

Meanwhile, rehearsals

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Abstract

This practice-based research examines the role of failure in art making through a series of art works that attempt to fail by: never beginning, self-censoring, pursuing purposelessness, never being ready, or devising ways to ensure irresolution. In doing this the project reconceives of failure as a generative space: a meanwhile that allows for self-censorship, avoiding failure, conducting only rehearsals, performative gestures, and deferring decision making. In engaging strategies of humour, it uses the notions of rehearsing and stalling as devices that ensure we never arrive at a point of conclusion. This offers a framework for understanding the many ways a project can fail (or attempt to fail) and through a series of performative gestures, seek to challenge failure and the fear it elicits. In doing so it comes to understand that art making is as much about its limits as its potential.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Samantha Cheng

21/05/2021

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Lastly and very importantly, I would also like to thank [REDACTED]

[REDACTED].

Foreword

Speech has a way of memorialising words in one's memory through the voice. You can always continue to speak, correcting yourself as you go along but you can never retract your words. People may forget but there will never be an ability to remove what you have said in its entirety.

In writing however, you may do this. Rigorous editing, reforming, and selecting specific words are part of a process of molding words to perfectly, or as close to perfectly, express our ideas. In the act of putting words on a page, pigment or pixel, things seem more final somehow. This was the contradiction I encountered as I sat down to write this exegesis. This project is interested in ways of resisting and thwarting the idea that things must reach a state of conclusion or be complete. Resisting the urge to reach the final step of realising something was first a habit. Now it is an important strategy overall.

It felt misleading to write as I normally would in an academic context. There was a curious sensation of being an imposter in constructing good sentences that work to deliver clarity when this project is nothing but clear in method and subject. To do so would be to undermine the journey of this thesis as well as undo the reframing of failure that this project aimed to do. It was important for me to honour the breadth of emotion felt and their role in driving this project during the early months.

I have used the strikethrough function as a way of 'stammering' with the written word. I have crossed out additions which I know I should take out for constructing an appropriate academic text. It is a method of having the text embody the indeterminacy of this research. Most of these are things I wrote as jokes or quips which if I were speaking candidly would probably blurt out. Obviously one can still read what is there, but they are crossed out. Another way I think of this is like having my cake and eating it too.

I redacted other things to address the issue of self-censorship that seems implicit in the notion of practice-based research projects such as this one. How do you express the sensation of wanting to share something while remaining determined never to do it? It occurred to me all the things I never ended up doing, or empty promises, or works that I made but never told anyone were just as important as the select few that did live to see the spotlight. For me, what remains beneath the redactions are not as important as showing that there was something there. Redactions mark a potential that has been disrupted, yet also perhaps create an opening or opportunity for something else. There is as much said in the words we take back or never communicate as the ones we do.

Introduction

During this project, I had to acknowledge that I have a giant fear of failure. It goes to say that my understanding of failure has changed drastically in the last year. I had always viewed failure as the antithesis of success and achievement along with all the associated positive connotations of those words.¹ Curator and writer Lisa Le Feuvre describes this view of failure as a “defeatist, disappointed or unsuccessful position”.² I do not think it is a stretch to say that many others also share this negative position as I once did. Failure is embarrassing; it invites mediocrity and suggests average-ness or less than average-ness. For a person who has always been ~~praised~~ valued for being an ‘achiever’ and meeting everyone else’s expectations, failure is the landmine one must constantly evade.

One of my misguided perceptions of failure is that it is a dead end. It is not necessarily always an outcome, but its presence typically signals a need to begin again or start over somewhere else. Failure can be seen as limiting, a hurdle in the way of greater things. Ironically, the same could be said about fear and its power to limit. Fear and failure seem to work in tandem ~~and unfortunately, I came along and put the two together. I also promptly forgot how to pull them apart.~~ You would think coming to acknowledge this fear would mean diminishing its capacity to have an impact on me. ~~It does not.~~ Instead, I found myself in the position of being infuriatingly self-aware while constantly returning to this fear of failing.

Despite the subjectivity of failure’s definition and meanings, the “poles” of failure and success have always seemed unshakable.³ ~~I think~~ there is a tendency for this perception of failure – and in turn success – to be treated dogmatically. Success, as I am sporadically but consistently reminded on social media, is a non-negotiable attitude and mantra. The ‘rise and grind’ message could be said to encapsulate how the millennial age views work.⁴ It is an inescapable and incredibly insistent

¹ Glory, triumph, happiness, accomplishment, fame and what have you.

² Lisa Le Feuvre, “Art Failure,” *Art Monthly*, 2008, 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ BBC helpfully defined ‘rise and grind’ for the masses as a “faux-positive” perspective on work. The reality they state is closer to what they describe as “burnout-addled, slog-it-out”. It is a description of the repetition of waking up, working, and sleeping non-stop, a cycle that most, if not all people are familiar with hence the name of the mantra which frames this cycle in a positive and to be respected light. Meredith Turits, “Rise and

message. Perhaps this is why it took almost ~~one~~ ten years for me to begin questioning why this attitude towards success and failure no longer works for me.

Every step of this project I have been plagued by questions such as 'how do you know if this is right' [REDACTED], 'what if this doesn't work out' [REDACTED], and 'so what are you gonna do about it'. These are questions borne out of this fear and the dread I experience of looking stupid doing something wrong. Being wrong or failing is the pulse which sustains the arbitrary and seemingly aimless things I do in my practice. My fear of failure is not something I have been able to quell, certainly not for very long. For me fear itself is nerve-wracking, temporary, and paralysing in the extremes, like when I peer over the edge of any railing higher than one floor. Fear of failure however, has made me extremely self-conscious, a perfectionist, value resources to a point of redundancy, self-censor myself to the extremes, and a master at procrastination.

~~I told myself I wouldn't do this but~~ I feel the need to interject here that this project began in a [REDACTED] [REDACTED] though somewhere along the way the procrastination master and the self-censoring perfectionist [REDACTED] took control. The idea of feeling like you have lost control is something violinist Ingolf Turban would argue signifies an "overdose" of control.⁵ Rather than the idea of [REDACTED], this suggests that what control we have, ~~for the violin artist~~ any performer, is an illusion.⁶ Turban states that this overdose is gained from practice and in a performance situation becomes the thing we rely on rather than our skills.⁷ From his point of view, it seems control is perhaps something no violinist performer possesses. ~~I certainly never showed any control whatsoever during the years I played the violin. Of all the musical instruments I have played, the violin is the one I hate the most. And if it isn't clear already, I no longer play the violin.~~ Perhaps fear had no hand in side-tracking the initial project. Instead, it made me [REDACTED], controlling and rigid [REDACTED].

grind." *Worklife 101*. Accessed on April 12, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190719-rise-and-grind>.

⁵ Ingolf Turban, "Internal Pressure During Musical Performances and Their Preparation." In *Art in Motion III: Performing under Pressure*, ed. Adina Mornell, Peter Lang GmbH (Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2016.), ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=5837394>, 10.

⁶ Ibid., 8-11.

⁷ Ibid.

Fear has a way of altering circumstances [REDACTED] and reality of the situation. To fear something is commonly thought of as a limitation to [REDACTED] true potential.⁸ [REDACTED]. Success and desirable results await us once we have moved beyond what we fear. But *only* if we move beyond it. I am also aware of my [REDACTED], so make what you will of that. This project about the [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] [REDACTED] overtaken by fear. And [REDACTED] [REDACTED], I ended up setting it on fire aside.

