# GESTURES OF FAILURE:

## PERFORMANCES OF OTHERNESS, MASOCHISM AND UNBECOMING IN THEA DJORDJADZE'S EXHIBITION *OUR FULL*

A MASTER'S THESIS FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF ARTS (TWO YEARS) IN VISUAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis makes use of Georgian artist Thea Djordjadze's exhibition *our full* to explore the close connection between artistic failure and 'otherness'. Combining queer theory with theories of the gesture, I examine how frameworks of artistic quality are maintained through repetitive forms, postures and themes that serve to value certain ways of seeing above others. By a careful study of the way *our full* poses passivity, negativity, masochism and unbecoming, failure is analysed as a disruption of language. The discussion investigates the visual process in which objects unavoidably become validated in relation to the specific norm of success that is obsolete within the context in which the object is presented. A process in which expressions that differ in significant ways from prevailing discourse, inevitably become constructed as lacking (in relation to the norm), thus as failures. Comparing theories of failure in contemporary art with Agamben's notion of the gesture, the thesis also puts pressure on the tendency in debates about failure to discuss the concept solely as signification, as something already perceivable in language. The thesis argues that such an approach does not acknowledge the crucial importance of understanding failure as speechlessness.

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# INTRODUCTION: GESTURES OF FAILURE: THEA DJORDJADZE'S *OUR FULL*

> The social worlds we inhabit, as so many thinkers have reminded us, are not inevitable, they were not always bound to turn out this way, and what's more, in the process of producing *this* reality, many other realities, fields of knowledge, and ways of being have been discarded and, to use Foucault's term, "disqualified"[1]

> The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such[2]

Despite increasing examinations of failure within contemporary art, more profound investigations of the vulnerable, shaming and painful aspects of this concept remain scarce in art theory. Instead, explorations of failure commonly stress how the inevitable gap between the intention and realisation of an artwork makes failure unavoidable. Furthermore, failure, error, experiment and doubt are commonly hailed as a means to access a productive space or to stumble on the unexpected. Advocacy of failure as a progressive vehicle may contribute to the re-evaluation of the binary construction of success and failure, yet this conception usually lacks a more thorough critique of the very means by which the model of artistic quality is reproduced. Based on a close reading of the solo exhibition of Georgian artist Thea Djordjadze titled *our full*, presented at Malmö Konsthall in 2012, this study will address the concept of failure by examining how the model of passing and failing within the Western art context may function as a means for inclusion and exclusion. The discussion examines the means by which objects become validated in relation to the specific norm of success that is obsolete within the context in which the object is presented. A visual process that inevitably constructs expressions that differ in significant ways from the prevailing discourse's[3] template of success as lacking (in relation to the norm) and thus as failures.

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[1] J. Halberstam, **The Queer Art of Failure**, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011, p. 147.
[2] G. Agamben, **Means Without End: Notes on politics**, trans. V. Binetti and C. Daniel Heller, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 58.
[3] Drawing on the theories of Michel Foucault, Gillian Rose defines discourse as a group of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking. When applying the idea of discourse into an art context, Rose refers to Lynda Nead's suggestion that art can be understood as a discourse, as a specialised form of knowledge. Following Rose this thesis applies the concept as a particular form of language with its own rules and conventions and the institutions within which the discourse is produced and circulated. G. Rose, **Visual Methodologies. An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials**, 2 edn., London, Sage, 2007, p. 142.

My main contribution to the debates of failure is to address the concept from the perspective of the gesture. Gesture is a term that originally refers to body language. Based on that sense, gestures are comprehended as corporal postures that enhance or support the expression of spoken language, as well as a language in itself. Within art theory, the concept has been used in order to discuss the gestures of artworks. Here, gesture refers to the way aesthetical forms and expressions underpin how a work of art conveys meaning. Theories of failure within contemporary art often discuss failure as signification, whose status may be re-evaluated. Based on philosopher Giorgio Agamben's theory of the gesture, I will instead aim to answer the question of how Djordjadze's works illustrates the very means by which failure is constructed. Investigating how failure might ultimately be a disruption of prevailing language, I address how models of quality operate in order to produce certain perceptions of reality, and consequently, how the concept of failure may be intimately connected to other, discarded, realities. Language is a method of communication in which the sign is a unit of meaning. I apply the term language as the system of communication used by the specific community of the Western art scene and discuss how Djordjadze's works clarify language as a coded system, strictly bound to the correlation between space, object and the viewer. In order to facilitate a translation of the performative elements of Agamben's philosophical ideas about the gesture onto Djordjadze's attainable artistic practice, I have throughout this thesis combined his theories with Amelia Jones' investigation of the relationship between art and identity, Jill Bennett's theories of how visual imagery operates, Judith Halberstam's ideas of unbecoming and Sara Ahmed's notion of unhappiness. I do not intend to describe Djordjadze's works as failures in the sense of being *opposed* to success or as being excluded from frameworks of artistic quality. On the contrary, Thea Djordjadze is an established and widely acknowledged contemporary artist. I am interested in how Djordjadze's works, through a deliberate play with gestures that does not support language accurately, *pose the process* by which failure is constructed within the specific context of contemporary art.

By investigating how frameworks of artistic quality are maintained through repetitive forms, postures and themes, the purpose of this thesis is to discuss how categories of judgement operate in order to value certain ways of seeing above others. In her book

*Seeing Differently*, art historian Amelia Jones traces how the concept of identity in Western thought is based on a binary construction in which the 'self' is created through the imagining of an 'other', which renders the self as unique and superior. She discusses how artistic quality reproduces this imaginary division of self and other through the interlinking of quality with certain ways of seeing.[4] Jones' ideas of how the rhetoric of artistic value is entwined with identity politics will serve as an historical context for my discussion. Based on an analysis of the artworks presented in Thea Djordjadze's *our full*, this thesis examines failure as a value judgment that renders certain subjects as outside of language; as other, or even as non-human.

The anthology *FAILURE* was published by Whitechapel Gallery in 2010 as part of their series of anthologies documenting major themes and ideas in contemporary art.[5] In the introduction, curator Lisa Le Feuvre describes how the interest in failure within art discourse is not a new phenomenon. In fact, Western art has basically built its self-image on the advocacy of failure since early modernism.[6] There are numerous examples where modernist art has been described as rejecting, challenging or deliberately failing the traditional arenas of art. In the exhibition *Entartete Kunst*, mounted by Nazi Germany in 1937, modernist art was presented as degenerate and perverted.[7] In Berlin 1892, the Union closed its November exhibition with Edvard Munch on the grounds that it was immoral to show such degenerate art.[8] The jury of the Society of Independent Artists famously rejected French artist Marcel Duchamp's artwork Fountain in 1917.[9] The avant-garde artist, as a member of French modernism, was staged in opposition to bourgeois society, challenging the conservative arbiters of taste.[10] During early modernism, the Parisian *Salon* was the official art exhibition of Académie des Beaux-Arts and the site for an artist's definitive validation. In 1863, almost two thirds of the presented works were refused by the *Salon* jury, amongst others works by artists such as Édouard Manet and Gustave Courbet. In a protest

[4] A. Jones, *Seeing Differently. A history and theory of identification and the visual arts*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, p. 20.
[5] L. Le Feuvre (ed.), *FAILURE. Documents of Contemporary Art*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2010.
[6] L. Le Feuvre, 'Introduction. Strive to Fail', in L., Le Feuvre (ed.), *FAILURE. Documents of Contemporary Art*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2010, p. 12.
[7] B. H. D. Buchloh, H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y. Bois, *Art since 1900 . Modernism，antimodernism，postmodernism*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2004, p. 17.
[8] S. Prideaux, *Edvard Munch: Behind the Scream, New Haven*, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 135-137.
[9] Buchloh, Foster, Krauss, Bois, 2004, p. 129.
[10] Jones, 2012, p. 32.

against these exclusions an alternative exhibition was erected, an 'exhibition of rejects' alongside the official exhibition. The art included in the *Salon the Refusés* soon gained status as more relevant than the works approved by the academicians in the jury, causing several of the artists included in the official *Salon* to desperately attempt to be removed and included in the exhibition of the rejected or failed works.[11] In this sense failure is deeply imbedded in the historiography of how modernist art challenged conservative arbiters of taste and therefore was rejected by the academy. Since then, using failure as a deliberate method is widely associated with the idea of the artist as someone at the political forefront, who aims to reframe obsolete art conventions.[12] In Djordjadze's use of found and cheap materials, her assemblages, and the way she leaves her work 'unfinished', her works share vital features with these kind of established expressions of anti-art and failure as resistance. But Djordjadze's work takes the input of artistic judgments as closely intertwined with political discourse one step further by demonstrating how artistic interpretation is oriented by the way gestures are embedded in the viewer's memory. While modernist art movements usually hailed failure as progressive and aimed towards goals such as breaking the dichotomies between life and art, Djordjadze's works are more explicitly gestural in the way they address *how* models of passing and failing within art operate. As I will elaborate throughout this thesis, *our full* connects the concept of failure in art to 'otherness' rather than to (deliberate) 'mistakes'.

Agamben argues that gestures inherit the possibility of interrupting language by making viewers aware of their position of being-in-a-medium.[13] A medium is the necessary means of communication. Being the means by which meaning or messages are conveyed, a range of different forms for communication can be termed as medias. A medium can be described as a kind of apparatus that commits existence, bodies and subjects to power and knowledge. It is therefore interesting to investigate how different contexts, expressions and forms within art function as medias. Art theorist Jill Bennett argues that aesthetics have been characterised as a discipline concerned with the definition of art or beauty. This has rendered a traditional conception of aesthetics as something disconnected from social-political structures, or even

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[11] Le Feuvre, 2010, p. 13.
[12] Jones, 2012, p. 32.
[13] Agamben, 2000, p. 58.

signifying the very antithesis of anything 'practical'. Drawing on Agamben, Bennett claims that the focus on mediality or means in art therefore becomes a countering of the traditional conception and a way to expose the connection between aesthetics, art and mediality.[14] She describes art as a 'means of apprehending the world via sense-based and affective processes – processes that touch bodies intimately and directly but that also underpin the emotions, sentiments and passions of public life'.[15] I will discuss how gestures, when repeated frequently become a means that structures the notions of identity of public life. Agamben defines gesture as a component always present within language, as something that support how meaning and perception is mediated. But he differentiates gesture from language by inscribing gestures into the sphere of pure and endless mediality. He claims that gesture has nothing to say in itself; instead it reveals the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality.[16] This thesis does not intend to further develop Agamben's ideas of gesture, means and mediality, even if it inevitably will do so in the process of applying his philosophical ideas onto existing objects and events. Instead, I will use his theories in order to contribute with a new perspective on the theories of failure within contemporary art by discussing how the perception of something as a failure may essentially be the result of a disturbance between gestures, viewers and space.

