relative failure).

Despite the routine, normal nature of failure, individual artists have to learn to contend with failure. Artistic labor markets face a perpetual oversupply of workers (Menger, 1999), and there are more artistic and creative works than can be supported (Hirsch, 1972), meaning that individuals and their work in the arts exist in a highly competitive space where failure is normal. In a clinical guide for psychological counseling for artists, rejection and failure show up over 80 times,[2] and recommendations in this book encourage counselors to understand that even the most talented or gifted artists have self-doubt and need interventions to build creative confidence (Gonithellis, 2018). Outside of a therapeutic or counseling setting, occupational communities that surround artists, including mentorship, friendship relationships, and participation in the normal activities of an art world help individuals to understand the regular, normal character of failure in their particular artistic context (Craig & Dubois, 2010; Frenette, 2013; Fürst, 2016; Reilly, 2018; Skaggs, 2019). Though all artists experience failure, understanding it as a normal reality of their field is important, taking individual self-doubt and exchanging it for an understanding of how art worlds work.

2 Failure Is Repeated: Opportunities and Markets

In addition to failure being regular, routinely experienced by all, it is also repeated such that any one individual will certainly fail on one measure or another many times.[3] However, past success does not protect artists from failing or failing again, and most artists who gain a high level of success for one work will not do so again (Fürst, 2022, 2023), meaning that while success is rare, a career based on repeated success is rarer. This repetition of failure leads some scholars to focus on pathways or trajectories (Cornfield, 2015; Fürst, 2023; Wohl, 2019) and some on resilience (Lindemann, 2013; Wong et al., 2021) as key factors in understanding artistic careers. Dealing with economic and symbolic markets creates much of the repetition of failure in the arts. Across artistic, cultural, and creative fields, market uncertainties mean that individuals contend with the risk and opportunity of sharing their work with the market (Godart et al., 2014; Mears, 2011; Rossman, 2012; van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2018). In addition to the market being difficult for any single artist at any one time, the nature of careers and aging in the arts means that for many, even early success and cultivating an established career will fade as new entrants who reflect market preferences for youth, novelty, and new artistic movements unseat incumbents (Accominotti, 2009; Frenette, 2019; Mears, 2011; Skaggs, 2022). Even in artistic fields that value status over economic success, the market for new ideas and symbolic capital is constraining, with adherence to one's own past artistic trajectory (Wohl, 2019, 2021) and its overlap with the community sense of the group (Wohl, 2015) structuring the stakes for who and what fails, even after attaining membership in the group and some level of initial success.

The fragmentation and long tails of markets in the contemporary era means that just as something can be perceived as a failure when released to the public, it can still rise from obscurity or maintain slow and steady sales or acceptance by audiences, critics, or influence groups of artists over time and in specific niches (Anderson, 2006; Hirsch, 2000). Just because the digital era makes this eminently feasible does not mean that it was not also a feature of artistic careers and the trajectories of artistic work in the past. For instance, posthumous success is documented and theorized across many artistic disciplines (Lang & Lang, 1988; Parler, 2020).

2. "reject*" – 55; "fail*" – 30.

3. Though successful people generally are more able to cultivate a good reputation and attract more resources that lead to a higher likelihood of continued success (Menger, 2014; Merton, 1968).

In this way, it is important to remember that failure is not final for artistic works or for artistic careers in terms of their legacy, legitimation, or value over time.

3 Failure Is Patterned: Structured Inequalities

Were failure to be unidimensional, it might stop an individual from continuing in the arts, and repeated failure would increase this likelihood. However, failure in the arts is multidimensional, with the potential to impact an artist or creative worker at many different phases of the creative process and on many scalar levels. Though potential failure is multidimensional, it is not, for the most part, random. People and the art they make fail in more-or-less predictable ways, patterned according to the conventions of particular art worlds, labor markets, and social worlds. The patterns that emerge and persist relating to failure in the arts could be conceptualized in a number of ways, including, according to particularities of the symbolic and material creation of artistic or creative work (Becker, 2008; Lena, 2012; Peterson & Berger, 1975; Wohl, 2021), according to relevant labor market dynamics (Cornfield, 2015; Frenette et al., 2018; Hénaut et al., 2023; Lingo & Tepper, 2013; Peterson & Anand, 2004), and importantly, along predictable dimensions of structural inequality in which people and which art are discriminated against (Childress & Nault, 2019; Chong, 2011; Dowd & Park, 2023; Garbes, 2022; Gualtieri, 2021).

When considering the patterning of failure in the arts, understanding acquisition and exchange of capital is a useful strategy for understanding failure. Patterns of success have been examined in terms of artists and their works' accumulation and exchange of economic, human, social, and cultural capital, and the reciprocal findings embedded in studies of successful artists and art outline failure as the non-acquisition of or inability to exchange these capitals in relation to the arts. Sociological generalities about capital acquisition and maintenance generally hold in this context.[4] That is, people who have access to more and more valued capital generally are more successful. What is more, in the arts, the fungibility of capital, its ability to be transferred and exchanged for other types of capital, give insight into a reason that failure is not terminal for an artist or their work.

