

The Art of Failure

A conversation between Judith Jack Halberstam and Konstantin Butz

Judith Jack Halberstam is Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity, and Gender Studies at the University of Southern California. In the eyes of the editorial team of off topic the 2011 publication *The Queer Art of Failure* – a book that is dedicated to »all of history's losers« – distinguishes Professor Halberstam as a genuine expert in the realm of failing, losing or ›verlieren‹. Konstantin Butz talked to Halberstam via Skype and although the connection got literally lost a few times, in the following we present the transcript of their conversation.

KONSTANTIN BUTZ I would like to start with a question that might appear rather personal. As you are more or less an expert in the field of ›losing‹ I would like to know if you can think of the last situation during which you had the feeling that you were actually losing.

JUDITH JACK HALBERSTAM There are lots of answers to that question because I'm sure all of us, everyday, in this shitty world think that we're losing: environmentally, economically, politically. It's a pretty grim political moment. It's hard to feel that one is at any way on a winning team in some sense. But the other thing to say about that is, of course, I'm not trying to replace winners with losers or to make losers into winners. I try to contest the logic of winning and losing. I try to think about different ways of measuring success; ways that are going to be more in line with, say, a queer lifestyle or an anti-capitalist way of thinking about being in the world. In that sense you could say that we're all in relationship to losing and we're all in relationship to winning. At the same time I could give you actually a very specific answer to that question: I was recently at a conference where I was speaking about my new book *Gaga Feminism* and I had this feeling that feminism was seen, at that conference, as a complete ›loser politics‹ that had no currency and that was seen as being something that old ladies worried about and that was not cutting edge, and was not cool, and was not theoretically charged. I felt like I was really speaking about a politics that had no purpose for the audience. That was a real experience of losing.

You dedicate your book *The Queer Art of Failure* to ›all of history's losers‹. Could you give a concrete example of someone who might be considered a loser or someone you would definitely include in this dedication?

In the introduction to the book I use a brilliant piece of what we could call ›rene-gade history‹ by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, which is called *The Many-Headed Hydra*. In that book they basically trace a very compact and compelling history of anti-capitalist struggle and they make a couple of different points that are of special interest to me. One is that as long as there has been capitalism there has been anti-capitalism. We should not imagine in the arrogance of the present day moment that we have invented anti-capitalist struggle. But they also show that many of these anti-capitalist groups — from the levelers and the diggers, to the Anabaptists, to the anti-slavery fighters — many of them, in their particular struggles, did lose. We are still living with capitalism. Nobody brought down capitalism. But it doesn't make it any more of a valid struggle or any less instructive as a historical example. So, that's a very concrete one. I also think anybody who grew up queer in the period that I grew up experiences themselves as some kind of loser — a loser in the sense set by heterosexual normativity. The losers of the world are by far the majority, you know i t

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Oh. Hello?

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Hello!? Do you hear me?



I think the connection is kind of bad right now. Do you mind if we switch off our cameras so that we just hear each other? That might improve the connection.



Can you still hear me?

Yeah, now it's good. Do you hear me?

So, what I'm saying is ... yeah, I can hear you. Do you hear me?

Yeah, perfect. So, another thing that you write about in your introduction is ›forgettings. You very convincingly connect that to the Foucauldian notion of discipline and that memory itself is a disciplinary mechanism; like a ›ritual of power« as Foucault might say. I was wondering what this means, very concretely, for our personal biographies or my personal biography for that matter. Do my lost memories basically constitute the more adequate or even more real biography of myself? That's probably true. That we are only in touch with the pieces of ourselves and our biography that remain memorialized. And that memorializing is a technique. As you say: a ritual of power, a form of ordering experiences and so on. What Freud called the unconscious is probably everything else. And if we don't want to use the psychoanalytical language anymore, there is always material that remains unavailable to us for all kinds of reasons. I think that my emphasis on

forgetting was to try to get away from the very normalizing procedures of memory that summon memory only under certain conditions and under certain forms and then relegate forgetting to a very crude technique of power that I think is not an adequate description of forgetting. So I try to turn forgetting into another site of productivity that can be used for good or for ill. I mean it isn't simply a resistant form. It can easily be a mode used by official formats in order to propose only one kind of history, for example. Many people have commented on that. But at the same time forgetting can also creahuoklfidsfjalfgqfkö

Sorry! Hello!? I think the connection just... I will just call you again. Sometimes that helps. One second, please.