In order to define specific medialities that shape the interpretation of the objects within *our full*, I will sometimes adopt the somewhat problematic label 'Western'. Even though the use of such a label might strengthen binaries of Western and non-Western, I find it useful in order to trace connections between artistic quality and specific political discourses and projects. Following Amelia Jones, I use the label as shorthand for the dominant belief systems that construct art discourse within countries whose dominant cultures are based on 'European traditions'.[17] It is also important to stress that when I discuss how gestures inform certain ways of seeing I refer to these as constructed. In *Ways of Seeing* art critic John Berger describes the relation between the content of images and seeing by explaining how images invite certain kinds of seeing. Berger argues that 'we never just look at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves', and stresses how representations should be

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[14] J. Bennett, *Practical Aesthetics. Events, Affects and Art after 9/11*, London, Tauris, 2012, p. 1.
[15] Bennett, 2012, p. 3.
[16] Agamben, 2000, pp. 58–59.
[17] Jones, 2012, p. xvii.

understood as part of a wider cultural construction of social difference.[18] Art historian Kaja Silverman defines the gaze (i.e. an arranged specific viewing position) as an abstract phenomenon and argues that in reality 'the gaze' is never a complete vision and it is not possible for anybody to attain visual mastery through it.[19] However impossible it might be to fully inherit constructed ways of seeing in reality, I argue that visual culture, through repeating certain gestures, constantly creates a fictional position where the viewer is positioned as inheriting a specific way of seeing.

There are a variety of interpretations and perceptions of what failure might mean and how the concept should be comprehended. The criteria for what constitutes a failure are dependent on the specific observer, context or mediality. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines failure in three different ways: 1. Lack of success, 2. The neglect or omission of expected or required action, and 3. The action or state of not functioning.[20] All three definitions presume failure as a value concept, always lacking in relation to a norm that is successful, full, or in this case, of artistic quality. This study finds its natural limitations of the concept by analysing how Djordjadze's exhibition *our full* reveal the visual process in which objects unavoidably become validated in relation to the specific norm of success that is obsolete within the context in which the object is presented.

Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud has argued that women, as well as men, define femininity as a failed masculinity because of their lack of penis. Starting from Freud, several feminist theorists have stressed the close connections between failure and the position of (woman as) the other, as both definitions are constructed in relation to a norm. Author and theorist Monique Wittig has said that 'there are not two genders, there is only one: the feminine, since the masculine is not a gender. The masculine is not the masculine but the general. Which means that there is the general, and then the feminine'.[21] Furthermore, Wittig argues that if women are defined through a heterosexual framework, then lesbians are not women.[22] In a similar manner, I will discuss artistic failures as ways of seeing that do not quite correspond to the template

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[18] J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London, Penguin, 1972, p. 9.

[19] K. Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 151.

[20] 'Failure', *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed. New York, Oxford up, 2012. Oxford Reference, https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/failure, (accessed 20 April 2014).

[21] M. Wittig, 'The Point of View: Universal or Particular', *Feminist Issues*, no. 3, Fall, 1983, p. 64.

[22] M. Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1992.

of the norm, and how failure, in its final state, falls outside of the framework of language, and is thus rendered incomprehensible. Philosopher Judith Butler describes how gender is 'a kind of imitation for which there is no original'.[23] Butler describes how binary categories such as man and woman, are reproduced through performative practices. She emphasises how the performance of gender is not a voluntary choice, we do not act as autonomous subjects but create and are created in relation to one another. Gender identity is based on repetition and imitation, which in turn naturalises what we consider as feminine or masculine. Butler discusses how repetitions and imitations that maintain a given discourse can be exaggerated, for example by drag, in order to create deferral and pose the discourse as a construction.[24] This thesis elaborates how value judgements within art are reproduced through performative practices, where an artwork has to repeat certain narratives and gestures in order to be comprehensible. Furthermore, it addresses how modes of failure, passivity and masochism may illustrate the construction of models of artistic quality by refusing to repeat or imitate these narratives in a correct manner. Queer theorists, such as José Esteban Muñoz and Judith Halberstam, have examined failure as an alternative to hegemonic systems.[25] Here failure is described as a rejection of social norms and as a crucial part of queer aesthetic. In 'Giacometti and the gesture of creative life' author and researcher Alexander Carnera investigates gestures of hesitation and failure as operating in the intersection between life and art.[26] While analysing gestures on the border between doing and non-doing, Carnera discusses the possibility of turning art into a sphere of pure means.[27] I will move in a similar direction when I explain how *our full* may contribute to feminist and queer theories on failure in the way that the exhibition emphasises the means by which failure is constructed.

Djordjadze's (b. 1971) exhibitions are always strictly adapted to the specific spatial conditions offered by the gallery space in which her artworks adopt peculiar poses and produce an atmosphere that trembles with a sense of quirkiness. Djordjadze was

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[23] J. Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' in D., Fuss (ed.), ***Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories***, New York and London, Routledge, 1991, p. 21.
[24] J. Butler, ***Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity***, New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 124.
[25] J. Muñoz, ***Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics***, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1999, Halberstam, 2011, pp. 96-97.
[26] A. Carnera, 'Giacometti and the gesture of creative life', ***CHARA – Journal of Creativity, Spontaneity and Learning***, vol. 1, no. 4, 2010, p. 479.
[27] Carnera, 2010, p. 482.

born in Tbilisi, Georgia, and is now based in Berlin. References to her upbringing in former communist Georgia, where she also received her first artistic training, are clearly discernable in her art. Occasionally in an explicit way, as when e.g. the country's local crafts are incorporated in her exhibitions, but many times more subtle, as the way in which the artworks' forms and fragile materials can be traced to eastern-bloc architecture, marked by shaky political regimes. When Djordjadze studied at Düsseldorf Art Academy she was a student of German artist Rosemarie Trockel, with whom she, beyond her solo projects, has collaborated with since her graduation in 2003. Like Trockel, Djordjadze has an interest in investigating the disjunction between art and craftsmanship, and Djordjadze's interest in interior design and 'feminine' materials like ceramic, soaps and textiles are clearly connected to Trockel's feminist critique of artistic quality and her examination of feminine identity.[28] Djordjadze started out as a painter and has explained how she composes her sculptural installations almost the way a painter would arrange elements on a canvas.[29] Compositions of form, depth and colour interact with features of cinema, literature and architecture. Shapes and references intervene and make her work appear as a kind of assemblage, where suggestive elements create a momentary sense of orientation only to withdraw, commingle and create a tension between memory and interpretation. Djordjadze commonly uses the work's as well as the exhibition's titles as sculptural components. She stresses how the titles, which are often borrowed from literature such as the poems of T.S Eliot and the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald or George Orwell, does not function as an explanation or translation but is material, a physical tool that is part of the sculpture, as much as e.g. plaster. The titles, as well as other gestures within the works are commonly abstracted and modified in such a way that their signification becomes displaced. For example, Djordjadze's installation at dOKUMENTA(13) was titled *As sagas sa*, a palindrome with letters that come from words that appear in the opening lines of two early T.S. Eliot poems, *A Lyric* (1905) and *Song* (1907).[30] *As sagas sa*, a site-specific work in a large greenhouse is characteristic for the way Djordjadze intertwine different gestures and medialities in her work. By a deliberate play with the way space orients interpretation, elements

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[28] A. Kreuger, **To See the Dimensions. Artists from Georgia**, Värnamo, Fälth & Hässler, 2011, p. 87.
[29] A. Maerkle, 'The Secret Border in Human Closeness', **Art It Magazine**, 9 June 2012, http://www.art-it.asia/u/admin_ed_feature_e/WLhilcyk2sKJtB5rvF4g/, (accessed 30 April 2014).
[30] A, Groom, 'Thea Djordjadze', **Frieze Magazine**, issue 158, October, 2013, http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/thea-djordjadze/ (accessed 15 May 2014).

suggestive of furniture or cases could be interpreted as e.g. graves, interiors or flowerbeds. Several of the sculptural components from *As sagas sa* were reconfigured for her first official touring show, the solo project *our full*. *our full* was shown in 2012 and 2013 at Malmö Konsthall in Sweden, Kunstverein Lingen Kunsthalle in Germany and Mudam in Luxembourg. It was a single project but Djordjadze changed it every time, forming each exhibition site-specifically, and adopting, building or changing the works due to the particular spatial setting. The exhibitions presented, in reconceived versions, objects made out of foam pieces, steel and glass together with paintings she made 20 years ago. It is the version of *our full* that was presented at Malmö Konsthall in 2012 that will serve as a basis for this analysis.[31]

The title *our full* is not an explicit reference to literature, as most of Djordjadze's earlier exhibition titles have been. However, aside from her already titled works, none of the separate parts included in the exhibition had their own titles. Since *our full* in this sense was presented as a kind of whole, this thesis will analyse it by making a close reading of a few of the separate sculptures as well as consider the entire exhibition as *one* specific artwork in itself. I visited *our full* when it was presented at Malmö Konsthall in 2012 but this thesis is not a phenomenological analysis built on my spatial and aesthetical experience at the time. Instead, I have used documentary traces of the exhibition such as photographs and film-recordings for the specific case studies as well as for the discussion of the exhibition as a whole. Photographs of the exhibition and the relevant sculptures will also be used as an illustration of my points throughout this thesis.

Djordjadze's sculptural arrangements are three-dimensional; viewers are able to see the works from all directions. Therefore, it is obviously not an unproblematic issue to discuss the works through a re-enactment of photographs. A photograph is a medium in itself, which means that it will add layers that inform and structure the reading of the artworks. It is also a two-dimensional representation that forces the viewer into one fixed viewing position. Undoubtedly, the physical impression I received while wandering around amongst the objects in the actual spatial setting of the exhibition has informed my understanding of the works. However, it is important to note that my

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[31] ***Thea Djordjadze: our full***, Malmö, Malmö Konsthall, 2012.

memory of the exhibition is also affected and informed by the photographs and video-recordings I have seen subsequently, along with interviews with the artist and texts I have read about the artworks. Therefore, it would not be possible to write this thesis solely based on my memory of how I experienced the exhibition at the time. It would be equally impossible to conduct an analysis of the sculptures founded on the photographs alone, since my reading of them is inevitably being informed by my memory of the exhibition. When discussing methods of analysing performance art, Amelia Jones argues that even if viewers in a 'live situation' might have an advantage of understanding the historical, political, social and personal contexts for a certain performance, on a certain level they may also find it more difficult to comprehend the histories, narratives or processes they are experiencing until later. Jones highlight how performances commonly become more meaningful when re-examined after a few years since it is hard to identify patterns of representations while one is embedded in them.[32] The reason why I have decided to undertake case studies, where I focus on four of the works, is because this kind of reading will illustrate my discussion of the works as gestures. This thesis problematizes the concept of failure from a philosophical and aesthetic perspective. Djordjadze's artworks are ambiguous and make references to a variety of visual phenomena. Hence, her works might be interpreted and understood in a variety of ways. My descriptions of the works focus on aspects that emphasise my reading of them as gestures operating within the exhibition space. Therefore, my discussion will highlight the specific elements in the works that foreground my own particular reading of how they contribute to artistic debates on the concept of failure.

In the first chapter I will discuss how models of artistic quality are maintained through repetitive practices in which gestures inform interpretation, and how these gestures are intimately linked to political discourses of self and other. The second chapter presents a detailed reading of how the artworks in *our full* operate as gestures, and examines failure as speechlessness. In the third chapter, I inscribe Djordjadze's works into the history of performance art, and discuss how adopted gestures of the sculptures denote notions of passivity, negativity and masochism. By stressing how failure ultimately is a state of speechlessness, the thesis investigates if its potential lies

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[32] A. Jones, '"Presence" in Abstentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation', *Art Journal*, vol. 56, no. 4, Winter, 1997, p. 13.

in its very status as failing, undoing or refusing language.