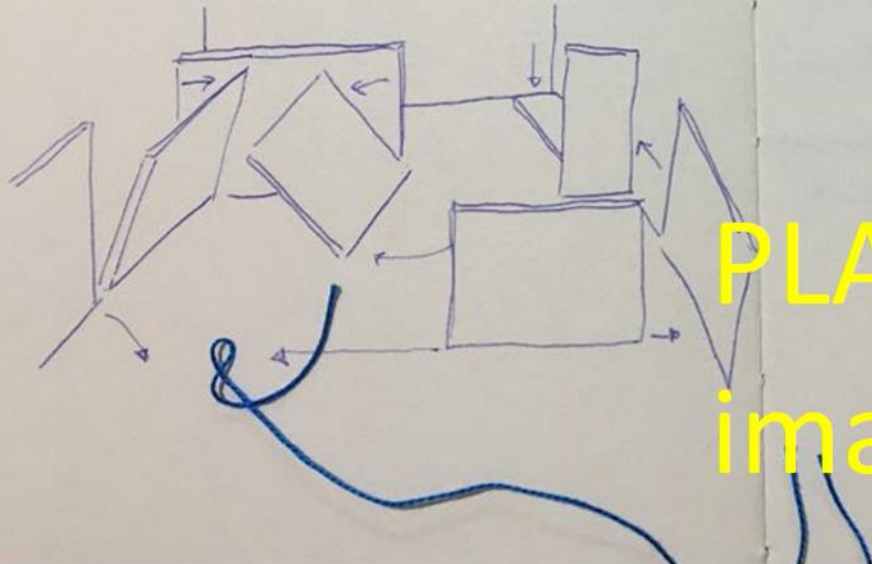
At a certain point in this project, I cannot say exactly when the line which separates success and failure was blurred. Or maybe [REDACTED]. The ways that this project 'fails' or attempts to fail even as this is a paradox, to be discussed further on will be discussed in this exegesis. But let's begin at the place before beginning: in the hypothetical state where inertia thrives and nothing seems to ever be achieved. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] time passes by [REDACTED] because I will it so. Purposelessness seems to come with the territory in this regard and is perhaps just another aspect of failure. The thought that everything I did or didn't do was failing, led to the thinking that trying and not trying was an act of futility.

This project has also taken on the idea of rehearsing with the things that I do becoming increasingly performative. In seeing my work as rehearsals and practice for a show that seemingly never arrives, the limitations of making work were revealed. With my limitations before me, I move along to coming to terms with a state of performative irresolution. In creating an installation where these aspects of 'failing' are no longer failures but something more, failure and success become interchangeable. [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. There is the tentative sensation in this that is as if I am being reintroduced to failure, familiar yet altogether new, so much so that the last few months have me curious about whether if I have ever met failure somewhere before.

⁸ If you google 'fear is limiting', the search engine helpfully collates near identical articles detailing precisely how fear might be holding you back. The first page of results offers enlightening perspectives from a wide range of people including a group of women focusing on advancing women in business, a musician turned entrepreneur, a science magazine, Celia Swanson the first female EVP at Walmart Inc., and LinkedIn respectively.

An art gallery whose walls can move freely (see Gerrit
 Rietveld's Schröder House, built in De Stijl movement).
 from the planes of the 'cube' not only will move from side
 to side but swing out at angles to create surfaces that vary
 horizontally.

An international food delivery
 system!



PLACEHOLDER
 image (maybe)

Figure 1. From the pages of *Good Bad Propositions* (February, 2021)

Meanwhile, I have a proposition

Proposition: Write a chapter about how fear of failure has led to my invention of the meanwhile space and discuss self-censorship.

In this chapter I ~~shall attempt to~~ discuss the aspect of failure that is closely related to fear: never beginning. Never beginning is not the same as procrastination in that an outcome is delayed. Rather all outcomes are considered and hypothetical including the one you might fear. So instead of risking this outcome, I will just do nothing. I used to think never beginning wasted a lot of my time. I spent as much time and energy, if not more, in never beginning than actually beginning ~~and continuing~~ ~~and then finishing~~. One of the symptoms of never beginning or never starting for this project is discarding out ideas. It was self-censorship which I exercised to the extent that the sheer volume of things I never made could not be ignored. To acknowledge and celebrate all the things I would probably never do allowed me to look at failure with the understanding that it had potential.

Le Feuvre puts it more eloquently that failure is a “space of potentially productive operations”.⁹ She elaborates that between the state of “intention” and “realisation” there is a space which can be generative in making artwork.¹⁰ By becoming a space, this part of failure - never beginning – becoming a space has been a recent development productive as it enabled me [REDACTED] [REDACTED] to see fear of failure in the same way. It utilises fear as a buffer or a pause [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. It is like dwelling in an in-between space, nowhere land, and neutral territory. [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. I will admit [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] here both success and failure apply yet are redundant. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] imagine a timeline reality. [REDACTED] in which destination and the journey are, all at once [REDACTED] [REDACTED] full of potential. This is the *meanwhile*.

In the *meanwhile*, one can deliberate about all the choices before you and contemplate on the ramifications of each course of action before taking any. Being in this space means embracing ‘intention’ and rejecting ‘realisation’ which strangely enough allows the *meanwhile* to be more generative. [REDACTED]. Over there in the corner is the colossal list of all the artworks I will probably never make. I am saving them for a rainy day which I’m sure will get here someday. One of the things I did in this space was create a book which details some of the fleeting propositional-type ideas I have. In *Good Bad Propositions* (see Figure 2. below), every so often I scribble some of the ideas and propositions I have made. [REDACTED] [REDACTED], particularly the ones that have endured for longer than the moment they came to me. I like to make books while I am here because in this space where everything exists in thought-form, [REDACTED]. One cannot help but imagine what is possible without committing to realising it. In this sense the *meanwhile* space is also transitory. In existing between intention and realisation, time seems to be suspended. Things are neither Here nor There because I am avoiding going Nowhere.

⁹ Lisa Le Feuvre, “Art Failure,” *Art Monthly*, 2008, 313.

¹⁰ Lisa Le Feuvre, Introduction to *Failure*, ed. (London: The MIT Press, 2010), 12.

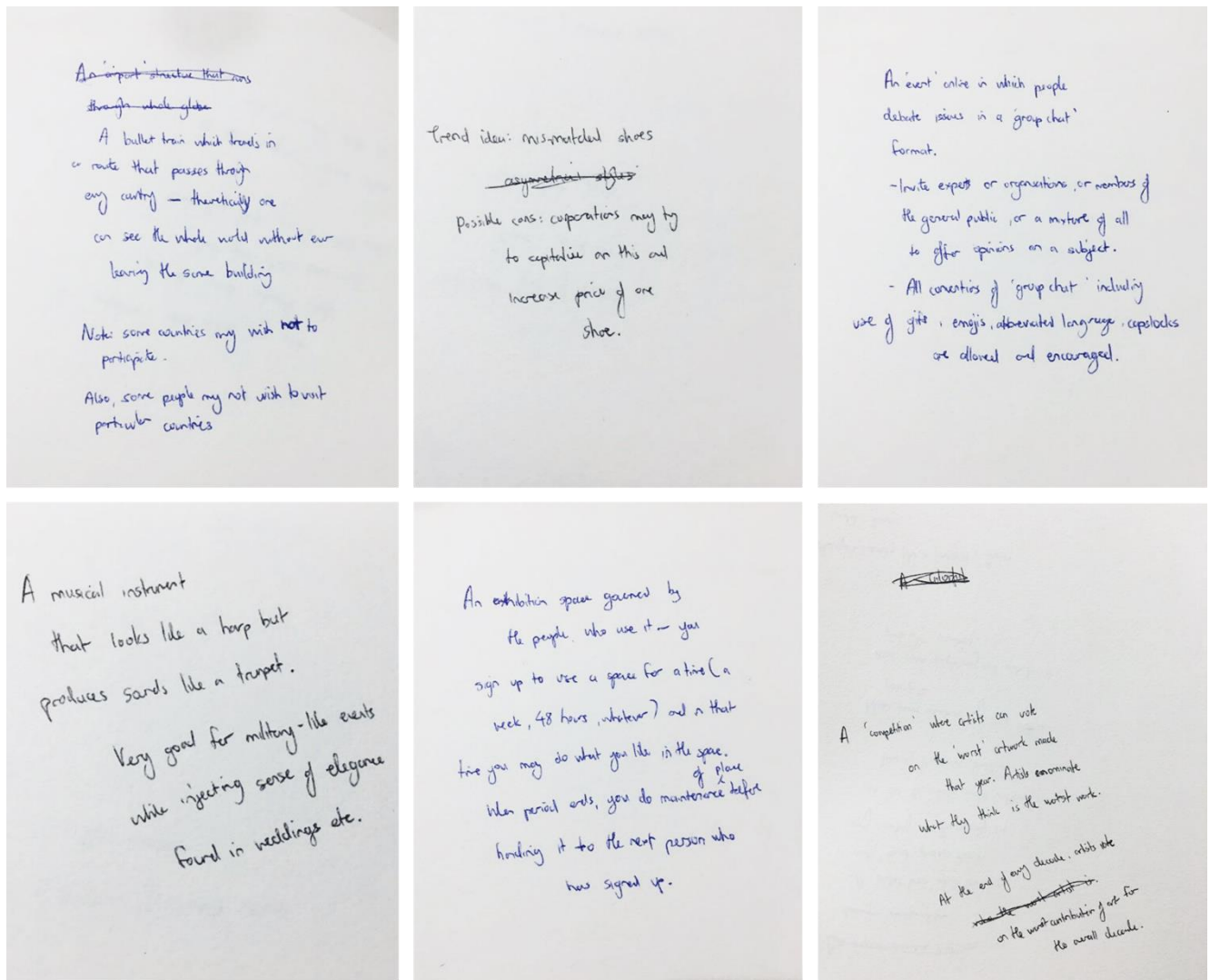


Figure 2. A few Good Bad Propositions (February 2021), Samantha Cheng

Meanwhile learning how to throw a mug on a ceramic wheel sounds interesting.