[calling again]

Hello.

Yes. Sometimes that helps. I don't know. We will see.

I came closer to my modem. Maybe that will help the connection.

Right now it is pretty good.

Okay. Good. So, I was saying that I think that forgetfulness gets cast as the alibi for official power but is also a productive mode of being in relationship to oneself and the world. In the most simple way of saying it: If you forget things it allows you to create the world anew. And the example that I give in my book is Dory, the blue fish in the film Finding Nemo, who forgets who she is and where she is every few minutes and therefore is able to create her environment again from scratch.

Well, but we are not fish, right? How could we productively or even consciously forget something? It seems oxymoronic: intentionally forgetting things. That is kind of hard...

And yet, it does happen. One example I could give you would be the queer person. The queer child who grows up in a heterosexual household and gets the training that heterosexuals give each other: a particular kind of training in being a man, a particular training in being a woman, a particular kind of orientation to getting married, a particular narrative of progressive development. And when you come out or when you begin to move through the world as a queer person you literally have to forget that training. So, I think that there are actually a lot of examples of people who do deliberately forget something that stands in the way of another kind of becoming.

At one point in your book you talk about failure and how failure comes accompanied by negative effects like disappointment, disillusionment, and despair. You describe this as an opportunity and explain that these negative effects could be used »to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life.« I think this

sentence really sounds great but, again, I was wondering how this could actually be done. How can we render such negative experiences valuable although they really make us feel bad and sad? But maybe my question is already too much indebted to a discourse of success and failure...

No, you're right. I think you are asking good questions here because you're saying to me: »This sounds really cool and it sounds like a very important thing to do; to poke holes in the toxic positivity of everyday life or whatever. But at the same time we have to grapple with the material sensation of losing, which is not pleasant, which is not something to be all kind of goofy and happy about...« I take that very seriously but I think what I was trying to get at is that toxic positivity is actually accompanied by this other suite of feelings. For example the suburban housewife who wanted nothing more than to own this house on this street in this county and is now sucking up prescription pills to get through the day. There is a way in which disappointment and despair accompanies toxic positivity rather than being something that stands in opposition to it, if you know what I'm saying. But at the same time I'm trying to acknowledge that disappointment, despair, depression are also unavoidable sentiments and to train ourselves only to look for the positive has a kind of fascism to it, too. It has a kind of forced element of cheerfulness that in the end is manipulative and possibly invested in a particular model of the good, the true, the happy that we might want to be suspicious of.

Maybe this brings us back to ›losing‹ a little bit. Would you agree that a lot of the implications of your writing are somehow connected to the notion of ›losing control? You are talking about things like disruption, anarchy, becoming different, and escaping discourses of normativity. This all has something to do with overcoming control. Is a loss of control something you are struggling for?

In this new book that I'm currently working on I become very interested in anarchy. Not anarchy from the late 19th or early 20th Century but new forms of anarchy. So that question that you are asking is very perceptive. I think you can see in *The Queer Art of Failure* that there is some sort of orientation to an anarchist kind of ethos. I wouldn't simply put it as a critique of control or an attempt to break free of control so much as really trying to experiment with different modes of rule and power and governance that don't just organize themselves in terms of state and citizenry but have lots of different logics and take many, many different forms. I'm trying to think about that now in a different project.

In *The Queer Art of Failure* there is this great quote by Quentin Crisp: »If at first you don't succeed, failure may be your style.« On the one hand this seems terrific and sounds pretty cool but on the other hand it also made me think about style and style as form of symbolic currency. For example twenty years ago Beck wrote this song *Loser*. That was a time when the whole grunge movement was going on in the aftermath of the punk movement and it seems as if at that point losing became something like a really popular style. Losing became cool and stylish and thus a form of success. What is your take on that?