# CHAPTER 1 – THE LEAPING GESTURES OF *OUR FULL*

## 1.1 GESTURES SUPPORTING LANGUAGE

Seemingly unfinished or carelessly assembled works inhabit the exhibition space. Objects partially covered with plaster or clay, foam mattresses, a sloppily rolled up rug and armatures without their sculptures emerge in different parts of the large hall. At first glance, the exhibition *our full* by Georgian artist Thea Djordjadze appears as if still in the construction phase, but at a closer inspection the items slowly claim their positions as works of art. The space is filled with a stillness that gradually becomes confounded as the objects one by one assume poses of vulnerability, lack and failure. The 'support elements' of objects resembling pieces of furniture such as chairs or beds come about as too fragile or too distorted to function for that purpose. Items denoting grand gestures of modernist art and architecture mix materials characteristic for the modernist movement such as glass, steel and wood, but abandon modernism's focus on expensive materials by also implicating cheap ones such as plaster, chicken wire and foam. References to the found object, crafts, interior design or modernist anti-art movements emerge but are never fully implemented. Different gestures reveal themselves and seem to orient the viewers towards certain interpretations only to pull themselves back again and appear incomprehensible. Form combined with negative form creates an oblique setting where the unfinished gestures of the works make the viewer aware of how the spatial setting directs the interaction of vision, memory and visual narratives. Djordjadze created her solo exhibition *our full* at Malmö Konsthall in 2012, in a rigorous process where many of the works assumed their finished form in the actual exhibition space. Through a careful orchestration one peculiar sculpture naturally lead to the next, as if in dialogue with each other and the modernist and functional architecture of the space. In the first chapter of this thesis I will investigate how *our full*, through disorienting or failing common narratives within art, design and architecture, exposes how models of artistic quality are reproduced through repetitive gestures inscribed into our visual memory. Jones discussion of how the rhetoric of aesthetic value is closely interlinked with political attempts to create self and other, will serve as a historical context for an analysis of the gestural character of Djordjadze's works.

Commonly, gestures are understood as bodily movements that support expressions of feeling and language. This conceptualisation of gesture has included any bodily movement or facial expression that transmits a message to the observer.[33] Apart from its definition as bodily postures, gestures have also been discussed as components of images, music and art, that underpin how meaning and perception are mediated. The gestural language of images as well as gestures of the aesthetics itself have been analysed from this perspective.[34] The fact that gesture is an activity within language means that it is not characterised by its differentiation from reality (characteristic for e.g. the sign) but by its actual role *within* reality.[35] Agamben describes gesture as a 'forceful presence in language itself'.[36] Playing a concrete role within the performance of communication, gestures orient how language is experienced. An artwork thus both gains its status as such and makes sense through 'supporting gestures', by presenting a specific range of aesthetic features within a particular context. White plaster appears in several of the works in *our full*, usually sloppily smeared and partly covering materials such as rattan, foam and wire. Plaster applied on a supporting structure such as wire is a common way to start making a sculpture. Because these objects are placed within the context of an art exhibition they make denotations to the design of sculptures, and hence, because we read them as such, they come about as unfinished. Whether, and in what way gestures are ascribed meanings is dependent on the context in which they appear. In order to understand the way the works included in *our full* operate as gestures it is therefore vital to have an understanding of the exhibition space in which they were presented (figure A1).

Malmö Konsthall is one of Europe's largest exhibition halls for contemporary art. Architect Klas Anshelm designed the building inspired by architect Le Corbusier's modernist designs. Made out of light and simple construction materials like concrete, glass and wood, the main exhibition space is large and bright. The ceiling of the building is constructed like a latticework of 550 domes and it has no windows or

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[33] K. Thomas, 'Introduction', in *A cultural history of gesture*, Cambridge, Polity press, 1991, pp. 1-2.
[34] See for example L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans P., Winch, Oxford, Blackwell, 1980, and, W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005.
[35] K. Lüdeking, 'Pictures and Gestures', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 30, no. 3, July, 1990, p. 223.
[36] G. Agamben, 'Kommerell, or on Gesture', *Potentialities: Collected essays in philosophy*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 77.

facades in the traditional sense but consists of concrete walls and a glass facade.[37] To construct a sense of framing for *our full*, Djordjadze covered the glass façade in the large hall with blue transparent curtains and painted the bottom of the space's white walls with a grey border.[38] Aside from creating cohesion in the exhibition space, the border enhanced the gallery as institution through visual references to borders used on walls within institutions such as schools, museums and hospitals.[39] Hence, Djordjadze intensified the exhibition space as an institution by strengthening the understanding of Malmö Konsthall's spatial associations to the artistic and political projects of modernism. Consequently the objects presented in *our full* were read as gestures denoting to discourses within art, design and architecture because of their position as artworks within the specific spatial framing of Malmö Konsthall.



**Figure 1**: Thea Djordjadze, installations view, *our full*, Malmö Konsthall, 2012.

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[37] 'About Malmö Konsthall', **Malmö Konsthall**, (web homepage), http://www.konsthall.malmo.se/o.o.i.s/2754, (accessed 20 April 2014).
[38] **'our full', Thea Djordjadze**, prod. Å. M. Bengtsson, Malmö, Malmö Konsthall, 2012, (video recorded interview).
[39] Thea Djordjadze explains the grey borders as a reference to the fabrics that hung on the walls of museums and schools during her childhood in Georgia. Bengtsson, 2012.

**Figure 2:** Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Farnsworth House, c. 1951.



**Figure 3:** Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, interior Farnsworth House, c. 1951.

The way Djordjadze enhanced the architecture of the large exhibition space where *our full* was presented is important in order to understand how the exhibition revealed the means by which gestures orient ways of seeing. Placed along one of the walls in the exhibition hall, a yellow foam rubber positioned upon a black steel construction created the impression of a bed (figure 1). The four thin and short legs of the sculpture were bent inwardly at right angles, which contributed to the work's straight, low and linear form. The mattress-shaped foam was a bit too long for the steel frame, causing it to bend down towards the floor on one side. Its top sloppily painted with white pigment that flowed down over the sides in some places. On the wall, up on the left

side of the sculpture, a quite small painting with a wooden frame was hanging. White paint or plaster covered most of the canvas and made it resemble Russian painter Kazimir Malevitj's suprematist form experiments from the early 20th century (figure A2). This reference to avant-garde art enhanced the way the sculpture was orienting the viewer towards narratives within modernist aesthetics. The low and linear form of the work denoted buildings of modernist architects such as le Corbusier's Villa Savoye or Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (figure 2). But the association between Djordjadze's sculpture and modernist aesthetics was abruptly cut off by some of its features. Functionalist modernist architecture and design has a strong focus on functionality, expensive materials, cleanliness and simplicity. As form follows function the design is supposed to be stripped of any decor or details not relevant to the overall function.[40] According to functionalist modernist aesthetics Djordjadze's work, when read as a piece of furniture, was stripped of all other details but the purely functional ones; the low steel frame and the mattress. This made it resemble standard work within modernist design such as Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona chair lounge (figure 3), but the object had a built-in fragility and came across as too dirty, broken and strange to be used for functional purposes. Its steel frame consisted only of a frame, as it had no splints it lost its function as a piece of furniture; a person who tried to lie or sit on it would destroy it by weighing down the mattress to the floor. Lacking functionality, the object became pure decoration, and consequently excluded from modernist design.

The objects presented in *our full* loaded the exhibition space with suggestive gestures that directed the viewers towards certain interpretations only to disorient them again when these gestures started to leap and manifest themselves. The sculpture described above serves as an initial example of how Djordjadze's objects illustrate how artistic quality is the result of how gestures orient interpretation through the viewer's memory and presumptions. By disorienting gestures Djordjadze's work interrupted well-established narratives within language before they had the ability to realise themselves. The winding intermingling of gestures within *our full* implying e.g. furniture, crafts, display devises, art, architecture and interior design, interweave and confuse the value judgements initiated by their position within an art space. The

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[40] L. H. Sullivan, *The Autobiography of an Idea*, New York, Press of the American Inst. of Architects, 1922, p. 108.

exhibition appears as partial and undone and its works as peculiar, stumbling and lacking because of the way the surrounding space implies states of success, wholeness and quality. Contemporary art theory often assumes failure as an end: as signification. The discussions commonly address the possibility of changing signification of what is perceived as failure, by e.g. offering new readings or interpretations. While this approach is interesting and important it risk reproducing the binary construction of success and failure. By reading the artworks presented in the exhibition as gestures I will move away from the perception of failure as signification and instead discuss failure as the disruption of language. Approaching failure from the concept of gesture enables a discussion of the very processes that locate certain subjects as outside of language and addresses failure as something present but rendered incomprehensible.

## 1.2 MODELS OF ARTISTIC QUALITY

Through his theory of 'Pathosformel' (pathos formula) early twentieth-century art historian Aby Warburg described how certain images and gestures, when repeated frequently enough, become a 'heritage stored in the memory'.[41]In this way, gestures are passed down from one generation to the next, embedded in a culture's visual memory.[42] Viewers thus comprehend artworks by consciously, or unconsciously, recognising gestures that orient them towards certain narratives and interpretations. Artworks, in turn, necessarily need to consist of a certain range of gestures in order to make sense at all. Reading Djordjadze's bed-like sculpture described above as a gesture inscribed in the exhibition space, as well as an object that suggests a variety of narratives, clarifies how the artwork assumes gestures that fail well-known narratives such as those of avant-garde art and modernist architecture. As mentioned, Agamben stresses gesture as a repetitive component *within* language, not anything that produces or acts but something that endures and supports. By a staggering play with gestures supporting narratives of art history, design and architecture, Djordjadze's works reveal how art discourses and practices are constructed and endured through repetitive gestures. The sculpture described above share features with modernist architecture but does not completely implement its gestures. Hence it is through the process of recognising the object within a framework of gestures embedded in the Western

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[41] E. H. Gombrich, ***Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography***, London, 1970, pp. 244-5.
[42] S. F. Eisenman, ***The Abu Ghraib effect***, London, Reaktion, 2007, p. 15.

culture's visual memory that it come about as failed, vulnerable and lacking. Consequently gestures partake in constructing a framework within which artworks come about as interesting, of artistic quality or as failures.

Gestures partake in the maintenance, as well as form the very basis for, models of artistic quality by directing the viewer's conscious experience through more or less unconscious visual means. The notion of artistic quality presupposes a shared logic of aesthetic judgement where the aesthetic experience is based on other, additional, aspects than the purely subjective or private ones. In this sense, models of artistic quality presuppose a shared, external, framework for experience. In his *Critique of Judgement* philosopher Immanuel Kant elaborates a model of aesthetics in which he presumes a 'sensus communis'. Kant tackles the problem of how one might be able to claim that one's aesthetical judgment is valid for other people than oneself (objective) when a subject can only perceive the world of aesthetics through his or her own (subjective) senses. Kant explains how aesthetical judgement might be universally valid because subjects share an aesthetical framework - the sensus communis. The sensus communis presupposes that people share the same formal or organisational ability to assimilate experiences, and is therefore a model that explains how aesthetical judgements become generally accepted. Models of artistic quality rely upon, as well as reproduce, an external mode of experience.[43] Gestures partake in building this shared framework of taste, in the way they organise experience and orient viewers towards objects. The notion of a sensus communis, or an external framework for taste, presupposes that one can only understand and interpret artworks accurately if one holds the correct tools and assume the right perspective.[44] The very fact that one needs tools in order to accurately 'understand' artistic expression clarifies that artistic quality consists of a coded system in which seeing and interpretation are directed by the gestures of an artwork. Therefore the value concept of artistic quality does not solely originate from private aesthetic experience but is a strictly coded experience in which one needs knowledge in order to 'read' the artworks correctly.