Meanwhile I propose a challenge to see how many hair ties I can ~~steal~~ permanently borrow from my work in one shift.

Meanwhile, what if I watch all two hundred episodes of a tv show in one weekend. Proposition: I will attempt to transcend the concept of time which claims that this feat would be impossible.

Meanwhile imagine if you hosted a funeral for your art career ~~or lack of~~ and invited people to the event.

Meanwhile maybe I might go window shopping.

Meanwhile this

Meanwhile that

Meanwhile meanwhile meanwhile meanwhile meanwhile meanwhile meanwhile meanwhile meanwhile meanwhile meanwhile

Meanwhile I came upon David Critchley's video work *Pieces I Never Did*, 1979. Made some forty-two years ago, the thirty-five minute video features the artist describing eighteen propositions for artworks.¹¹ One of the works he proposes involves the artist recording himself shouting 'shut up' until it became physically impossible.¹² Ultimately however, these propositions were discarded by

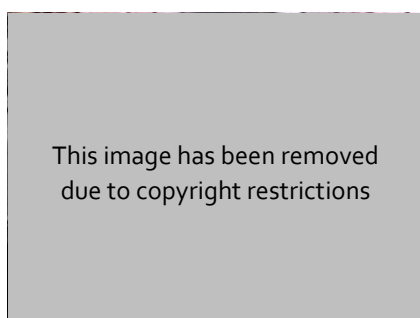


Figure 3. *Pieces I Never Did* (1979), David Critchley. Image courtesy of https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/david_critchley/pieces_i_never_did.html.

Critchley. As Le Feuvre contemplates perhaps Critchley felt the ideas carried too many flaws, were a hazard, that fellow artists could better execute them, or even that they were inconsequential whether for the times or for time taken to make them.¹³ Following on this speculation, it seems Critchley's propositions met one or more of these criteria and therefore [REDACTED] he had cause to discard or abandon them. Failure.

Reading Le Feuvre's account of *Pieces I Never Did* after I made *Good Bad Propositions*, there was something familiar about why Critchley never began any of the eighteen ideas. My instincts to self-censor were often for the same reasons. I thought it meant that meeting any one of the criteria was a failure and maybe on reflection, so did Critchley. *Pieces I Never Did* can be read as the artist acknowledging the times ~~eighteen to be exact~~ he exercised self-censorship. As such they are an admission of Critchley's fear of failure by which they are suspended in their own *meanwhile* space. Situated between intention and realisation, Critchley's works that were never made are not precisely a failure nor a success. Interestingly though, in making the video perhaps a step has been ~~taken closer to realisation.~~

~~I am aware~~ I think that that most of my propositions ~~whether I document them or not~~ will never be 'successful'. I know when there are too many flaws or obstacles like [REDACTED] and the idea of being inconsequential is undesirable. To an extent I spent so long thinking about what could be a failure that I never stopped to ask what

¹¹ Lisa Le Feuvre, "Art Failure," *Art Monthly*, 2008, 313.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

'success' was. What are the criteria for a proposition that would guarantee success? It seems less relevant to elaborate on what I used to see as success such as [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] but I digress.

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Figure 4. *Art Bin* (2010), Michael Landy.
Image courtesy of
<https://www.southlondongallery.org/exhibitions/michael-landy-art-bin/>.

In a work reminiscent of John Baldessari's *Cremation Project* (1970), British artist Michael Landy created *Art Bin* (2010), a fifteen by five metre structure within which he discarded his own failed projects and invited other artists to contribute.¹⁴ It occurred to me that self-censorship also occurs outside of the never beginning stage.

Destroying artworks is one of the ways in which that takes form.

When I think of *Cremation Project*, in which the artist destroyed thirteen years of work it's always mentioned that most of them were paintings, I always think of [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]¹⁵ In February, I too decided a ritualistic fire was the gesture I needed. (~~Proposition: invent a product which allows you to set things on fire in your backyard without the hassle of smoke and the fire smell.~~) There is

something in the gesture which feels theatrical and drastic that speaks to an

attempt to return to the place of never beginning or at least beginning once more.

Figure 5. *Cremation Project* (1970), John Baldessari. Image courtesy of
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/john-baldessari-687/lost-art-john-baldessari>.

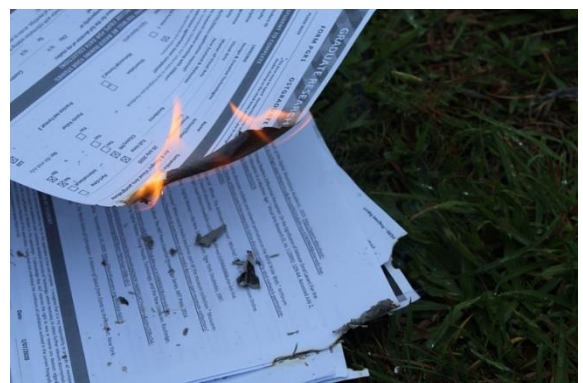


Figure 6. *The burning of one Postgraduate Research Proposal* (February 2021), Samantha Cheng.

¹⁴ Amy Sherlock, "Learning to Love the 2010s," *Frieze*, no. 208. (January 2020), <https://www.frieze.com/article/learning-love-2010s>.

¹⁵ Jennifer Mundy, "The Death of Painting," *The Gallery of Lost Art* (2012-3): <http://galleryoflostart.com/>.

Pieces I Never Did, *Cremation Project*, and *Art Bin* are ways that other artists have acknowledged that the act of dismissing a work can still have impact or importance. ~~Proposition: Facilitate a ceremonial art rubbish bin for all art students to throw out work.~~ Self-censorship is significant in that it allows us to move forwards from a point of failure. Return to the beginning of this chapter, there is clearly potential in this aspect of failure. Never beginning dictates that there should be no failure or success in the first place, therefore making it a failure anyway. (Proposition: make a show full of 'censored' artworks.) Artworks that no longer exist or on the verge of no longer existing, or have never existed, or are propositions belong to the *meanwhile*. Here between intention and realisation, propositions carry a potential which should not be dismissed so quickly. With that understanding, somewhere along the way for me, Never Beginning seemed to detach itself from failure. In this regard can I still say that the parts of the project which Never Began be considered a failure? Meanwhile it continued to occur to me that I still have not made anything. But let's move on.

Propositions made: 11

Works made: 1



Figure 7. *Rain Simulation for Party Parasol* (January 2021), Samantha Cheng.

Purposelessness

Meanwhile in the real world

On the occasion that I do make work, I am confronted by the sensation of moving in circles. This was the cycle of beginning something and doing it, only to find dissatisfaction and ultimately arriving once more to the place I started once more. Writer Emma Cocker discusses how the myth of Sisyphus can be a frame which mirrors the multitudes of art practice that adhere to “purposeless reiteration” [REDACTED].¹⁶ The myth of Sisyphus is one which depicts endless action, a loop of time and action. Rolling a boulder up an entire slope only to have it roll back down is an impossible task yet not too impossible to at least execute most of it.

¹⁶ Emma Cocker, “Over and Over, Again and Again,” In *Failure*, ed. by Lisa Le Feuvre (London: The MIT Press, 2010), 154-163.

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Figure 8. *An unsuccessful attempt at chasing fog* (2012), Layne Waerea. Image courtesy of <https://laynewaerea.wordpress.com/2012/02/18/an-unsuccessful-attempt-at-chasing-fog/>.

Sisyphean gestures allow for “open-ended, ambiguous or even incomplete” situations within artist Layne Waerea’s work.¹⁷ One such situation is *An unsuccessful attempt at chasing fog* (2012). The work sees Waerea trespassing onto a neighbouring land just before dawn to chase fog. Through making ‘purposeless’ gestures such as chasing fog, the artist seeks to acknowledge and examine the system of authority.¹⁸ The concept of futility and absurdity of chasing fog asks for a deeper meaning.¹⁹ For the artist, these futile and absurd attempts to question the rules of a particular situation in order to question if a system can be changed.²⁰ It is interesting how Waerea creates spaces for ambiguity through absurdity, as if comprehension of the rules is suspended in the absurdity of futility.