There are two things you mentioned. One of them is Quentin Crisp's quotation and then on the other hand a kind of grungy version of losing that became quite popular in the 1990's and almost had a kind of hip appeal to it, ironically. In the first case, Quentin Crisp, that's a very historically located and very queer way of thinking about failure and success and that's why I use the epigraph so much in the book. He's somebody who made a long life out of turning failure into a style. There is his failure to maintain a job, his failure to be a civil servant (if you think

of his biography: The Naked Civil Servant), his failure to be a man, to be married, to be heterosexual. All of those things actually became the basis for him for a lifestyle and for a way of being in the world. He turned all the ways in which he was seen as being somebody who was failing into being. Rather than saying, »Oh my gosh, I'm failing, I need to try harder«, he is really taking aim of this Protestant work ethic that says, »If at first you don't succeed, try and try again!« And his response is something like, »If at first you don't succeed, why would you keep trying? If you don't succeed, then maybe you are born to fail and you need to turn this failure into something.« So, that is one thing. Then, when you get grungy people, slackers, hipster white guys with grungy clothes who are approximating losing, failing, who are kind of opting out of work, who are turning being nerds into something sexy as in the Judd Apatow films; for me that's a different thing. That's a kind of reinvesting the category of loser with new commodity force. It becomes a new category, a new category for white guys that can again be turned into another form of winning. When you have other kinds of characters who are nerdy, if you have nerdy girls or if you have nerdy sissy-boys or dykes, these people don't become a new source of sexiness or a new heroic figure. They are just losers. But there is something about the force of the way we have constructed our identity politics that allows for white guys to always be situated in modes that can be recuperated. Beck being a loser nets him millions of dollars. And Beck is also a Scientologist. For me that really says something about the category of losing that he is invested in. Scientology is a cult that is deeply invested in the specialness of certain individuals. While on the outside he may be singing about being a loser, on the inside he's actually deeply invested in a very elitist understanding of self and other. So, I'm suspicious of a recuperative relationship to the loser that then nets these kinds of guys millions of dollars.

I'm asking these questions from a certain position I have in academia. And you have a certain position in academia as well and you are also writing about that. There are certain standards that evaluate students and...

I lost you, Konstantin!

Oh! Do you hear me? Hello?

Yeah, I hear you now. You came back in!

Okay. Sorry, I don't know what happened. What I was asking was basically: How do you cope with the notion of success in the academic world?

The sound is cutting in and out. I don't know if I got you...

Sorry, I will just call you again. That helped the last time. One moment, please.

[calling again]

Hi.

Okay. Here we go...

Okay, I think you were asking how we can think about winning, losing, failing and succeeding in the context of academia, is that right?

Exactly, that's right.

Well, like you said, we have certain standards by which we measure success in academia and they're just as disciplining and normative as the standards of success and failure anywhere else. We are oriented to certain modes of knowledge and ignore other modes; we privilege canonical archives and bodies of work; we are suspicious of subcultural archives or less interested in theories of resistance and theories of oppositionality; we are more interested in theories of domination and theories of hegemony. I think that academia, like any other institution, sorts out success and failure and does so using many of the same techniques of measuring success according to standardized exams, measuring knowledge in terms of disciplinary rigor, excluding certain forms of knowledge, casting certain forms of knowledge as debased and somehow crude or uncomplicated. And sometimes, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney put it in their manifesto for the undercommons, often it is so-called critical academics and subversive academics, people who think of themselves as critical, who are also enforcing many of these normative regulations. Moten and Harney argue for a certain kind of fugitivity, that we are in the institution but not of it. They argue that we should be engaged not in the production of knowledge but in study. We should study together; we should think together and we should not always allow everything we do to be counted by the institution or accountable to the institution and this means doing things that are not simply about your CV. It means organizing studying outside of the university while remaining open to knowledge that comes from the university. It means not getting invested in a kind of Frankfurt School notion of high and low knowledge forms: being invested in the avant-garde while being critical of the popular. Those kinds of fixed dialectical oppositions are part of institutionalization.