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[43] I. Kant. **Critique of Judgement** (1790), trans. J. C. Meredith, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1952, p. 52.
[44] Jones, 2012, p. 26.

## 1.3 FAILURE AS OTHER

Throughout history, the act of frequently repeating certain gestures and images has been used as a tool to control prevailing discourses of identity, memory and politics. Repetitive narratives within images have functioned as justification of violence and as an inscription of oppressive ideologies of master and slave in our visual memory, commonly through repeated depictions of military victors as omnipotent and the conquered as inhuman. Depictions of e.g. victims of violence as subordinate, non-human (and even as if they were taking pleasure, or at least accepting the rationality of their own annihilation) have functioned to justify the violence of the oppressor.[45] Thus, Western art has a long history of informing certain viewing positions as a way to naturalise sovereign imperial powers by implanting and familiarising images of their domination within the cultural visual memory.[46] In her book *Seeing Differently*, art historian Amelia Jones argues that art discourse has continually repeated motifs and narratives which cause the viewer to 'identify' works of art with European male subjectivity, which in turn has naturalised liberal and secularist beliefs about subjectivity. She traces the modes through which art history, and ultimately the birth of the art museum in the nineteenth century, played a vital role in the ideological articulation that aimed to establish Europe's primacy and superiority.[47] Jones connects the way that the art museum has functioned historically to the construction of binary models of self and other, and consequently, to European modernism's establishment of the (European, male, divinely inspired) sovereign individual. Drawing on French philosopher Michel Foucault's ideas she claims that the particular structures of the aesthetics in Western culture can be understood as a way of situating and normalising this subject vis-à-vis his objects of knowledge; a variety of 'others' whose difference is marked by e.g. ethnicity, gender, class or sexual orientation.[48]

By repeating narratives of Western domination, the art museum has historically created a collective memory of the past. An external visual memory that has informed, contextualized, and reinforced European modernity as superior. Amid the artworks of *our full*, several traces and tracks of modernism's political construction of

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[45] Eisenman, 2007, p. 79.
[46] Eisenman, 2007, p. 15.
[47] Jones, 2012, p. 20.
[48] Jones, 2012, p. 29.

the viewing position of the sovereign subject can be discerned. One of these sculptures (figure A3), located on the opposite side of the glass façade in the oblong exhibition space, consisted of two identical glass cabinets placed upon a black steel frame. Both cabinets were positioned laying down, one above the other, creating the form of a large and unified rectangular display case. In the middle, the two cabinets were joined together with white plastic. The merge appeared to be carelessly made with white plastic smeared up on the sides of the glass sheets, partially concealing the transparency of the cabinets. Being placed within the spatial setting of Malmö Konsthall, included in an art exhibition, the object denoted a museum's glass vitrine; the kind of cabinet often used to display artefacts in museums. A crucial aspect of Agamben's implementation of the concept of the gesture is how he differentiates gesture from language. While being a component of the discourse, partaking in the performance of language, gesture may also often be at odds with the function of communication. Hence, gesture does not only support speech but may also interrupt language precisely at the moment when it is actualising itself.[49] Certain gestures that are usually only registered unconsciously therefore have the potential to be captured when they 'fail' language. The display cabinets in a museum construct collective knowledge and memory by illustrating what is interesting and important to see and remember, and consequently, what is not. Adopting the gestures of a display device, Djordjadze's sculpture orients the viewer to look into the cabinet, only to notice that the paint partially covers the glass' transparency and finally that the object is empty. The object thus indicates methods of display but ultimately only displays itself as a means in which an artefact is given its significance. In this case, the sculpture denotes failure by assuming an action or state of not functioning. The object disrupts the common narrative of orientation by exposing the way the exhibition space constructs a certain way of seeing.

The model of artistic quality (the framework of taste) within the Western art scene is intimately linked with the way gestures informs certain ways of seeing. As mentioned, Jones has investigated how the notion of artistic quality within visual art has been crucial to the naturalisation and ideological justification of three modes of 'Western' domination; colonialism, capitalism and industrialism. Developing from

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[49] R. ten Bos, 'On the Possibility of Formless Life: Agamben's Politics of the Gesture', *Ephemera*, vol. 5(1), 2005, p. 40.

the early Renaissance in Europe and reaching its height in Enlightenment and 19th and 20th century European thought, the conception of art as a superior mode of human production came into being when Europeans were confronted with profound cultural differences as a result of colonialism.[50] Art thus became a tool to consolidate Europeans as a people that are culturally and intellectually superior in order to justify the large-scale projects of colonialism. To consolidate the artistic expression of Europeans as superior meant that one had to claim universal validity for judging art. To address the problem of how to assert subjective judgements as if they had universal validity, different models of aesthetic judgements, e.g. Kant's sensus communis were implemented. Therefore, models of aesthetic judgement were reinforced within European modernism as a response to the construction of self and other during the period.[51] Furthermore, from the early modern period (14th and 15th century onward), art has come to be understood as expressive of an individual's (the artist's) intentionality. Since then, art has been established as an expression of an individual set apart from others. Jones claims that this idea has functioned as a way to distinguish a superior subject from a range of 'others', defined, not only through ethnicity or race, but also e.g. class, gender, age or species. From the nineteenth century onwards, the artist was for example distinguished from the industrial labourer making identical mass produced objects and the bourgeois craftsperson, often a woman making artistic projects at home.[52]

## 1.4 THE IDENTITY OF QUALITY

On the backstretch side of the exhibition space, Djordjadze had hung a sculpture made out of eleven elongated thin black steel frames. They hung alongside each other in a row, one after another, with the same distance between them (figure 4). Consisting of identical outer steel frames they differed from each other in the way the straight thin steel created various geometrical forms inside the outer frames. The height of the elongated frames was based on Le Corbusier's *Modulur*; a scale of proportions used as a system to improve the form and function of architecture (figure A4). Le Corbusier's scale was based on the golden ratio, the Fibonacci numbers, the

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[50] Jones, 2012, p. 20.
[51] Jones, 2012, p. 26.
[52] Jones, 2012, p. 32.

double unit and human measurements. Inspired by e.g. Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* the system aimed to create a harmonious measurement that would be universally applicable to architecture and mechanical objects. Its height was based on the height of a human man with his arm raised.[53]
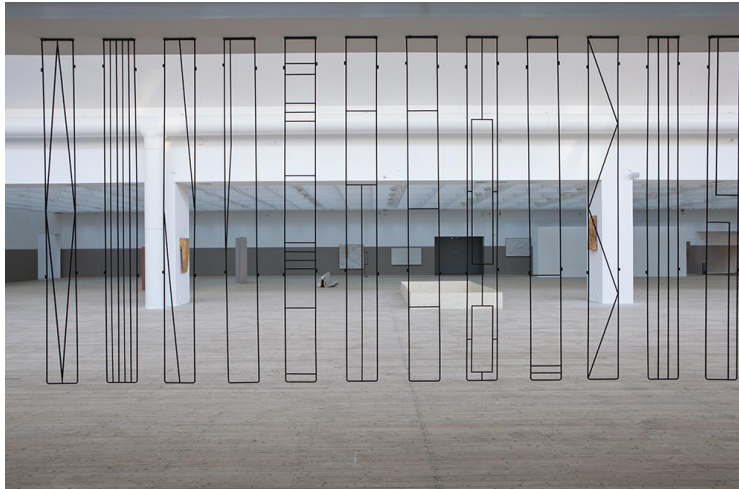


**Figure 4:** Thea Djordjadze, installations view, *our full*, Malmö Konsthall, 2012.

Jones points out how the construction of the concept of 'art' and 'the artist' in early modernism, worked in tandem with the art museum to establish Europe's primacy and superiority. Just like the art museum created a process of visual interpretation that familiarised the way of seeing of European male subjectivity, the concept of the artist was closely connected to this construction of a sovereign individual as well. Linking the rhetoric of universal aesthetic value to romantic individualism and Enlightenment thought, Jones shows how art and the artist in the still dominant model of artistic value are closely entwined with discourses of identity. Drawing on e.g. French and German Romanticism she connects the idea of art as both humanly produced and motivated and justified by a divine origin to modernism's construction of the sovereign subject.[54] The fact that an individual had to have a soul in order to be an artist; a link to divine inspiration in earlier periods, excluded a range of people from being able to make 'true art'. Kant, for instance, in his *Critique of Judgement* described how the quality of a true artist required a soul and stated that women could therefore not be artists: 'Even of a woman we may well say, she is pretty, affable, and

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[53] Le Corbusier, *The Modulor*, trans. P. de Francia and A. Bostock, Basel, Birkhäuser, 1999, p. 37.
[54] Jones, 2012, p. 24.

refined, but soulless'.[55] Jones traces this advocacy of a particular way of seeing as equated with 'true art' to the modernist construction of the sovereign subject. Just like the artist in earlier periods had been ascribed qualities of the monarch in his link to divine inspiration, the artist was within modernism constructed as the ultimate modern sovereign individual. The sovereign subject fully coherent of his own intentions and creative will and 'the artist', were both intimately linked to discourses of colonial, capitalist and industrialist politics. With modernism, the identity of the artist was collapsed into the work of art as art was seen as reflective or expressive of an individual's emotions, feelings, beliefs or, later, unconsciousness.[56] By tracing the relationship between art and identity through several historical periods in Euro-American culture, and with utmost focus on the period from early modernism until today, Jones argues that the way viewers 'identify' with works of art inform how objects are interpreted. Art discourse has attempted to universalise a certain way of seeing with aesthetic quality. Therefore, aesthetics are permeated by more or less hidden or explicit identity politics. This in turn enhances and supports a model of artistic quality that determine 'universal' aesthetic values, while covering up the fact that is it based on the relation of self and other in a political project of exclusion.[57]

The way gestures orient identification is implied by the spatial presentation of the mentioned elongated black steel frames in *our full*. Djordjadze chose to hang the frames down from the ceiling so that viewers could walk around them and observe them from both sides. This created a viewing position where one saw the artworks of the exhibition, with their intermingled gestures as well as their spatial setting, through Le Corbusier's aesthetical system based on male measurements. Just like the object suggesting gestures of a display devise was exhibiting itself as a means of constructing seeing rather that exhibiting an actual artefact, the steel frames exhibit how gestures within art are linked to ways of seeing that are structured by discourses of identity. The frames disturb the relationship between viewer, artwork and gesture by staging the excluding model behind one of the most influential modernist architect and artist's aesthetical systems. This work does not directly illustrate the way *our full* operates through narratives of failure. Even so, it is important to mention as it plays a

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[55] Kant, 1952, p. 124.
[56] Jones, 2012, p. 25.
[57] Jones, 2012, p. 24.

vital role in the way the exhibition illustrated how the mediality of art and architecture is built on a historical discourse of self and other. And, consequently, how the perception of the objects in the exhibition is informed by gestures strongly connected to a political project of exclusion.