What are the reasons for keeping at a practice that emulates a system of purposeless reiteration? The things I set out to do were Sisyphean in nature by being predetermined to fail. *Just slightly off Riddell Road* was a task I gave myself, to draw a line in the centre of a road that had not been continued.²¹ The gesture was revealed to be futile in that chalk would not endure or be visible in the dark and that the line that I drew was not straight.

Another highly impractical and futile task I completed was repairing my umbrella with a bedsheet. Carrying through with these things that were assured to fail one way or another became an inquiry into whether they could be more than that. What else could be found in a cycle or loop that is determined to



Figure 9. *Just slightly off Riddell Road* (October 2020), Samantha Cheng.



Figure 10. *The making of Party Parasol* (September 2020), Samantha Cheng.

¹⁷ Layne Waerea, “Silent injunctions: Tactics for criminal intent or creative liability?” (Master’s thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2012): 31, <http://hdl.handle.net/10292/4776>.

¹⁸ Ibid, 31-2.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ When I was first learning to drive, I used to get so irked when the centre line of a road would cut off on some streets. For one, without the line I had a tendency to drift to the other side and it also usually indicated that it was a narrow street with many cars parked on the side that I would have to navigate.

maintain its own failure? What I once started [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] begin again.

The strategy of working only with failures created a feedback loop which placed failure outside of the cycle. Being that this project had its roots in [REDACTED] [REDACTED] not unfamiliar. Feedback loops can be found everywhere and understood generally to mean when outputs of a system or 'feed' feeds back into the same system. There are different types of feedback loops. As written in *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*, written by Diana Wright and Donella H. Meadows, a balancing feedback loop is one which "opposes whatever direction of change is imposed".²² The example of drinking coffee is given: a coffee drinker ingests coffee according to as much or as little caffeine is felt in the body.²³ If one has consumed too much caffeine generally the coffee intake will decrease.²⁴ If the effect of too little caffeine is felt, more coffee will be consumed.²⁵

My experiments with the obviously flawed *Party parasol* seemed to follow this method. Firstly, in proposing an idea that was obviously futile ensured that success would not be attained, then secondly putting it through a series of tests such as throwing it off a hill, using it at the zoo, and using it in windy and wet conditions. The feedback loop was created when one experiment fueled others.

[REDACTED]. I threw it off a hill like a javelin and then decided to use it in public as it was intentionally designed to. After the sunny day at the zoo which proved to be too successful to be purposeless, I tried it on a windy day. For that test, its flimsy quality revealed itself in the utter 'flappiness' of the structure against even the mildest gust of wind. And in the rain simulation surprisingly only half the water went straight through the sheet. I had to



Figure 11. A windy day for *Party Parasol* (March 2021), Samantha Cheng.

²² Diana Wright and Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 25.

²³ Ibid., 25-34.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

improvise when, predictably, it did not rain for weeks. (The only thing that was drenched was my hair. The rest of the water ricocheted off the surface of the umbrella as it should. Conclusion: should be quite effective in light drizzle but not in torrential downpour.) The results of the experiments dictated the next in that it prevented or encouraged reaching ultimate success and failure.



Figure 12. Rain Simulation for Party Parasol (January 2021), Samantha Cheng.

I look at this now as my refusal to allow myself to succeed or fail. In working this way, there was a gradual change from fearing failure to somewhat courting failure but still not accepting it. Courting failure is a Sisyphean gesture. As Le Feuvre points out, one cannot “strive” to fail.²⁶ This feedback system I designed thwarts the idea that I am striving to fail by ensuring things will ‘fail’ or ‘succeed’ according to the chances of having the opposite outcome. It neither ensures nor disregards failure which maintains the aspect of ambiguity that happens when something is absurd.

A feedback loop that is designed to fail repeatedly in its own self-interest makes failure meaningless. The notion itself suggests my experimentation with futility is just a self-sabotage strategy, where I increase the absurdity of the next experiments. There is another type of loop called reinforcing feedback which describes this progression. This cycle is located when a system has “the ability to reproduce itself or to grow as a constant fraction of itself”.²⁷ The example for this is how many rabbit parents create baby rabbits that then become rabbit parents themselves which results in the production of more baby rabbits and so on.²⁸ It is described as a progression which could create positive consequences or “runaway destruction”.²⁹ Given my fear of failure and how I have sought to court both success and failure equally, this type of feedback loop is not as relevant. But what form would runaway destruction take in this project? This is something I currently obsess over as I work on mending a hat with dental floss.

²⁶ Lisa Le Feuvre, “Art Failure,” *Art Monthly*, 2008, 313.

²⁷ Diana Wright and Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 31.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, 30.



Figure 13. *You can just paint the roses red* (February 2021), Samantha Cheng.

Rehearsing and performativity

Between the test runs I conducted for *Party Parasol* for the 'real work' and the multiple trials of *Just slightly off Riddell Road*, I realised that the work I was making were rehearsals. These preparations for some distant final event were my attempts to reach a place where I would feel ready for it. There was a gradual realisation that I was never going to feel ready [REDACTED]. Fear seemed to make an appearance once more.

In a rehearsal, one can practice and finetune to your heart's content until the prospect of uncertainty is erased. This is of course within the timeframe of the rehearsal. Failure or uncertainty cannot be practiced against or anticipated, however. It usually just is or just happens. If one were to rehearse or practice uncertainty it would not be uncertainty. For this project I like to use the notion of *rehearsal* as an umbrella term for works that somewhat count as a performance but also not. Dwelling in a *rehearsal* is like not-performing on the stage. In a *rehearsal*, one is still performing but ever present is the thought that this is *not the real thing*. The thing that is interesting for me is when

practice and the real thing begin to cross over. There was nothing that made me realise the two can be interchangeable more than Bas Jan Ader's work.

Specifically one work – *In Search of the Miraculous* spanned two years from 1973 to 1975 and is considered a performance and installation project.³⁰ Split into three parts, these are a walk and the resulting photographs which the artist took in Los Angeles, an exhibition of these photographs accompanied with the singing of sea shanties, and lastly travelling to Holland by boat to exhibit the

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Figure 14. *In Search of the Miraculous* (1973-5), Bas Jan Ader. Image courtesy of <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/stil/dem-geheimnis-auf-der-spur-havarie-als-kunst-1.3655723>.

show with additional photographs from the voyage.³¹ *In Search of the Miraculous* exists in a unique state of being finished yet unfinished due to the disappearance of the artist whilst on the voyage. Now as a larger than life figure in stories, I am struck by the tragedy of the circumstances which asks the question whether an artwork's success or failure involves understanding its potential or its limitations.

Considering Jan Ader's work I realised I was so occupied in thinking of all the potential in my work that I never considered what it could *not* do. In a *rehearsal*, both the limitation of the artist and the artwork are revealed. In performing without rehearsal, there is an element of risk. A risk that one might take to discover what the limitations might really be. One of the works I made, *You can always paint the roses red*, went through many iterations. The *rehearsals* for this began with painting yellow wildflowers red, then switched to buying carnations from a supermarket and painting them red, and then finally painting daisies yellow. Of all my *rehearsals*, this one was rehearsed the most. With each *rehearsal* I came upon more 'limitations': the first flowers turned orange, the carnations looked bloody and too dramatic, and lastly yellow seemed too safe – for [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. Although in hindsight, what works about the yellow



Figure 15. Second rehearsal of *You can always paint the roses red* (August 2020), Samantha Cheng.

³⁰ Tate launched an online exhibition in 2012 called *The Gallery of Lost Art*. It has now been erased in a gesture which I assume is symbolic in that the re-found art has been lost once more. ~~This would have been~~ ~~astoundingly funny if I had not been interested to read the actual exhibition and use it for my exegesis.~~ As it is, the gallery and its contents ~~some of which I will never know~~ has entered the *meanwhile*, neither here nor there, which is a thought I am reluctant to be annoyed about. "The Gallery of Lost Art Has Been Erased," (2012-3), <http://galleryoflostart.com/>.

³¹ Jennifer Mundy, "Capsized," *The Gallery of Lost Art* (2012-3): <http://galleryoflostart.com/>.

