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You Can't Normalize, Don't it Make You Feel Alive?

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*"So I'll just keep on...till I get it right...
so I'll just keep on...till I get it right..."¹*

Ceal Floyer

In a naturally lit gallery in Kassel, roughly three cycles of these lyrics, clipped from Tammy Wynette's 1973 country ballad, played in a loop before I realized that the Ceal Floyer sound piece would never shake its compulsive tick and continue in song. The 2005 sound work is subsequently titled after the song it's composed from, *Til I Get It Right*, and is situated in a ground-floor gallery of the main Friedrichsplatz building of Documenta 13. With first day hopes set high and senses alert, this encounter was a formative component for me, and a piece I was reminded of as I connected the disparate strands of such an intellectually ambitious exhibition. Floyer's pensive audio loop lingered in my mind as the hallow feeling of an omniscient and ambiguous failure quietly settled into the gut, but to what end?

Deserving of its prominent platform, the piece reflects on the patterns and temper of what we call contemporary art. This is our being; still wading in a pool of postmodern paradoxes, chasing our tails in search of standards and accountability just to immediately feel suffocated by them and break from any formula for quality. We just keep on, till we get it right. But with success an ever moving and subjective target, and criticality a vital and unavoidable stance to take, the word failure falls drastically short in complexity when describing the agonistic subject hood that constitutes what it means to be both an art producer and citizen in 2012.

Later that day, a short walk along a busy Kassel street swept me from Floyer's white cube to a black box tucked behind the historic Huguenot House.² Cautiously, with outstretched arms, I entered the pitch-black room that later I would come to know as the Tino Sehgal, *This Variation*,³ which everyone was mentioning but would not explain. "Have you been to the Tino Sehgal? You just have to experience it, I can't tell you more." With pupils still dilated by the midday sun, I walked into the darkness and felt the presence of performers at every angle, synchronized in their a cappella singing, chants, and exaggerated movements. Voices sometimes carried from across the room, while others were directly in my ear as I bumped over to a corner to get my bearings. A few minutes of pure pulsating energy passed. Singing and dancing bodies swirled about, but I still saw nothing.

That's when a new chant began to ring in my ear, one that I took as an answer to Ceal Floyer's previous solemn mantra. Again in the form of an altered pop song, the tune started softly, and slowly grew to a wild and explosive perfor-

mance at an uncommonly close range. Riffing from the LCD Soundsystem's dazed club beat, *Get Innocuous*, the performers chanted the tweaked lyrics, slightly tweaked, "You can't normalize, don't it make you feel alive?" Again and again the phrase was repeated as I could feel my eyes slowly adjusting to make out about twenty performers and an equal number of viewers dispersed throughout the room. Before I knew it I was no longer in the dark, I could see every step of the choreography and every blinded and bewildered newcomer to the room. These lyrics rang as equally symptomatic of our time as those of Floyer's drudging tune only this time in a spirit of hope and possibility. It was a liberating surrender to "getting it right." What remains at stake lies in the subjective definition of what it means to be "right."

Art should serve as a haven from the regimented constraints of society. It's a place for possibilities to run their course, what is predictable and slick is often the least "successful." The problem with using words like failure and success when talking about art is that they imply consensus but the very core of art is to eliminate consensus and introduce alternative positions. Therefore, the opposite of failure in contemporary art is not success, but more accurately, criticism. Art would be obliterated into a numbing congratulatory slop if we stopped fighting to maintain a critical edge. Failure is an oversimplified singular word that houses many meanings because it is based on an assumed set of clearly defined rules, not the complex web of reality. The same is true for all things political. The variation from one subject's notion of acceptable behaviour to another's is the site of all ethical and political agency. The subjective definition of what constitutes failure is riddled with political positions, especially when determining what is a broken system and what is a functioning one. To fail in the eyes of normalized society is often the material of success in the realm of art.

The standardization of acceptable behaviour and outcome is often the point of reference for what is most commonly considered failure. It is also this very point of reference that art constantly pushes against. There are palpable behavioural expectations that are contingent on one's gender, race, class, and sexuality, in addition to more generalized social norms such as what constitutes mental health in opposition to mental illness. For example, in reflecting on the diagnosis of a potentially mentally ill patient, the ground-breaking and controversial psychiatrist R.D. Lang was known to accept the patient's symptoms as truthful and valid lived experiences. He was "aware that the man who is said to be deluded may be in his delusion telling [me] the truth, and this in no equivocal or metaphorical sense, but quite literally, and that the cracked mind of the schizophrenic may let in light, which does not enter the intact minds of many



Ceal Floyer, *Til I Get It Right*, 2005. Audio Installation.
Courtesy Ceal Floyer; Collection Ivana Segre; Esther Schipper, Berlin;
Lisson Gallery, London; 303 Gallery, New York, Photo: Roman März.