This chapter has served as a historical background for the arguments presented in this thesis. I have discussed how the repetition of certain gestures in artworks have historically functioned as a means used for political reasons in order to familiarise and normalise specific points of view. While these gestures have sometimes supported actual depictions of rulers as omnipotent and the conquered as submissive, I have discussed the more indirect ways in which gestures inform certain ways of seeing. Where gestures function as a key component within a complex process in which the forms and postures of an artwork become connected to specific identities and ways of seeing. In *our full* one wandered around amongst objects that suggested certain interpretations only to disrupt these again and disorient the viewer. The viewer was forced to recognise the visual process in which their own memory 'filled in the blanks', the parts that was missing in order for the works to be comprehended as full or complete. This in turn made the viewer aware of how the social context, the exhibition space, oriented specific interpretations. This thesis examines how *our full*, by disrupting and mixing gestures, exposed failure as lack, thus as a value judgement always related to a norm. By demonstrating how seeing is directed by gestures imbedded in our visual memory, *our full* addressed the means by which failure is constructed; how expressions that do not assume the correct gestures within a certain context are rendered incomprehensible or failed. The way Djordjadze's works pose failure as lack opens up for recognition of how the final state of failure might be something that cannot be articulated at all, something excluded from language. With a starting point in the way artistic quality are closely interlinked with identity politics, the next chapter will approach failure through Agamben's ideas of a politics of the gesture. As mentioned, *our full*, by revealing the close connection between artistic failure and lack, links failure to the way of seeing of 'the other'. By deepening the understanding of how *our full* operates as gestures, the next chapter will address failure as, in Agamben's words, 'speechlessness dwelling in language'.[58]

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[58] Agamben, 1999, p. 78.

## CHAPTER 2. FAILURE AS SPEECHLESSNESS

## 2.1 ANTI-ART

In her work Djordjadze often uses ready-made items such as old carpets, foam mattresses and wooden stands. The way in which support elements and cheap materials become displaced from their original context in her work, makes reference to the 'found object' (from the French objet trouvé) of avant-garde art movements. The found object is an existing object, manufactured or of natural origin, that usually had a non-art function before it was presented as an artwork. Modernism's found object originated from Cubism and was later frequently used within art movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism and Arte Povera. These art movements employed the found object for several different reasons, but it was mostly used to question separations between life and art, to challenge prevailing distinctions of art as opposed to non-art, and as a means of creating unexpected juxtapositions.[59] In her use of found objects as well as in their appearance, Djordjadze's works particularly share similar designs and attributes with artworks from the 1960s Italian modern art movement Arte Povera (impoverished art). This art movement consisted of a group of artists that used cheap, natural or found materials in order to question prevailing values of art, industry, government and culture. By promoting inexpensive and available materials the artists attempted to enable an art scene where everybody could get involved.[60] In this sense Arte Povera, the use of found objects, along with similar strategies within modernist anti-art movements (such as Dadaism) can be described as past attempts to deliberately use failure in order reframe art conventions. While sharing vital elements with these narratives of anti-art within modern art, Djordjadze's works elaborate their application of failure by converging different medias and gestures within her work. As I will argue later on, *our full* disorients the viewer by mixing different medias in a careful orchestration of the spatial setting, the objects and the various viewing positions, thereby drawing signification from the well-known narratives of e.g. the found object *as well as* highlighting these as pure medialities.

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[59] M. Gale, 'Objet trouvé', *Grove art online*, Oxford University Press, http://www.oxfordartonline.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/subscriber/article/grove/art/T063150?q=Objet+trouvé &search=quick&source=oao_gao&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit, (accessed 17 April 2014).
[60] 'Arte Povera', *Grove art online*, Oxford University Press, http://www.oxfordartonline.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/subscriber/article/grove/art/T004357?q=arte+povera &search=quick&source=oao_gao&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit, (accessed 17 April 2014).

Art history and contemporary art theory commonly describes artistic failure as signification; as something perceivable within language. This thesis is not an investigation of precisely what kinds of artistic expressions are rendered as failures. Such an investigation would have to look at artworks through their signifying function. The fact that gesture is an activity within language means that it is not characterised by its differentiation from reality, characteristic for e.g. the signifier, but by its actual role *within* reality[61]. This chapter will focus on the performative aspects of Agamben's idea of the gesture. After an initial discussion of how he connects access to language to the construction of being human I will discuss how *our full*, by staging a fusion of altered gestures and medialities, revealed the viewer's position of being-in-language by disrupting language at the moment it was about to actualise itself.


## 2.2 MAKING A MEANS VISIBLE


When explaining modern politics and its mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion of bodies, Agamben draws on Michel Foucault's notion of 'bio-politics'.[62] Agamben explains bio-politics as the way sovereign powers control people, not by suppressing autonomous subjects but by producing the whole society in which people are regarding themselves.[63] He describes how subjects of the political are constructed through binary terms such as human and non-human or represented and non-represented bodies.[64] These terms are fluid and based on a logic in which humanity is defined by access to language.[65] According to Agamben, politics is thus an anthropological machine that renders subjects without a possibility to be heard accurately within specific contexts; such as the slave, the refugee or the foreigner, as figures of animals in human form, or as non-human.[66] This machine also prevents any

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[61] Lüdeking, 1990, p. 223.

[62] M. Foucault, *The history of sexuality. Vol. 1. The will to knowledge*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990, p. 144.

[63] G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 10.

[64] ten Bos, 2005, p. 36.

[65] G. Agamben, *The open: man and animal*, trans. K. Attell, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 34.

[66] Agamben, 2004, p. 37.

encounters with the less-than-human by constructing these as impossible.[67] In this sense, the way models of artistic quality is built on repetitive gestures which orient certain viewing positions can be comprehended as supporting discourses of exclusion, where ways of seeing that differ from the norm come about incomprehensible or as failures. Agamben argues that the community (polis) is built on sovereign politics in which access to language is exclusive, and the less-than-human is alive but has no voice at all in the community. Through Agamben's understanding of the correlations between access to language and the construction of subjects as included or excluded from the community, the profoundly problematic and dangerous traits of the concept of (artistic) failure emerges.

As discussed in the first chapter, Jones has illustrated how the rhetoric of artistic value originates from projects of Western domination; colonialism, industrialism and capitalism. The model of artistic quality, the framework of taste, within the Western art scene is intimately linked with the way gestures inform certain ways of seeing. Jones argues that the supporting gestures that are necessary in order for an artwork to be judged as quality, or comprehended as art at all, are tied to the way of seeing of the (European, male, divinely inspired) sovereign subject. Hence, the model of artistic quality is based on gestures that construct certain realities as passing, as art, or as artistic quality. Following Agamben, this means that the very language of art constructs certain subject positions as human, and discards others as irrelevant, failed, other, non-human or incomprehensible. While the way gestures orient specific viewing positions has been challenged in contemporary art by artists redirecting ways of seeing towards other perspectives such as gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation, the fact remains that one still has to reproduce certain gestures in order to pass aesthetical judgement. Consequently, because these gestures are saturated with ideology[68], they continue to reproduce certain narratives of subjectivity and what it means to be human. This emphasises failure as vulnerability, tremor and speechlessness, and highlights how models of artistic value might consequently render certain subjects as outside of language, as other, or even as non-human.

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[67] ten Bos, 2005, p. 35.
[68] I use the term in the same manner as Gillian Rose who describes ideology as knowledge that is constructed in such a way as to legitimate unequal social power relations. Rose, 2007, p. 75.

Drawing on Latin writer Varro's definition of gesture, Agamben inscribes gesture into the sphere of action but distinguishes it from acting or making. Varro describes gesture as something that transfers, or 'carries on' meaning by supporting it.[69] Gesture is therefore not a sphere of means addressing a goal or something that necessarily leads to an end. Instead gesture is the endurance and the exhibition of 'the media character of corporal movements'.[70] This means that the study of gesture is not the reading of an action or expressive movement as goal-oriented but rather the study of the inhabited or supported aspect of an action. Agamben claims that gesture has the ability to exhibit or reveal an activity that is commonly regarded as a means to an end, in a way that does not deny its function as a means but focuses on its *being-in-a-means*. Being a 'communication of a communicability',[71] gesture has nothing to say in itself but is the exhibition of mediality; of making a means visible as such.[72] I argue that *our full* uncovers the media character (institutional or discursive framings) of the objects' gestures (the particular structure of the aesthetics of the objects) and reveal the mechanism through which space and gestures correlate and direct a viewer's solitary experience of an artwork towards specific judgements of artistic value.

Around the exhibition *our full*, forms appeared that seemed strangely familiar; gestures connoting to formal languages of modernist furniture, architecture, art and design. But the forms were never quite implemented or transformed into the actual intelligible object they were referring to. The way that the different objects related to each other, as well as the way they communicated through contradictory gestures, created a sense of confusion and hesitation within the exhibition space. Through this sense of confusion *our full* illustrated how forms and postures of artworks are never neutral, but always carry meaning. As described in the first chapter, the not-quite bed made strong formal associations to modernist formalist design and architecture, but disrupted this narrative by coming about as too fragile, dirty and strange to be used for functional purposes. Like many other of the works in the exhibition, its lack of symmetry combined with its thin black 'spidery' legs created a movement in the work that made it resemble a damaged insect crawling across the floor. The impression of vulnerability and fragility disrupted the narrative of modernist design and instead

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[69] Agamben, 2000, pp. 56-57.
[70] Agamben, 2000, p. 58.
[71] Agamben, 2000, p. 59.
[72] Agamben, 2000, p. 58.

made the object come about as a negative form and movement. The black steel frame that functioned as the base on which the mattress was placed, reoccurred in other works in the exhibition where it denoted other forms from architecture, design or art. For example, an identical frame was used in the object that made reference to a museum's display devise, but in that instance it functioned as a base for the glass-vitrines. By mirroring the same structural devise within different objects in the exhibition, *our full* revealed its forms as illusionary and fictitious. This in turn disclosed how meaning mediated by gestures is contextual; dependent on its spatial setting and on what other gestures and narratives it is presented in relation to. Yellow foam also reoccurred in other places within *our full*. In the centre of the hall laid two large foam mattresses with white plaster sloppily painted on their tops (figure A5). One of them was positioned flat on the floor while the other had one of its ends half curled up over the first mattress and its other end sunken down along the floor. The cheapness of the materials as well as the way they appeared as displaced from their original function made strong associations to the found object in modernist anti-art movements.