I shall now discuss performance in art

Age Group	Percentage of Respondents
18-29	83%
30-49	78%
50-64	72%
65+	32%

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] . [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] . [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] . [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] . [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] 34 . [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] . [REDACTED]

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33 [REDACTED]

34 .

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]³⁵ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]³⁶ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]³⁷ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] but all of this is not as important as performativity.

³⁵ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

³⁶ [REDACTED]

³⁷ [REDACTED]

Performativity describes the action-like characteristic of language. A common example of this is the phrase “I now pronounce” which through the act of speaking seems to perform the act.³⁸ First introduced in 1955 by theorist J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things With Words*, performativity points at going beyond language.³⁹ For performance art, this relationship between words and gestures is important, particularly within the actual performance. For a while, I was confused between performance with a capital P and performativity. I have always been hesitant to embrace performance, doing so would place importance on the real thing – the act of performing. For a practice founded on the feeling of never being ready, yet engaging in aspects of performance, I have always considered my actions as *barely-a-performance*. The point of thinking of my works operating as *rehearsals* is that I sidestep making a decision about practicing or performing, instead preferring to remain in an ambiguous performative place.

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Július Koller's *Time/space Definition of the Psychophysical Activity of Matter 1,2* (1986) is a work which occupies this ambiguous space. In photographs, the viewer sees Koller demarcating a tennis court. The work seems to operate as an event and photograph at the same time.⁴⁰ The act itself feels ambiguous: is it a drawing being made in the sense that there are lines physically drawn in space by the body? Or is the demarcation of the court a performance?⁴¹ Its undecidability is what makes it fall short of entirely being one of the other. As such performativity is evident in the way that it seems to work towards failing intentionally at being a performance, a *rehearsal*, or an event. In choosing to exhibit a photograph which suggests it is a documentation, it feels as if the artist was entirely aware of the limits inherent in each reading of the work.

Figure 17. *Time/space Definition of the Psychophysical Activity of Matter 1,2* (1986), Július Koller. Image courtesy of <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/cazjE9n>.

If I think back to Landy's *Art Bin* and the performativity of the gesture of publicly throwing an artwork away, it seems to want to say something more than the act. The same might be said of the performativity of Waerea's *An unsuccessful attempt at chasing fog*. These works speak to a

³⁸ Dorothea von Hantelmann, “The Experiential Turn,” In *On Performativity*, ed. by Elizabeth Carpenter (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2014), <http://walkerart.org/collections/publications/performativity/experiential-turn/>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Jan Verwoert, “Exhaustion & Exuberance,” (Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, 2008), 93.

⁴¹ Ibid, 93.

significance deeper than the one that is being documented. My *rehearsals* provide the opportunity to consider the meanings of the things that I do beyond what I first intend. There is a work I made ~~still making actually~~ titled *Happy ever after* (see Figure 18. below), in which I run into the distance until I disappear from the camera's view repeatedly for the duration of the sunset. What do gestures like running off into the sunset or setting evidence documents on fire say beyond the physical gesture? They seem to speak to the aspects of failure such as futility and self-censorship. I have always regarded *Happy ever after* as ~~a middle finger at the entirety of that Tuesday~~ acknowledgement of my constant desire, which I felt especially keenly that day, to give up this endeavour of making art. Considering that no one else is around to witness the making of *Happy ever after* or Koller's demarcation of the tennis court, can they be considered failures themselves? As no one was present to see the many times I 'mess up' or 'make mistakes', the notion of *rehearsal* is itself becoming performative.

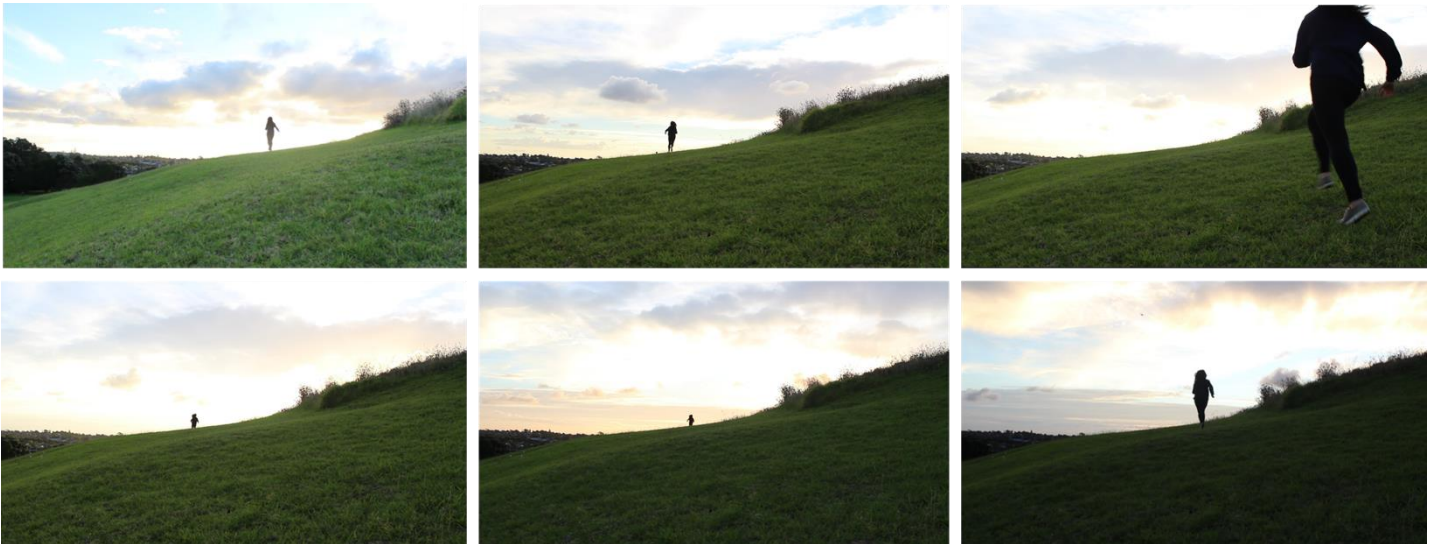


Figure 18. *Happy ever after* (March 2021), Samantha Cheng.



Figure 19. *Thanks for noticin' me* (January 2021), Samantha Cheng.

In-stalling and humour

It was established midway through this project that an installation format would best suit the work that was being made. Now in my head this installation was where all the random things I had done and decisions I made supposedly came together. ~~The thought was paralysing. To me a gallery or display space is one that has been demarcated as an area for finished work to be received by an audience. Deference, irresolution, indecision – all these things associated with failure you might say have no authority in a gallery space. Would it be a stretch to say that with any work in a show, an artist attempts to go beyond the not-provisional? That is I mean to say the very nature of the work or show meets a standard where it is confident and enduring. Isn't that how we perceive the greatest artworks and artists of our lifetimes?~~ I have always had an impression of galleries being cold and detached. Gallery spaces – especially the white cube – bring a finality to the work, the artist, and their practice for that moment. However, my indecision was demanding a space for objects that I had not decided on, let alone where to place them or what to do with them. My thoughts turned to crafting and sustaining a place where I could focus on not being focused and with deliberate intention of not being deliberate.

Meanwhile a flashback

One Monday evening ~~early this year~~ in February, I gathered the assortment of objects in my studio. Amongst the ~~crap~~ miscellaneous items were hand painted flowers, my newly repaired umbrella, and the lamp with a pathetic ~~but in my opinion also endearing~~ posture. The only thing they had in common were that these things did not have anything in common. When isolated in a 'studio' space, their ~~utter uselessness~~ inability to perform their duty through my interference was emphasised. There were other props including a pallet, a shopping cart, timber, plant saucers, and many plinths which floated around the space like large minimalist icebergs.

I myself was also adrift wandering from corner to wall and around again. Occasionally I stepped over the things on the floor. Other times I nudged them about a metre sideways with my foot. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. This was my first strategy for installing, which was barely a strategy at all. I was navigating a path set out by the random locations I had initially dumped everything. Eventually I got tired of tentatively nudging things about and set to reorienting the larger things in the space. By Tuesday afternoon, I must have moved the paint tin and the lamp a hundred different places. The pallet had become the spot for objects in transit to another location. My plant saucers had morphed from containers to superfluous ornamental plate to makeshift pedestal.