Self-structuring, multiple jobholding, and polyoccupationalism all characterize artists' abilities to obtain and exchange various forms of capital in the work that they do, even if they fail at obtaining other forms of capital (Ashton, 2015; Hénaut et al., 2023; Platman, 2004; Scott, 2012; Stokes, 2021; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). Artists frequently hold multiple types of roles, contracts, and jobs that make up the whole of their work and creative life, some of which may have relatively high earning potential in terms of one or more types of capital, whether it be economic, human, social, or cultural capital. For example, one visual artist may hold contract work in graphic design for a local publishing company that pays relatively well (economic) but that is highly commercial and does not publicly attribute her work. Simultaneously, she may have the opportunity to be in a selective artists' residency (cultural) where she can continue to develop her skills in intaglio (human) and connect with other artists in her field (social) despite not being paid for her time in the residency. Such occupational careers are structured around and can perpetuate unstable and low earnings relative to other similarly skilled workers (Abreu et al., 2012; Menger, 2006) since efforts may be focused on accumulating non-economic capitals, even as rare "superstars" earn incredibly high incomes across artistic disciplines (e.g., Ala-

4. As such, this section does not focus on defining forms of capital in the arts, but rather outlines themes related to failure of acquiring and exchanging these forms of capital.

covska & Bille, 2021). Having such an amalgamation of occupational roles and sources of work, including self-driven projects and efforts, means that regular, repeated, patterned failure is not lethal to a creative career. The risky, failure-fraught nature of artistic work has been met by a 21st century style of work that allows for persistence even amidst failure.

Even given the economic and occupational challenges in the arts, artists and creative workers are able to persist and achieve in part due to their ability to acquire and exchange other types of capital (Alacovska, 2022; Scott, 2012). The ability to exchange capital in appropriate ways is highly specific to the context of particular art worlds. In the case of the graphic designer in the intaglio artists' residency given above, this artist's connection to the residency and the skills that she learned may lead to paid opportunities, like teaching at the residency, or to opportunities to sell the work using the skills that she gained at the residency. Even if she fails to be hired for subsequent graphic design contracts, she may be able to parlay the new skills and connections into new opportunities for paid work. Despite derision and stereotyping of artists who do low-paying work outside of their artistic practice to make ends meet, some artists choose to take so-called "bad jobs" as a commitment device that strengthens their identity as an artist (Adler, 2020). Adler's research inverts the contemporary popular assumption that artists who are moonlighting in service roles are failed artists. Evaluation is somewhat subjective but socially structured (Aadland et al., 2020; Sgourev & Althuizen, 2017), with artistic communities crafting their own standards of taste (Wohl, 2015) that differ between artistic fields and often between field insiders and outsiders (Bourdieu, 1983), and thus failure to obtain economic capital may be an asset for some artists should their field place higher value on cultural capital.

The value of traditional higher education in the arts, a major source of human capital, is contested. Research shows that across many majors, there are skills gaps in what graduates of arts programs learn in their degree program and what they need for their careers (Skaggs et al., 2017) and that in recent cohorts impacted by the Great Recession arts degree holders earn less than their pre-recession arts graduate peers (Paulsen, 2021). In higher education, research, philanthropic, and practitioner circles, arts entrepreneurship has over the past decade become a leading framework for describing and addressing the conditions of precarity that shape individual careers in the arts (Chang & Wyszomirski, 2015), positioning human capital in the form of skills, risk-taking behaviors, and opportunity seeking as ways to circumvent failure. In a neoliberal, capitalist political economy, considering the artist or creative worker to be an entrepreneur whose vocation necessarily requires that she take on risk aligns artistic work with models that are familiar and understandable to a wider public.[5] Economic precarity is a motivator for self-identifying as an arts entrepreneur (Feder & Woronkowicz, 2022), and artists who are not able to obtain the necessary human capital to self-structure careers are especially likely to experience more failure in the contemporary era, despite talent or special artistic abilities.

What of those artists who do fail to continue on in arts work? While much of the research cited here focuses on artists whose creative work and occupational roles are at the fore, even those individuals who fail in an artistic career path or never pursue the arts as a career may still engage in the arts in other ways, such as a hobby, as a volunteer in the arts, by participating in local arts programs, or being a fan of art (Frenette & Dowd, 2020; Lindemann, 2013; Skaggs et al., 2017). Again, failure is not terminal, and non-occupational pathways exist to creating or performing art, though these pathways generally lack legitimation within occupational communities of artists (e.g., as in self-publishing books: Fürst, 2019). However, it stands that the winner-take-all markets across the arts are rife with failure. Artists appear to personalize the risk,

5. Compared to, say, models that present the artist as a needy individual whose work is created from a patronage relationship or as an employee whose labor is governed by an employer or employing organization.

precarity, and uncertainty of their fields, thinking of success (and failure) as due to luck (or bad luck) (Lindström, 2018) and putting up with negative aspects of the work because of their passion (Frenette, 2016), despite the fact that such feelings can lead to work-related exploitation and further disappointment upon failure (Cech, 2021).