The sculpture consisted of forms and gestures that seemed to support both narratives of modernist design *and* the ideas mediated by anti-art movements' found object. This intermingling of gestures confused the ideological narrative that these forms communicated. Associations to the found object made the sculpture emerge as a relic from a bygone era, and thus posed modernist form as a reflection of a historical and political narrative. This in turn exposed how the seemingly neutral and simplistic forms of functionalism are deeply bound to the Western ideological project of industrialism. However, the features of the sculpture also disrupted narratives commonly associated to the found object. By merging seemingly found materials into an object that denotes the linear and functional forms of modernist architecture, the work forced recognition of how seeing is inevitably a coded and contextual experience and thereby how communication is always mediated, in a position of being-in-language. Consequently, it is impossible to create revolutionary art, or artistic expressions comprehended as such, without them inevitably being inscribed and understood through the coded system of art. Your 'finding' an object, your way of seeing or which forms you find interesting, is never a coincidence but always already affected by the prevailing discourse. Drawing on Agamben, Bennett describes

how gestures might become evident when one form of media is mixed with another. Gestures are ascribed meaning due to their contextual, or medial, presentation. A converging of different medias within an image or object confuses the way gestures mediate meaning. Bennett claims that exhibiting or exposing gesture in its mediality is to enact critique by highlighting language's mediality and thus reducing its signifying capability.[73] Djordjadze's works highlight the gestural character of artistic quality by suggesting gestures to the viewer and then never completely implementing them. The objects come about as failed, fragile and lacking because they differ from the narrative their gestural elements orient the viewer towards. The constant intermingling of different gestures and medialities, e.g. (modernist) architecture, (avant-garde and anti-) art movements, crafts and interior design served to isolate the gestures in the artworks. This in turn caused the works to reveal the media character of their gestures rather than their signifying function, thus highlighting their position of being-in-a-medium and raising awareness of how, or in what way, models of artistic quality are being endured or supported.

## 2.3 INTERRUPTING LANGUAGE

Failure is an ambiguous concept. In queer theory the signification of failure as something negative has been challenged. While this approach of the concept might be fruitful and interesting they also risk veiling the more painful aspects of failure. How failure, shame and lack are always present within language, necessarily written into the system in order to make a norm valid. Thus how failure might ultimately be a question of what is not perceived at all, the shame, vulnerability or pain of being excluded from language, rather than a signification or label of what is already included or comprehended in language.

*our full* posed failure as lack by forcing the viewers to recognise how they became oriented towards a certain visual narrative by the works' suggestive gestures, and consequently how the sculptures appeared as lacking or failed when they did not quite implement its template. This revealed how artistic judgement is based on a coded system, strictly bound to the correlation between space, object and viewer; thus

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[73] Bennett, 2012, p. 132.

bringing to the surface the viewers' and the artworks' positions of being-in-language. Agamben describes how being-in-language is something that cannot be said in sentences, but can be shown by the gesture. In his article 'Kommerell: or on Gesture' Agamben draws on literary theorist Max Kommerell's theories that define gesture as an expressive exposing of a person lost in language.[74] Agamben considers gesture as muteness inherent in the linguistic; as 'speechlessness dwelling in language'.[75] Whilst Djodjadze's works revealed the close connection between failure, lack and otherness, they also addressed failure as speechlessness. When illustrating how value judgements are oriented by the way gestures operate through the visual memory, *our full* illustrated how language is limited. We cannot use words, images or sentences to describe all experiences or realities because language itself is not neutral or operating outside of ideology or discourse. Agamben claims that language, as a process of talking, is exclusive and creates a community in which encounters with the less-than-human (subjects that are only alive and have no voice at all in the polis) are impossible. Therefore he argues for a 'politics of the gesture'; a post-sovereign politics that does not exclude life.[76]

According to Agamben, the gesture is an element of a possible politics that takes the body of the less-than-human as its starting point. Professor of philosophy René ten Bos understand Agamben's ideas as a politics that wishes to undo language; undo the effects of the anthropological machine that makes us think in terms of humans and non-humans. Thus a politics that wants to overcome the distinction between a human life that has attained a perfect form and a life that somehow has not.[77] Agamben argues that we, in order to approach this kind of practice, need to abandon the talkative citizen (Man, the Citizen and its rights, the sovereign people, the worker etc.) as a standard unit of analysis and build a new political philosophy built on the less-than-human as its starting point.[78] Drawing on philosopher Judith Butler's notion of vulnerability as a politicised rather than private emotion[79], writer and theorist Mara Lee explains the difference between bodies constructed as human and bodies constructed as less-than-human through the distinction of who is trembling on

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[74] Agamben, 1999, p. 78.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Agamben, 2004, p. 37.
[77] ten Bos, 2005, p. 36.
[78] Agamben, 2000, p. 16.
[79] J. Butler, **Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence**, London, Verso, 2004, p. 43.

borders. Lee asks us to consider how borders are crossed and points out that when bodies are able to cross borders indifferently, there never really existed a border in the first place.[80] Whilst Lee's discussion address border controls, her notion of tremors is relevant for understanding what bodies are labelled as subjects and the process in which certain bodies, subjects or ways of seeing fail to pass the frameworks of language.

It is through Agamben's theory of a politics of the gesture that the performative aspects of his ideas emerge. Gesture supports and endures language, as a speechlessness dwelling inside of it. Being a component of the linguistic, it does not only support language but also inherits the possibility of interrupting it precisely at the moment when it is actualising itself. A gesture is captured or consciously noticed when language reaches its limits, its ends. Therefore Agamben defines gesture, based on Kommerell's theories, as 'essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language'.[81] Following Agamben, ten Bos argues that when we speak, it is as if an unsayable labyrinth weighs us down and asks if the person who makes a gesture might show us a way out of this linguistic labyrinth.[82] Artworks are weighed down by language in the sense that the supporting gestures inevitably needed in order for a work to be understood or communicate as art at all, are imbued with ideology and prevailing discourse. Djordjadze's works alert us to this very fact and reveal how the ways out of this labyrinth lead into spaces of vulnerability, shame and failure. Which in turn addresses how art worlds that include a diversity of ways of seeing, realities and experiences must abandon models of artistic quality and the way these presuppose a shared, external, framework of experience.

Djordjadze's works revealed how form, postures and gestures of an artwork are inevitably means of communication within language and therefore posed the objects as well as the viewers as being-in-a-medium and thus as partaking in an apparatus that commits existence, bodies and subjects to power and knowledge. To understand or perceive artworks (as art) outside of language is impossible as the being-in-language of human beings is pure mediality. This chapter discussed failure as speechlessness

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[80] M. Lee, '…sa hon och darrade', *Glänta*, nr. 2, 2011, p. 114.
[81] Agamben, 2000, p. 59.
[82] ten Bos, p. 40.

and how failure ultimately may be understood as the discarded realities of bodies or lives that are excluded from language. Gestures are captured or noticed when language is disrupted or reaches its limit. Agamben describes how gestures, when captured, is the exhibition of a mediality, the process of making a means visible as such.[83] Therefore, it is gesture's very status as speechlessness that also contains its performative potential. In the next chapter I will discuss the performative potential of failure by examining Djordjadze's works in relation to strategies of masochism and unbecoming within feminist art performance and queer theory. I will introduce queer theorist Judith Halberstam's idea of the potential of failure and explain how *our full* might contribute to Halberstam's theories by their emphasis on the means by which failure is constructed.

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[83] Agamben, 2000, p. 58.

CHAPTER 3 – GESTURES OF UNBECOMING

3.1  NARRATIVES OF BELONGING

Becoming aware of one's position of being in language means that one notices not only how experiences of artistic quality or failure is directed by the way gestures orient language, but also, how these gestures construct narratives of identity. Sociologist Nira Yuval-Davies describes identities as narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are, and who they are not. She describes how constructions of belonging have a performative dimension:

> Specific repetitive practices, relating to specific social and cultural spaces, which link individual and collective behaviour, are crucial for the construction and reproduction of identity narratives and constructions of attachment[84]

Being able to communicate through the different mediums within the realm of art means that you necessarily have to repeat a narrative of belonging in the art scene. As I have described earlier, this means that you have to repeat gestures that inevitably are imbued with prevailing discourse and narratives of self and other. What we are able to perceive is thus shaped by repetitive practices that in turn shape our understanding of subjectivity, reality and human experience. Researcher Vanja Hermele, following philosopher of science Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich,[85] describes the concept of artistic quality as a mystified concept that carries undeclared meanings but follow the dominant tradition's views and values. Similarly to Jones, Hermele argues that this leads to incorrect generalisations in which the experiences, values and arts of the dominant few, are constructed as representative for humanity, general or even universal.[86] *our full*, by clarifying how gestures are always comprehended in relation to a contextual and normative narrative, posed how the model of artistic judgement reproduce certain viewing positions as equal to artistic quality. This illustrated how ways of seeing that differ from the normative ones are always inevitably read in relation to these norms, which in turn causes them to come about as lacking or failed,

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[84] N. Yuval-Davies, *The politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, Los Angeles, Sage, 2011, p. 15.
[85] E. K. Minnich, *Transforming knowledge*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2005.
[86] V. Hermele, *Konsten - så funkar det (inte)*, Stockholm, Konstnärernas riksorganisation (KRO), 2009, p. 14.

or ultimately, to not be heard or comprehended at all. As discussed in chapter two, the way in which narratives create positions of belonging (or not belonging) within the art context is not a harmless procedure. Agamben points out how these narratives construct access to language and consequently, how models of artistic value pose the process in which certain subjects are rendered as outside of language, as other, or even as non-human. In order to attain a position of belonging within a particular context one not only has to relate to specific gestures in a certain way, but one also has to renounce gestures and expressions that do not correlate to the given narrative. In the context of art this means that one has to distance oneself from artistic expressions that are generally comprehended as artistic failures in order to gain a position of belonging.

It is this logic of inclusion, where viewers have to tell a specific story of who they are and what they feel and experience in order to belong, that discussions of the potential of failure have to take as their point of departure. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz has connected failure to queerness and understands failure as not realising norms of e.g. sexuality, gender or ethnicity. In *Disidentifications* Muñoz criticises the understanding of identity as either identifying with one's culture (belonging) or standing against it. He stresses how those positioned as outside the hegemonic discourses of e.g. of sexuality or ethnicity historically have negotiated majority culture through performance and activism. They have done so not by aligning themselves with or against narratives of belonging within art discourse, but rather by transforming exclusionary works, and their inscribed identifications, for their own cultural purposes.[87] Muñoz' theories are interesting and have been tremendously influential for the understanding of failure as a refusal of social norms. This thesis is based on the perception of how queerness is central for an understanding of the contraction of failure but also stresses that the advocacy of failure as progressive may veil how the final form of failure is speechlessness. In order to acquire the position of negotiating or transforming meaning and hegemonic culture, one is already 'enough' included to have access to language.

The rhetoric of possibility, or producing alternative ways of seeing, presupposes the

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[87] Muñoz, 1999, pp. 4-5.

formation of new ways of seeing and identifications that ultimately will displace the prevailing significations of an artwork. While this may challenge dogmas of taste and narratives within art, it is still bound to the understanding of failure as signification, as an end. Through failures, or 'queer readings' this approach alters the way gestures orient language, but it still fulfils the signifying process in which gestures are read as a means towards an (albeit different) end. The gesture is a means without an end, Agamben describes how we have to understand this in the sense that it both refuses to become a means to an end and refuses to become an end in itself.[88] Queer theorist Judith Halberstam turns away from theories of happy and productive failures and moves towards darker territories of failure associated with emptiness, loss, and modes of unbecoming. I argue that Halberstam's approach is similar to Agamben's idea of the gesture as she poses failure as a kind of refusal to aim towards an end.[89] As described in the two previous chapters, Agamben's theories of the gesture offers an important base for understanding failure as otherness as well as provides an understanding of how gestures might reveal humans' position of being-in-language. In order to apply Agamben's ideas onto an obtainable art context, I have throughout this thesis combined his theories with, among others, Amelia Jones' feminist theories of aesthetical judgement. Based on the way *our full* poses failure as a disruption between gesture and language, this chapter will elaborate how Djordjadze's works may be understood through Agamben's theory of how the gesture opens up the non-communicative speechlessness of language. To facilitate a translation of the performative elements of Agamben's philosophical ideas onto an attainable artistic practice I will use Halberstam's concept of unbecoming along with professor of race and cultural studies Sara Ahmed's notion of unhappiness.