Everything was ~~being~~ sort of interesting but also sort of not. Satisfaction eluded me, and indifference was rapidly settling in. Not even [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. During this time, I went through [REDACTED]. Things, as they always do, went around and around in a circle. And it was in between these moments, of debating the rightness of a paint tin in the corner versus on a plinth that I realised I was attempting to delay failure. I mentioned previously that I am fully aware when an idea is an obvious failure. Sometimes though, I tend to view everything else as a failure as well. With installing, every action I had been taking was simply a means of putting off what I perceived as an impending failure. My debate about the paint tin is actually a trick question, there is no correct answer except that not deciding is the correct answer.

I then focused on the strategies I did most when I was hesitant or feeling uncertain about things. Things like placing objects on surfaces without looking. I would walk around the room and each time passing the plinth place down an item. I tried throwing or tossing things to reach a place of conclusion without the need for me to decide. ■

■ took over, resulting in a new enjoyable installation process. Once a table collapsed ■

■ like Eeyore. ~~Actually a lot of things fall~~

~~over whenever I work in my studio. I use a lot of Blu-Tack.~~ These moments of pure unexpected chance are the ones I value the most as they allowed for the deferral of decision making. Especially for objects that I am struggling to decide how to intentionally not decide what to do with.

Flashback over

Delaying the inevitable is hardly a radical idea or one unfamiliar in this project. Spending time in the *meanwhile* is just another form of delaying or putting off things for me anyway. It was Duchamp who first placed a coatrack on the floor ~~a hundred years ago maybe~~ in 1917, presenting what curator and writer Helen Molesworth says is “not a step saved but one wasted, a distraction”.⁴² By



subverting the expectation of what a readymade object is used for within the same place it is used in, added to the ideas of “delay or postponement of labour”.⁴³

Figure 21. *Trébuchet* (1917), Marcel Duchamp. Image courtesy of https://www.toutfait.com/unmaking_the_museum/Trap.html.



Figure 20. *Party Parasol in Thanks for noticin' me* (January 2021), Samantha Cheng.

⁴² Helen Molesworth, "Work Avoidance: The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp's Readymades," *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (1998), doi:10.2307/777927.

⁴³ Ibid.

Such postponement of labour can be flipped for instead of halting work, such configurations create

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Figure 22. *Agouti Sky* (2019), Georgia Dickie. Image courtesy of https://coopercolegallery.com/art/2019_agouti-sky/.

more work for a viewer. Georgia Dickie is an installation artist who accumulates materials for her found-object assemblages. She addresses failure indirectly by honouring indecision. This is most clear in her solo exhibition *Agouti Sky* (2019). At a glance, the show resembles piles of stuff littered throughout the gallery space. Deceptively the exhibition appears unfinished. Objects are piled on others and certain things are profiled while others remain shrouded. There is a sense of a largely disorganised arrangement throughout the space.

The space where the work is received by viewers contributes to a sense of something being delayed, whether it is work or a promise of a resolution. The very format it supposedly upholds stymies out expectations and confounds the logic of the installation. There is amusement to be found in Dickie's subversion of the objects and the space. For example: consider the artist's studio couch, a piece of functional furniture generally considered utilitarian, displayed on a wall. Such treatment is in

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Figure 23. *Agouti Sky* (2019), Georgia Dickie. Image courtesy of https://coopercolegallery.com/art/2019_agouti-sky/.

contrast to Dickie's other ~~commodities articles~~ stuff textiles, reading material, even lengths of a hose to name several of the remaining miscellaneous items, which are on the floor. Reviewing Dickie's work, Charles Reeve states: "take it on its own terms or not at all".⁴⁴ I like this because it suggests that the installation itself has its own set of rules that exists outside the expected or conventional ones. There is an element of an insider joke, if you 'get it' you can embrace the work and it simultaneously invites you in.

⁴⁴ One thing I found interesting to contemplate is Reeve's statement that the show is a "symphony of indecision". There is a question of whether the indecision and spontaneity that Dickie works to emulate is fabricated. How can something be random if it was chosen intentionally by the artist for this moment, for this show? Dickie has made a practice on accumulating materials through happenstance encounters on free items. This element of chance is woven from the sourcing of her materials to her conception of her assemblages and now apparently in the installation. As Reeves states, there is an illusion of an absent artist which we as the viewer know is false. The juxtaposition of chance and choice here seemingly encourages the interplay of both, forcing one to not choose to lean towards one or the other. Charles Reeves, "Georgia Dickie's 'Symphony of Indecision'," <https://coopercolegallery.com/georgia-dickie-reviewed-on-frieze/>.

Humour as I am beginning to reflect on more deeply at the time of writing, is always present in some form in my work. I seek out humour in things and places where I often find none: places that are at a point of not understanding. Humour is a strategy that masks anxieties I have in and around my work and on a more personal note [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. *Happy ever after* came to be after feeling extremely frustrated in making another work at the site. I had given up at the site and was thinking about gestures of giving up that I could make so that I had something to show for a day's work. The humour that can be found in these gestures come out from feelings of frustration, anxiety, and hopelessness that seems to come with the territory of failure.

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Figure 24. *What's the point of it?* (2014), Martin Creed. Image courtesy of <https://thejupital.com/whats-the-point-of-it/>.

Artists such as Martin Creed use humour to critique what art actually is. In *What's the point of it?* (2014), humour is in focus as farting sounds, smiling faces, vegetable prints in all the colours of the rainbow, balloons and much more fills the gallery.⁴⁵ As part of a retrospective exhibition in which many of his works are together, the work highlights the artist's relationship to art, cumulating in a loud, not-subtle effect that seems to suggest a conclusion (and answer to the show's title): for Creed art is 'whatever'.

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Figure 25. *Fallen Star* (2018), Ceal Floyer. Image courtesy of <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/ceal-floyer-interview-lisson-gallery-london>.

In contrast the humour found in Ceal Floyer's work relies on its simplicity. I think of *Fallen Star* (2018) – a work in which a star projected onto the gallery's ceiling is reflected back on the floor – as amusing. It also reflects a solemnity which is evident in the sparse isolation of the work in the space. This is a strategy of less says more.⁴⁶ The humour or 'joke' of the work is as substantial as the physical objects it is made from and seems to ask if the joke is perhaps more for the work than it is for us. For Floyer, keeping it simple asks the question what or where is the art and further, what art can do when there is little of it? How little does one have to do to make a point? At one point in

⁴⁵ Anna Dezeuze, "Martin Creed: What's the point of it?" *Art Monthly*, no. 375 (2014): 29-30.

⁴⁶ Hatty Nestor, "Ceal Floyer," *Studio International*, January 09, 2019, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/ceal-floyer-interview-lisson-gallery-london>.

writing this exegesis I had an idea of [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. What is 'too little' in an installation?

In *The Artist's Joke*, Jennifer Higgie writes that the one trait that applies to all forms of humour is that it "[thumbs] its nose at pigeonholes".⁴⁷ Particularly for art, humour is effective in that it similarly mocks art as it poses as art. Creed and Floyer utilise humour in their work in ways that question the nature of art while still allowing it to feel familiar as art. I think back to the notion of *rehearsing* and how with every work I may or may not make I am attempting to find acceptance in my limitations through art making. In the moments when dealing with futility ~~and exercising my patience to the extremes~~ Creed's question 'what's the point of it' is one I will inevitably ask myself. Something in this characteristic of familiarity, brings me back to a place of humility when dealing with failure.

Humour helps me feel grounded and is a device I use to feel more comfortable when things are clumsy or feel embarrassing. In my installation practice, the many questions I have about what ~~the a~~ work is or should be are revealed. In it the strategies of deferring decision making are a humorous device which seem to ask what work is but also distracts from the genuine [REDACTED] I have beneath my own amusement. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. As a distraction technique, humour works to prolong the moment which I, the artist, should come to a decision about what constitutes a work. The 'crappy' or pathetic quality of the materials I use is part of my own sense of self-deprecating humour. Being self-deprecating speaks to the one certainty I count on and that is in stalling I am installing uncertainty. This means being satisfied with being dissatisfied. And to come to resolutions without a resolution. Humour as a way of allowing things to remain open ended – I think. Recently I have been becoming aware

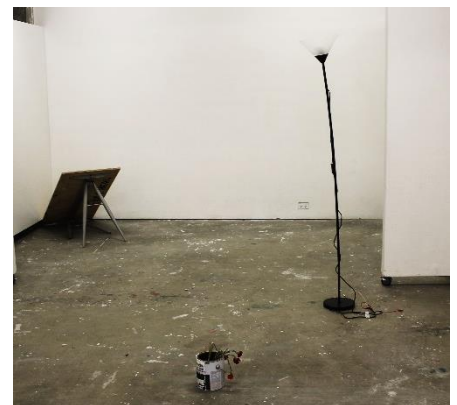


Figure 26. 'Eeyore', the lamp, and painted carnations in *Thanks for noticin' me* (January 2021), Samantha Cheng.