Is there any way that you could break this down as an advice for someone who starts entering this system as a student?

Well, I love that idea and in fact when I was going around with *The Queer Art of Failure* to do book store talks I presented people with five rules for how to »fail better« (to quote Samuel Beckett) because a lot of people would come up to me and say, »Ok, how do I do this thing of ›losing?« They wanted to learn how to be a better failure... It does not really work that way but I do think there are certain principles: Accepting losing as being part of what it means to be in the world; being suspicious of the logics of success and winning; recognizing what kinds of subject positions losing attaches to; thinking small and getting down to the micro-level rather than being invested in producing a grand theory of something that everyone signs on to; and then, my final sort of strategy for losing is to turn to these more popular archives of culture. Like animated films, to find ways in which people in animation — where the human form does not constrict the art history — come up with all kinds of ways of thinking about not just being in the world but being in relation to others that is not a competitive being but is a cooperative being and seeks something beyond personal success and instead reaches out to a larger collective landscape of what would constitute a better way of being together in the world. And that sounds impossibly kind of cheery, optimistic, and hopeful for a project that is about losing but

I do think that in order for the many to win probably individualism itself has to lose. Those are the kind of political, very strategic pushes that the book makes. You just briefly mentioned art history and of course the title of your book is also *The Queer Art of Failure*. That implies that losing and failure might be perceived as a form of art or that art might provide a medium or an expressive mode to fail. Could you elaborate on the potential that artists might find in failure or in losing?

I think that art is very broadly defined in my book and constitutes everything from *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, the brilliant animated film by Wes Anderson to actual paintings by artists like Judie Bamber or Monica Majoli. There are all kinds of different examples I give in the book but I think that avant-garde and queer art is in fact very invested in making an aesthetics out of otherness if you like. That would be one way of thinking about it. But the other way is, as I was saying a moment ago, that there are certain forms, like animation, that are seen as »less than«, formats that are seen as being cheapened by their popular appeal that none the less contain lots of information. There is lots of information in there about the otherness of the animated creature that we should be mining for information about how to do this thing: how to lose, how to fail differently. There are also genres, it seems to me, that are utterly and totally committed to winning. If you take, for example, Hollywood genres like the romantic comedy. By definition, the romantic comedy has to take two people who seem to be on a trajectory of failure and turn them into winners. And the prize for the winners is love. We all know this formula and we all know that in every single romantic comedy this is how it will play out. And yet there is a kind of pleasure that people take from the repetition of this genre. What I'm trying to get at is that by always positing the same narrative over and over again as the winning narrative, there is a kind of relegation of all kinds of other narratives about desire to the margins, to the category of failing. One has to look to different genres for the history of losing and the history of failure.

My last question will now take us back to the beginning of our conversation because I would like to close the interview by relating to my first question but now ask: When was the last time that you felt that you were winning?

That's a great question. Let me think about that... I think I often feel that I'm winning when I'm at a club, a queer club. I will sometimes feel that something is happening there that is honestly different from what is happening up there on the street in the everyday environment. I would not call it political protest or not conventional political protest but more carnivalesque political protest...

But you would not dismiss winning as something that is forcing you into some kind of normative discourse?

I think that's the danger, right? That's why that question is so hard to answer. It's very easy to think of many examples when we feel like we are losing; we are being humiliated; we are relegated to the margins of whatever is happening. It happens to everybody and it happens all the time. But I think I'm suspicious of thinking, »Yeah, this feels like a winning event!« Because then it does seem as if those logics have been reinstated. And if the logics have been reinstated then what have you really achieved through this emphasis on losing? If you just transfer losing into winning you are back where you started from. Maybe the point is not to try to identify moments of triumph. Maybe the point is to really stay with losing – rigorously almost – and see where it might take you next.