## 3.2 FAILURE AS MEANS OF UNBECOMING

Agamben argues that the fact that human beings are in language is what cannot be said, but is shown by the gesture. He discusses how the gesture posits the possibility to intercept the process of language that lies in the heart of the community (polis) in order to replace it with a formless communicability:[90]

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[88] Agamben, 2000, p. 58.
[89] Halberstam, 2011, p. 23.
[90] Agamben, 1999, p. 47.

> What unites human beings among themselves is not a nature, a voice, or a common imprisonment in signifying language; it is the vision of language itself and, therefore, of experiencing language's limits, its *end*.[91]

Expressions that float in the outskirts, or even outside, of language, can still only be understood through language. Being-in-language means that one's gestures are limited to be comprehended through previously established, and contextual, biases and presumptions. The only way to understand gestures that does not coincide with discourse as something other than failures is therefore to be confronted with their condition of being-in-a-medium, or within language. In her book *The Queer Art of Failure* Halberstam proposes the possibility of not speaking in the language of action and momentum, but instead articulate a practice based on evacuation, passivity, unbecoming and unbeing,[92] modes that offer a different relation to knowledge.[93] Halberstam suggests a politics that ensues not from doing but from undoing, and not from being or becoming but from a refusal to be or become within a linguistic system in which one can only be understood through already set models of definitions and imaginations.[94] I have discussed how Djordjadze's works posed a refusal to complete the narrative in which gestures lead to an end. This forced the viewers to fill in the blanks; to recognise how their own visual memory strived to complete the narrative suggested by the work's gestures, moving past the appreciation of the gestures' signifying function and instead revealing them as means that endure and support language. In this chapter I address how the way Djordjadze's works illustrates a failure to fulfil given narratives can be understood as a refusal of language, where refusal is also a rejection of inscribing oneself into a system where one's ways of seeing or experiencing are predestined to be construed as lacking, shameful or as failures.

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[91] Ibid.
[92] Halberstam, 2011, p. 129.
[93] Halberstam, 2011, p. 23.
[94] Halberstam, 2011, p. 124.

**Figure 5:** Thea Djordjadze, installations view, our full, Malmö Konsthall, 2012.

Next to the blue curtains that covered Malmö Konsthall's glass façade, a sculpture was mounted against the wall. It consisted of the same kind of thin black steel material as the steel frames that served as the base for the bed-like sculpture and the object that looked like a display device. However, in this instance it did not function as a support system for anything in particular, but was only displaying itself. Its base, which hung flat against the wall, consisted of a rectangular shape. From each side of the base, two thin and spidery legs pointed straight out after which they bowed to the floor at a 90-degree angle. The base was mounted at a slight angle to the wall with the result that one of its legs hung closer to the floor than the other. The work's material coupled with its contextual placement and its apparent non-function, made it resemble the support system of an unfinished, broken or mounted down sculpture or object. Hanging by itself, seemingly oblique and without use function it appeared exposed, extradited and naked; as a stalled movement, refusing to become complete. In this sense the sculpture came about as partial or undone. It repeated movements and gestures well known in the art context, but repeated them incorrectly and poorly. As if it represented a refusal of any attempt to create something of meaning or significance within a system that would force its expressions into narrow models of interpretation.

When discussing how modes of unbecoming have historically been employed within feminist art performances from the 1960s onwards, Halberstam describes how these might be understood as a refusal to perform the role of the other in a system that

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demands women's subjugation.[95] *our full* was ultimately an exhibition of this kind of negation of narratives. Walking around the space one never encountered artworks that came about as complete, but only saw objects that seemed to refuse wholeness. The exhibition appeared partial but also indicated that it was coming undone. The object that looked like a support element emerged as an anti-movement, revealing the narrative in which it usually becomes a gesture subsumed by the sculpture or artwork that is comprehended as its end; or its actual signification. Its oblique and thin black legs almost reached the floor, but not quite. It seemed fragile and out of size, as if it suggested a longing to actualise a movement, but at the same time appeared as unwilling or unable to ever fulfil it correctly. In this sense, several of Djordjadze's works can be described as assuming poses of self-destruction, lack and masochism. By staging their own lack, tremulous and failure they acted as queer movements that had given up on trying to express themselves and instead had surrendered to (failed) attempts to conform into the system.

## 3.3 GESTURES OF MASOCHISM

Several of the works presented in *our full*, with their fragmentary character and inbuilt fragility, appeared as if they were meant to fall apart or self-destruct. The way they posed this radical kind of masochism allowed them to be inscribed into a history of feminist artistic performance or expression that has offered a critique of violence and the very foundation of the human.[96] Art historian Kathy O'Dell argues that most of the performances within the Body art movement in the 1960s and 1970s, where artists induced pain on their own bodies, can be described as masochistic acts. Artists such as Marina Abramović, Yoko Ono and Vito Acconci endured pain, or assumed other poses of vulnerability, in front of an audience. Either by hurting themselves or by having the viewers hurt them. Accepting violence towards one's own body for a higher purpose or pleasure has historically been assigned the masochist. O'Dell claims that the complex agreement between the artist and the audience can be regarded as a variant of the masochistic contract in which the rules for violence

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[95] Halberstam, 2011, p. 132.
[96] Halberstam, 2011, p. 139.

between subjects are decided.[97] Following Gilles Deleuze's suggestion that 'the masochist's apparent obedience conceals a criticism and a provocation'[98] she argues that the unveiling of the logic of the contract reveals the ideological construction of violence. Where the most crucial implication of masochistic performance art concerned the everyday agreements – or contracts – that we all make with others but that may not be in our own best interests.[99] O'Dell's description of how masochistic gestures might reveal the performative logic of the contract is thus quite similar to Agamben's notion of how gesture may make a means visible. Djordjadze's works are consenting to the violence of the model of artistic value by assuming poses that will come about as lacking and failed. O'Dell describes how within the masochistic contract, the reason why the subject chooses to consent to violence remains unclear. The same can be said for the objects in *our full*. The obvious staging of lack and failure encourages the viewer to try to understand the reason behind the adopted gestures of the works. They thus reveal how language is a contract between subjects, objects and space, which in turn unveils conceptions of artistic quality or failure as performative and a result of being-in-language.

Halberstam discusses how language is occupied by binaries, colonial figures, logics and identities which in turn leave people marked by difference by e.g. their gender, ethnicity or sexuality, with only two options: they can inscribe themselves into language's narratives of identity or they can assert a refusal to be part of any narratives at all. She describes how masochism, when posed as a radical form of unbecoming, choose the latter.[100]*our full* displayed support devises, its objects recurrently featured plaster on wire (a standard beginning for sculptures) and the works assumed poses of fragility, vulnerability and lack. In this sense Djordjadze's works did not tell a story of becoming but was rather an un-story of narratives within the Western art context. The way several of the works intermingled diverse gestures and medialities can be read as violent acts that negated and deconstructed meaning. Agamben describes how the gesture is essentially is a gesture of not figuring something out in language and links gesture to the idea of a gag. Here he refers to a

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[97] K. O'Dell, *Contract with the skin: masochism, performance art, and the 1970's*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 2.

[98] G. Deleuze, *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. J. McNeil, New York, Braziller, 1971, p. 77.

[99] O'Dell, 1998, p. 2.

[100] Halberstam, 2011, p. 131.

gag in the meaning of something that could be put in the mouth in order to hinder speech, but also as something linked to the theatrical; as an actor's improvisation meant to compensate a loss of memory or an inability to speak. Agamben describes being-in-language as a gigantic loss of memory, which through repeated acts presupposes the community over and over again.[101] Drawing on Foucault, Halberstam describes memory as a disciplinary mechanism that selects what is important (the histories of triumph), and 'reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradiction'.[102] Agamben argues that the gesture, by marking the limits of language, can open up for a post-sovereign, non-exclusive politics that refuses to acknowledge a special status for particular human beings.[103] Following professor in literature and history Saidiya Hartman, Halberstam asks whether freedom can be imagined separately from the terms upon which it is offered.[104] In this sense Djordjadze's works can be read as posing a refusal to propose a resistance in the terms mandated by the languages available to them. If the only way to be understood within the context of Western art is by repeating a language imbued with a oppressive discourse, then speechlessness; asserting a refusal of language, might be the only true possibility of resistance.

## 3.4 POSING UNHAPPINESS

This thesis examines failure as a performative concept that ultimately always represents otherness in relation to what language has constructed as fulfilled or successful. The difference between this approach and the frequent aim in contemporary art theory to negotiate the signification and meaning of failure is fundamentally a question of positivity. Halberstam suggests unbecoming as a counterintuitive feminism that thinks in terms of the negation of the subject rather that her formation, the disruption of lineage rather that its continuation and the undoing of self rather that its activation:

> Ultimately we find no feminist subject but only subjects who cannot speak, who refuse to speak; subjects who unravel, who refuse to cohere; subjects who refuse "being" where

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[101] Agamben, 2000, p. 59.
[102] Halberstam, 2011, p. 15.
[103] ten Bos, 2005, p. 42.
[104] Halberstam, p. 145.

being has already been defined in terms of a self-activating, self-knowing, liberal subject.[105]

Refusing the choices offered is a refusal of language. By revealing the means by which artistic expressions are rendered as passing or failing within the prevailing model of artistic quality, Djordjadze's works operate, in Agamben's words, through the reduction of works into the sphere of gesture.[106] They therefore enter a sphere that lies beyond interpretation, and poses the means behind signification or meaning as pure mediality. Agamben argues that a politics of the gesture has the ability to overcome the anthropological machine of language by posing its limits or ends. Therefore, gesture opens up a sphere in which humanism could, and should, build its political philosophy anew, starting from the position of the humans that are alive in the community but rendered without a possibility to be heard.[107] Halberstam suggests that a political project that tries to construct a resistance to language's given narratives, identities and constructions of self and other, cannot resist through an active war on oppression. Instead a new kind of resistance needs to be inhabited, one that poses modes in which the position of the other self-destructs, and in so doing slowly tear down the edifice of oppression.[108]

Halberstam uses a range of examples from literature, art and film when she discusses the concept of unbecoming. In one of these she refers to an interview in which the author Jamaica Kincaid received the question of why her characters seemed to be against most things that are good. Kincaid answered,

> I think in many ways the problem that my writing would have with an American
> reviewer is that Americans find difficulty very hard to take. They are inevitably looking
> for a happy ending. Perversely, I will not give the happy ending. I think life is difficult
> and that's that. I am not at all – absolutely not at all – interested in the pursuit of
> positivity. I am interested in pursuing a truth, and the truth often seems to be not
> happiness but the opposite.[109]

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[105] Halberstam, 2011, p. 126.
[106] Agamben, 1999, p. 80.
[107] Agamben, 2000, p. 16.
[108] Halberstam, 2011, p. 133.
[109] M. Snell, 'Jamaica Kincaid Hates Happy Endings', **Mother Jones**, September-October, 1997, p. 1.