⁴⁷ Jennifer Higgie, *The Artist's Joke* (London: The MIT Press, 2007), 12.

of the consideration on whether we are laughing with or at the thing that is humorous. ~~he idea that~~
~~my failures might provide a hook for a joke solely at my expense does not comfort me at all~~ does
not comfort me at all. ~~I think a big part of this is the project has always sought to invite others to~~
~~feel familiarity in the struggle of failure, not that I am providing a spectacle for people to point and~~
~~go ha ha.~~ Of course, there is always the possibility no one gets the joke in which case it is not
humorous just ~~merely stupid~~ another failure.

I think back to the paint tin debate; it is funny that nothing is wrong and simultaneously nothing is
right. Yet I consistently work to resist validating myself. Is it a failure to have less than an installation
prepared for exhibition? Or is that the intention? Although is thwarting failure through stalling even
an effective means of making an installation? Or is that ~~been done before~~ too obvious? Is there a
chance I could fail in performing failure? ~~Frack, somehow that seems even more pathetic than~~
~~failing on just one level.~~ Who is to say? The artist or the viewer? ~~And mightn't our perceptions and~~
~~attitudes change in time anyway?~~ Failure is barely distinguishable at this point.

Meanwhile

This thesis conceives of the *meanwhile* as a productive space in which self-censorship, rehearsing, and deferring decision making occurs. Through a series of works that confront the notions of never beginning, futility, never being ready, and uncertainty, the project examines the role of failure in art making. These works that fail (or attempt to fail) challenge failure and the fear it elicits.

The project's various 'failures' create a framework for understanding what the role of failure has in this project. This includes the failure of ideas and propositions that have never been made which reveals that the act of self-censorship contributes to art practice. In pursuing the things that are embedded with failure such as repairing an umbrella with a bedsheet, the strategy of employing failure to avoid failure seeks to undermine the idea that failure is *just* failure. Another strategy which works to counter this is making performative gestures of failure whether through *rehearsing* giving up or stalling failure. The humour of these gestures counters the feelings of frustration, anxiety, and fear which failure often elicits. In these notions of rehearsing and stalling, I find myself never arriving at a point of conclusion.

In conclusion, ~~without a conclusion one must find satisfaction in this idea that nothing will ever be finished. Never finishing something reveals that art making is as much about its limits as its potential. Meanwhile, where time is suspended, does rehearsing becoming infinite? And if so what really do I rehearse for? I am haunted by the notion of waiting or anticipating forever, but anticipating what? Not knowing is the essence of the meanwhile, after all it is the part of art making that sits between intention and realisation. And so, does it ever be that we move forwards from meanwhile? In the conclusions we reach, the things we understand or think of as definite, can we be sure they are certain? Conclusions themselves are an end, they signal the finished judgment or decision reached from reasoning. In the meanwhile, where things are ever unfinished perhaps the idea that there is no conclusion is the conclusion or are we still in a rehearsal?~~

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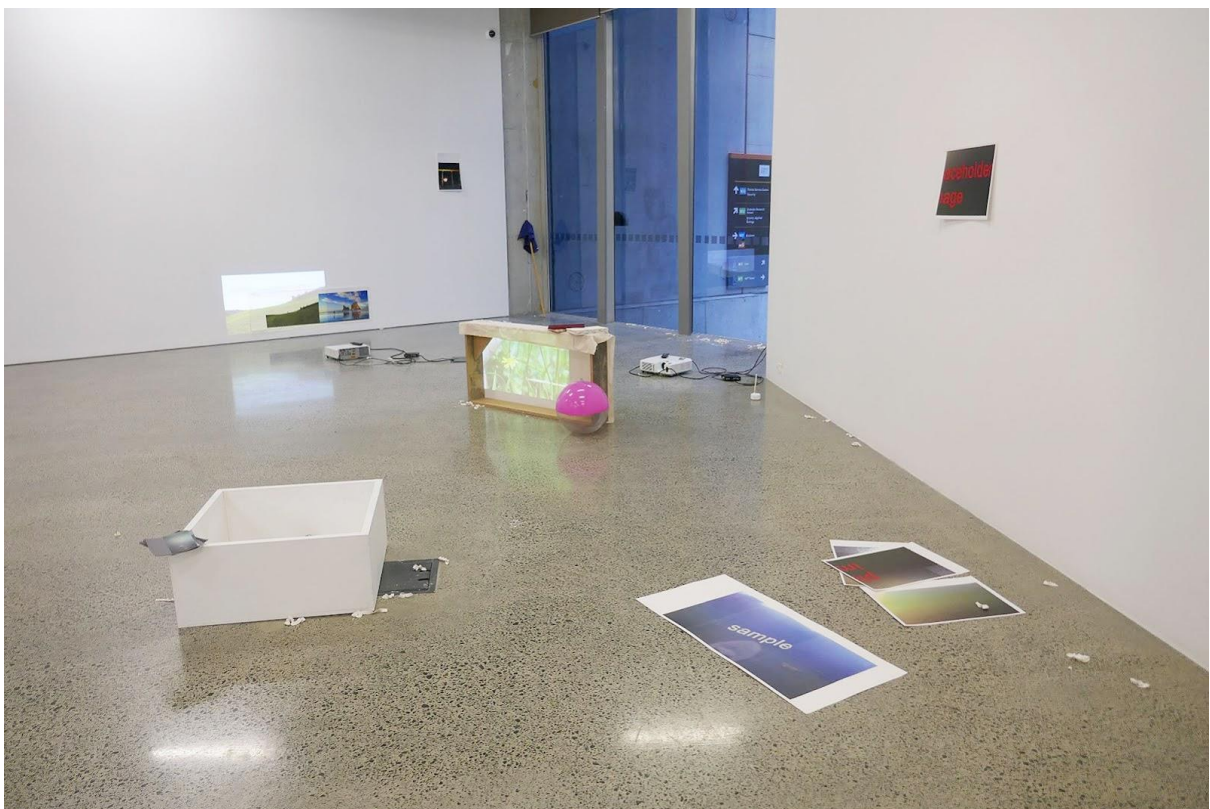
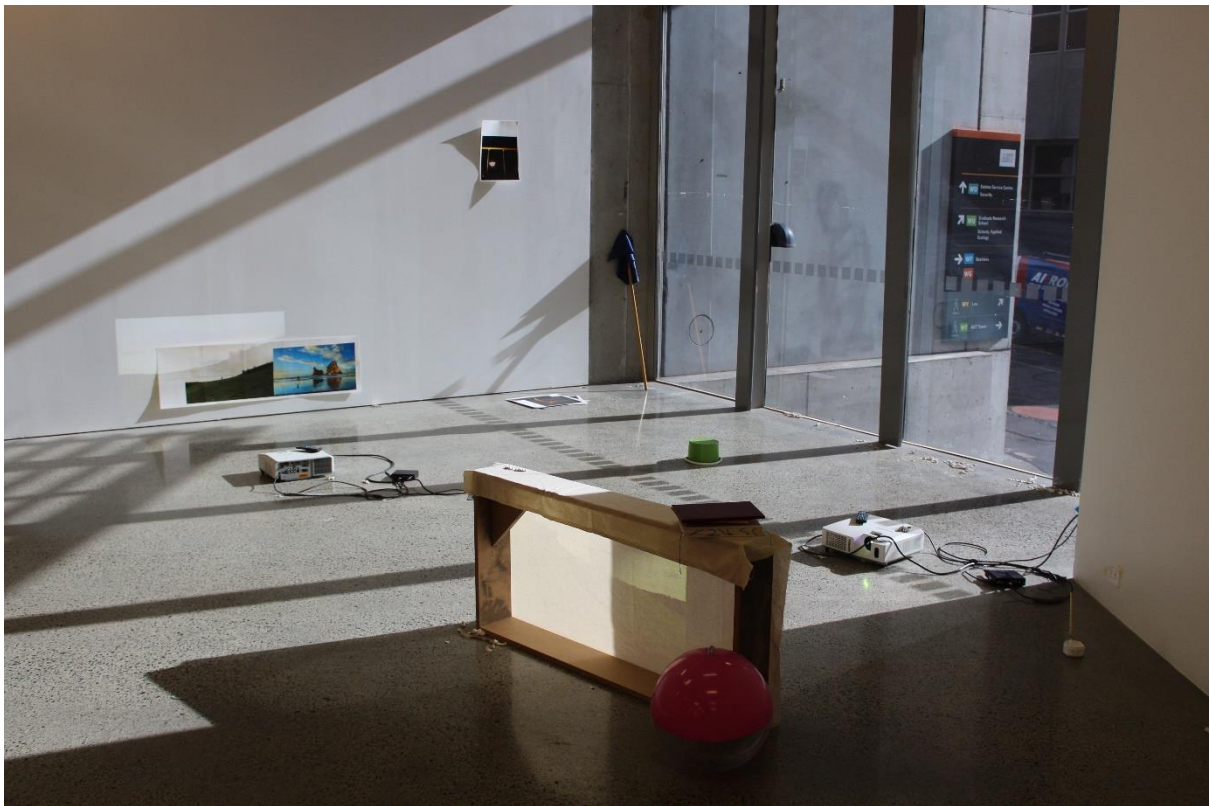
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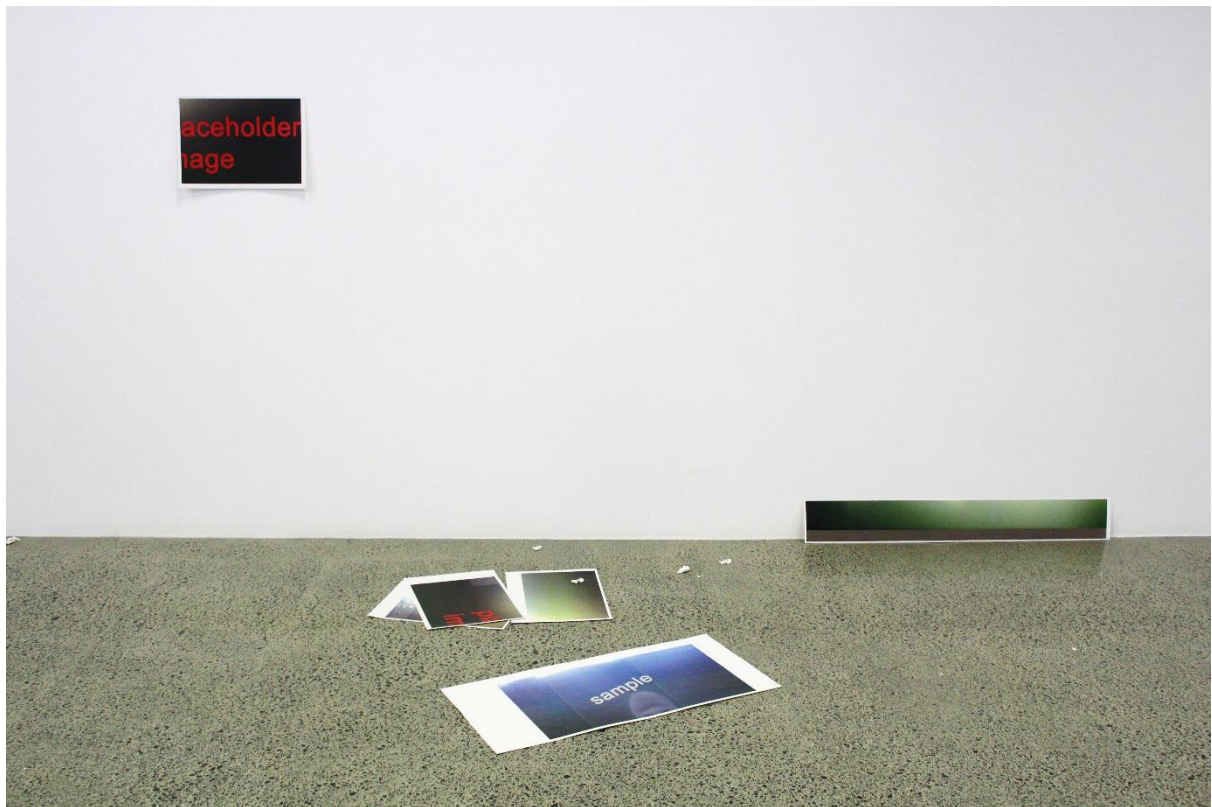
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Appendix 1