Tino Sehgal, *This Variation*, Documenta13, 2012.



Occupy Documenta outside Friedrichsplatz, 2012.



Klara Lidén, *Paralyzed*, (Installation shot), 2003.
Digital video, colour, sound, 3:05 min.
Courtesy the artist, Galerie Neu, Berlin, and
Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York.
Music: The Legendary Stardust Cowboy.
Photography: Pelle Backman.

sane people whose minds are closed.”⁴ In this sense, there are no failed minds or failed bodies, only failed understandings of complex beings.

Upon returning to New York, I was looking forward to a survey exhibition of work by the young Swedish artist, Klara Lidén at the New Museum. However, it wasn't until after seeing the exhibition that I realized the song lyrics from Germany had followed me across the Atlantic and were seeping into another artist's work. The inability to accept the normalization and standardization of behaviour could not be more present in Lidén's practice, primarily her video work. Her video pieces, screened in a make-shift shelter of cardboard boxes, can be characterized by her precarious psychological states expressed through the body and displayed outward into the public realm.

In the video, *550* (2004),⁵ the artist is depicted alone, tucked away in a crowded nook of her Bed-Stuy apartment. The camera moves from room to room throughout the apartment before Lidén is discovered. Seen only through a crack in the doorway, surrounded by boxes, papers, and books, she pedals vigorously on a stationary exercise bike. Recorded through the doorway, she is shirtless and filmed from behind rendering her gender ambiguous. The scene then shifts to Lidén again on screen in the same crowded apartment but hunched over a piano, again facing away from the camera, bare back, playing and singing a reckless, heartfelt song. Surrounding her are hordes of old photographs and furniture. The song ends abruptly punctuated by Lidén yelling “Ich brauche mein space,” or, “I need my space.” What is this space Lidén so passionately desires? Is she referring to the camera operator infringing on her performance? Is she referring to the limited physical space due to the piles of knickknacks that surround her? Or, is she calling out for a more conceptual space, the mental space where art can become manifest in the cracks of everyday life? Plotting and delineating one's mental space is not a battle easily won in a culture where outside influences bombard the inner psyche with demands and expectations.

In Lidén's video piece, *Der Mythos des Fortschritts (Moonwalk) [The Myth of Progress (Moonwalk)]* (2008),⁶ the camera moves with the artist as she performs Michael Jackson's classic pop dance move, the moon walk. The dance is performed as a mode of transportation at night on city streets, sidewalks, moving past various public spaces. The appropriation of this iconic gesture is set in motion as Lidén uses a dance to travel from one location to another. Here, and generally in Lidén's practice, art is not created in the typical clinical place of artistic investigation, the artist's studio, but rather she works from an existential mobile laboratory within the public sphere. Lidén's “studio practice” breaks into public places as she and the contours of the city simultaneously define her movements and direction.

Moving from the city streets to public transportation, Klara Lidén's next video piece, *Paralyzed* (2003),⁷ takes place on a subway car. Starting as an inconspicuous passenger, Lidén bursts into a childlike pseudo choreographed dance. As two passengers watch with a mixture of disbelief and nonchalance, Lidén continues seemingly without embarrassment, as her dance gets increasingly erratic. She takes off items of clothing, swings from poles and climbs on seats and railings. In the final scene of the video, Lidén seen through the car windows from the perspective of the platform, runs, recklessly at full speed through the subway car. In complete disregard for established social norms, we assume Lidén's dance is one of emancipation from the behaviour

that is expected of rational adults. Through exaggeration, *Paralyzed* calls into question the well established filter that exists between how people desire to act and how they act, or don't act, in a reality muddled with, possibly unnecessary, self-conscious thoughts. What are the consequences of a body in space *not* paralyzed by social norms, and what is lost, or never quite gained, in living in a constant state of neurotic paralysis?

In order to gain any sort of traction or authority, the notion of failure must rely on normalization: the normalization of behaviours, forms, systems, roles, and so on. But we must not aim to fail, according to the standards of normalization in order to defeat them, this would only legitimate its totalizing power. Instead, this is a challenge for every individual, citizen, and cultural producer to find one's own critical voice and psychic space. Finding this space will not lead us to consensus, as there is no such thing as “getting it right,” we will only wander in the dark of our new self-defined space until with time, we come to find an authentic solidarity in the discourse between discrete individuals.

Marie Heilich

Marie Heilich is a curator and writer. Her recent curatorial projects include a survey exhibition of Jillian Conrad's new work at Webster University and the group exhibition, *Cellar Door*, at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. She is currently an M.A. candidate at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

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Klara Lidén, *Der Mythos des Fortschritts (Moonwalk) [The Myth of Progress (Moonwalk)]*, (Installation shot), 2008.
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