Sara Ahmed has explored happiness as a politically encoded emotion that sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values and objects.[110] To experience something 'in a good way' involves an orientation toward something as being good.[111] Ahmed claims that the distinction between good and bad feelings presumes that bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive. She argues that it is this very assumption that good feelings are open and bad feelings are closed that allows historical forms of injustice to disappear.[112] Whilst masochism, negativity and anti-gestures might be comprehended as an anti-social refusal to contribute with new solutions, I argue through the notions of unbecoming and unhappiness that Djordjadze's works pose the narrative of language by unbecoming instead of becoming. By depicting the close connection between failure and lack, *our full* posed failure as otherness and thus addressed the impossibility of creating new positions within language, without first destroying the old ones. This in turn stressed recognition of how we need to abandon the dominant view of bad feelings as backward and conservative, and instead discuss new ways to approach feelings of lack, failure, shame and vulnerability. Ahmed argues that the important task is negotiating how our orientation towards queer moments of deviation will be. She seeks a way to inhabit the world that gives 'support' to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange and out of place.[113]Ahmed's conclusions clarify that we must approach failure not by asking, in Agamben's words, what is being produced or acted but 'in what way is an action endured and supported?'.[114] Through reading the artworks presented in *our full* as gestures inscribed into the exhibition space, I have discussed how notions of artistic quality and failure operates as vehicles that include and exclude life from language. Through modes of unbecoming and unhappiness Djordjadze's works disturbs language, expose the means by which failure in constructed and thus exposes models of artistic quality as supporting prevailing political discourses that control who is given a voice and who is not.

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[110] S. Ahmed, 'Happy Objects', in M. Gregg and G. J. Seigworth (ed.), *The affect theory reader*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 29.
[111] Ahmed, 2010, p. 35.
[112] Ahmed, 2010, p. 50.
[113] S. Ahmed, 'Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 570.
[114] Agamben, 1999, p. 57.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This investigation of the concept of failure was initiated by a sense of want as none of the theories I had encountered about failure within contemporary art theory addressed the concept in a sufficiently thorough manner. Theories of failure often describe the concept as a space for experimentation and progress, and discuss failure solely as signification, as something already visible and comprehensible in language. I wanted to examine the more painful aspects of failure, the shame, tremors and vulnerability connected to the position of being rendered as other, incomprehensible or irrelevant. This thesis discussed the means by which failure is constructed and argued that things come about as failures because of an activity *within* language that disrupts the correlation between space, object and the viewer.

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss why it matters what we characterise as passing and what we characterise as failing in the model of artistic quality. Failure is a value judgement related to a norm, but that does not quite fulfil its template for success. I discuss how *our full* by creating an atmosphere jarring with lack, failure and vulnerability, revealed how the notion of artistic quality is associated with certain ways of seeing, narratives and subjectivities. Based on case studies of four of the artworks presented in *our full*, and considering the exhibition as one specific artwork in itself, this thesis examines the definition of artistic failure as lack. It discusses the means by which ways of seeing that differ from the norm come about as failures and provides a theoretical model for understanding the connections between failure and otherness.

By investigating how the model of artistic quality is founded on repetitive practices that are closely interlinked with ideas of self and other, this thesis addresses how the concept of artistic quality functions as a political means for inclusion and exclusion. It illustrates how frameworks of passing and failing in the art context sustain the subjectivities and realities of a dominant few as relevant, general and universal, whilst discarding others as failed, irrelevant or even imperceptible. Through a discussion of failure as a disruption of language, I investigate how *our full* disoriented or failed common narratives within art, design and architecture. This thesis takes its point of departure in queer theory's interconnection of failure and otherness, but provides a

new perspective on the subject by discussing the very means by which models of artistic quality are reproduced. It asks, in Agamben's terms, not what is being produced or acted, but 'in what way is an action endured and supported'?[115]

Theories of failure within contemporary art often consider failure as a sphere in which alternative ways of seeing and identifying may be produced. While a displacement of the prevailing significations of an artwork may challenge dogmas of taste and question binary constructions of success and failure, it is still bound to the understanding of failure as signification, as an end. Through failures, or 'queer readings', these approaches may alter the way gestures orient language, but it still fulfils the signifying process in which gestures are read as means towards an end. The gesture is a means without an end that both refuses to become a means to an end and refuses to become an end in itself. The constant intermingling of different gestures and medialities, e.g. (modernist) architecture, (avant-garde and anti-) art movements, crafts and interior design in *our full* served to isolate the gestures in the artworks, and revealed their character as *medias* rather than their signifying function. Gestures, when captured, are the exhibition of mediality, the process of making a means visible as such. I argue that *our full* revealed how the form, postures and gestures of an object stand in an inevitable relation to discourses of self and other, where they either endure narratives in which the subjectivity of a few are presented as general or even universal, or does not support language correctly and therefore become rendered lacking, failed or incomprehensible. By posing the artworks as well as the viewers as being-in-a-medium *our full* revealed how the artworks and the viewers was partaking in an apparatus that commits existence, bodies and subjects to power and knowledge.

Djordjadze's works highlight the gestural character of artistic quality by suggesting narratives to the viewer and then never completely implementing them. The sculptures come about as failed, fragile and lacking because they differ from the narrative their gestural elements orient the viewer towards. I argue that the term 'language' can be understood as the correlation between space, object and the viewer. Viewers comprehend artworks by consciously, or unconsciously, recognising gestures that orient them towards certain experiences and interpretations. Therefore, artworks

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[115] Agamben, 1999, p. 57.

necessarily need to consist of a certain range of gestures in order to make sense at all. Being able to communicate through the different mediums within the realm of art means having to repeat gestures that are imbued with prevailing discourse and narratives of identity. What we are able to perceive is shaped by repetitive practices that in turn shape our understanding of subjectivity, reality and human experience. Language is a system of communication that constructs what, and in what way, gestures are perceived and comprehended. We cannot use words, images or sentences to describe all experiences or realities because language itself is not neutral or operating outside of ideology or discourse. I argue that failure in its final state is speechlessness; something that fall outside the coded system of language, rather than a signification or label of what is already visible or perceived.

By applying Agamben's theories of the gesture onto queer theory's conception of the close links between failure and otherness, I contribute to theories of failure by providing a model of the very processes that locate certain subjects as outside of language. The purpose of the thesis is not to argue that implementations of failure do not have potential, however, I do stress that there are problems with reading failure as progressive or as pure signification, since these kinds of approaches risks to overlook a more fundamental understanding of failure. By exploring how the very means of passing and failing within models of artistic quality operate, this thesis provides a framework from which debates about the possibilities of failure might proceed. Agamben's ideas of the gesture clarifies how what we understand as failure is essentially a disruption of language, an outset that illuminate the impossibility of expressing oneself outside of language and discourse. This provides a new starting point which stress negativity, passivity and unbecoming as important means for communication, since these modes illustrates the very condition of being-in-language. The basic understanding of failure as lack, otherness and speechlessness thus leaves us with new questions and tasks. It infers that failure is not substantially available as a viable position from which one can communicate or be understood. Instead, failure is something always included in the language to make a norm valid. From such an understanding, it is possible to move past re-evaluations of already present signification in order to envisage fundamentally new approaches to the things we understand as strange, oblique or failed.

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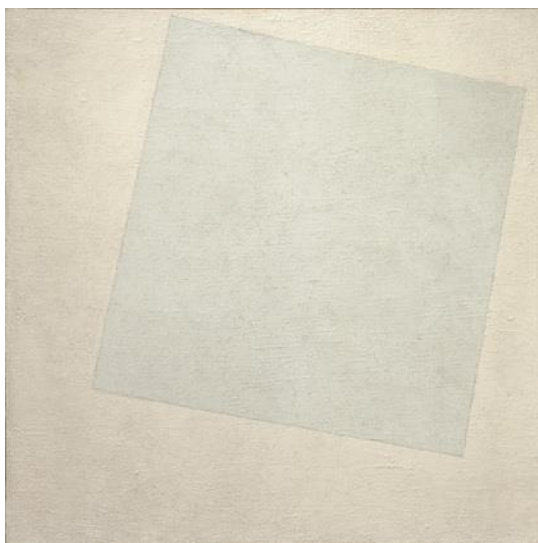
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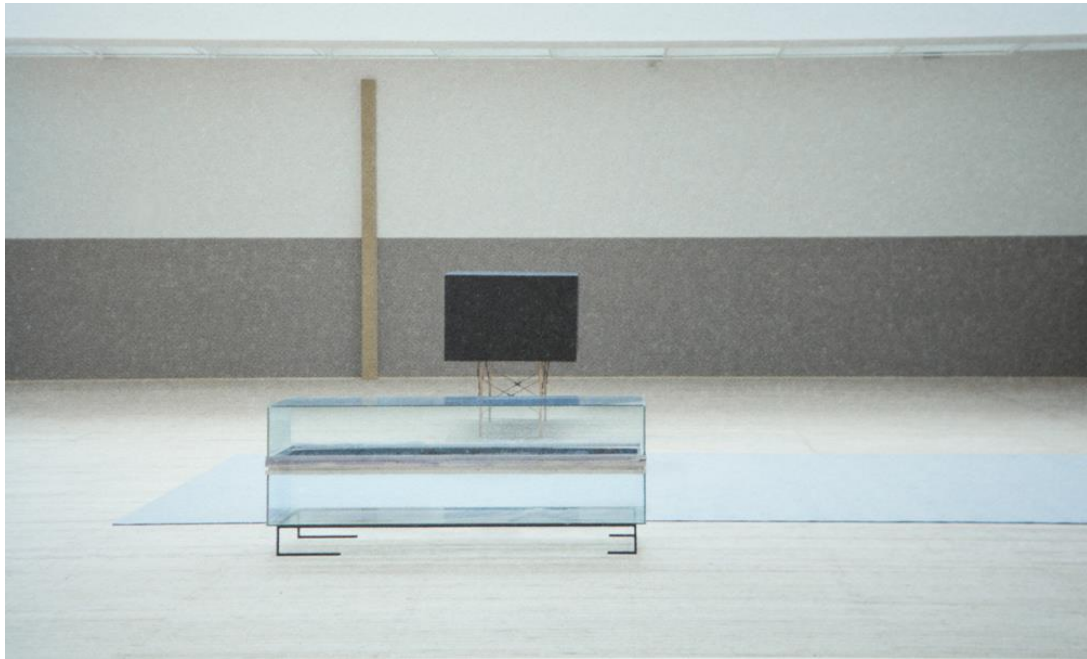
APPENDICES:

**Figure A1:** Thea Djordjadze, installation views, *our full*, Malmö Konsthall, 2012, photography and copyright: Helene Toresdotter.



**Figure A2:** Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White On White*, 1918, The Museum of Modern Art, copyright: The Museum of Modern Art.

**Figure A3:** Thea Djordjadze, installation views, *our full*, Malmö Konsthall, 2012, photography and copyright: Helene Toresdotter.



**Figure A4:** Swiss coin showing Le Corbusier's Modulor.

**Figure A5:** Thea Djordjadze, installation views, *our full*, Malmö Konsthall, 2012, photography and copyright: Helene Toresdotter.