4 Conclusion

This article forwards the concept of kaleidoscopic failure as regular, repeated, patterned capital non-acquisition toward contributing to a sociological perspective on failure in the arts. Failure should not be understood in the arts as having a moral valence; people who fail and art that fails are not necessarily bad. Likewise, artists and art that are cast as successful are not necessarily good. Thinking of failures only as individual happenings that occur in the lives and work of individual people neglects sociological knowledge and theory about the importance and impact of collectives, communities, and interactions in art worlds. Despite being part of a structure that casts failure as regular, repeated, and patterned, individuals in the system are often seen themselves as failures, an ascribed term with moral implications that can be difficult for their self-esteem, make them question their artistic voice, and many times make them choose to leave the arts altogether.

Sociologists often conceptualize the determinants of failure in the arts implicitly from studies of successes in art worlds and studies of elite artists and their work, so much is lost in the implied findings about failure in the arts. Sampling on success means that the "failures" in many of these studies are objectively successful on many other measures. For instance, even those who were not the most creative in their time were still far more successful than artists whose creativity was not documented in art historical writing (Accominotti, 2009). Misaligned missions between grantees and a granting agency cannot document such alignment or misalignment from unsuccessful grant proposals (Crisman, 2022), and understanding predictors of success among films in the exhaustive Internet Movie Database (IMDB) still only considers films that were completed and distributed in a way that allowed them to be documented by IMDB (Lutter, 2015; Rossman et al., 2010). What is more, empirical realities within the arts are sometimes not considered or are excluded from analyses, often because they fall outside of the theoretical contribution of articles that are focused on success or on specifically delineated types of success. These are understandable, given limitations of analytic software and the push for parsimony in theoretical and empirical models. In fact, many authors note this bias toward the known and lament that they cannot access data about artists and art that have failed in a more systematic way without implicitly sampling for some degree of success.

Likewise in qualitative studies of the arts, relative failures are discussed by interviewees who have been identified as relevant to the artistic field and field sites are selected for their appropriateness in studying the arts, meaning that the people, thoughts, behaviors, processes, and actions captured in these data are likely to be disproportionately aligned with success or success-seeking. It would be difficult to select for failure, and to be sure, there are empirical and theoretical difficulties in dealing with and theorizing failures, particularly when failure is normal and success is rare for the modal artists and their work.

Many sociologists of art and of artistic careers have interest in and have set out to study failure, but conventional sampling methods and timelines for expedient completion of dissertations, books, tenure and promotion periods, and grants hinder scholars looking to identify and understand failures. Things have to be known to be studied, so obscurity is inherently limiting to empirical study in this area. Studying artistic failures could begin from sampling works

in progress longitudinally rather than choosing an object of analysis retrospectively. Likewise, whereas ranked lists of artists and their successful works are easily accessed (e.g., Oscar winners, Billboard chart toppers, New York Times Best Sellers, Models who walk in Paris Fashion Week haute couture shows), comprehensive lists like copyright databases, IMDB, YouTube and Spotify uploads, and other digital platforms and archives may give creative sociologists ways to access everyday artists and their work before they become successful or fail, though many challenges arise in understanding failed works when thinking through what is published or posted online in the first place. In these cases, retrospective interview or oral history analyses of "successful" and "failed" artists alongside data about their work, creative lives, and goals throughout their careers may provide useful data for deeper theorizing.

Cultural economists have been publishing research for over two decades using national data sets in the United States like the Current Population Survey (Alper & Wassall, 2000; Feder & Woronkowicz, 2022; Woronkowicz, 2015) and the American Community Survey (Paulsen, 2021; Wassall & Alper, 2018; Woronkowicz, 2023) to examine the career outcomes of artists. The questions that can be answered with these data are limited according to the questions that appear on these national surveys, and it is worth noting that this trajectory, too, is primarily focused on determinants of success. Nevertheless, these data do provide a more robust sample of potential failure rather than sampling on success in the same ways as are common in sociological research.

This conceptualization of failure in the arts as kaleidoscopic is only one perspective. It treats art worlds somewhat erroneously as the sum of individual parts in terms of the structures of failure and the points of failure that individuals experience. For instance, meso-level social groups, including organizations, are not theorized here. Variation makes patterns interesting, and the variation across artistic disciplines, creative media, and the careers of the people who hold these roles make the arts a fascinating case for understanding structures and processes of failure in social life, in and beyond the arts. However, this variation makes it difficult to conceptualize any theory that wholly accounts for anything in the arts. For this reason, understanding failure as kaleidoscopic in its regularity, repetition, and patterning is broad enough to constitute a concept of artistic failure that is sensitive to failure as being normal but also subject to the context of art world particularities.

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