Documentation of *Gone meanwhile back soon* (2021)



Installation view, 2021 (day view and later-in-the-day view)



Installation details, 2021



Installation details:

Table lamp, June 2021 (above)

Digital camera, June 2021 (right)



Installation view of *You can just paint the roses red, Dragon fruit and All the things that couldn't be part of the art*, 2021



Installation view of *Dragon fruit and Things that happened while I was making decisions about art*, 2021



Installation details:

All the things that couldn't be part of the art, June 2021

Confetti, June 2021



Installation detail, 2021



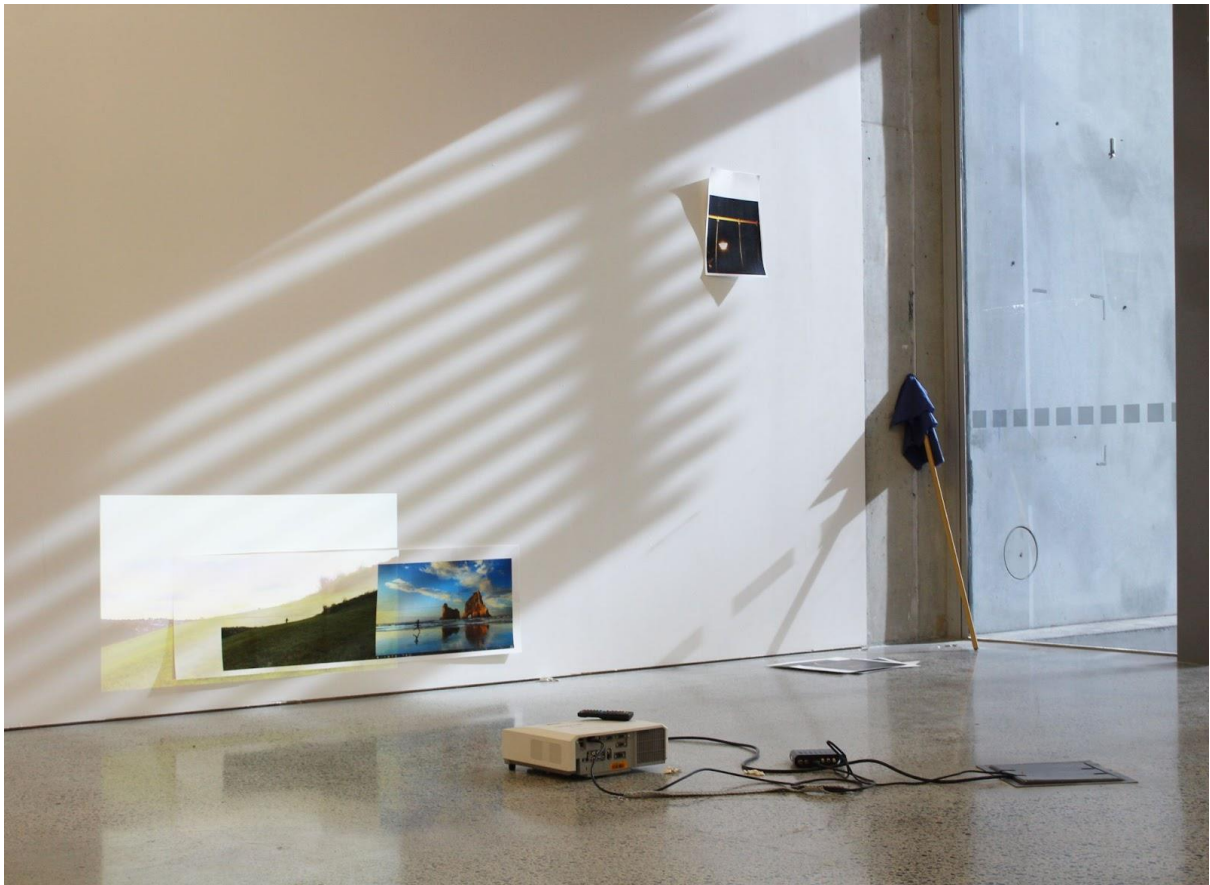
Installation view of *You can always paint the roses red*, 2021



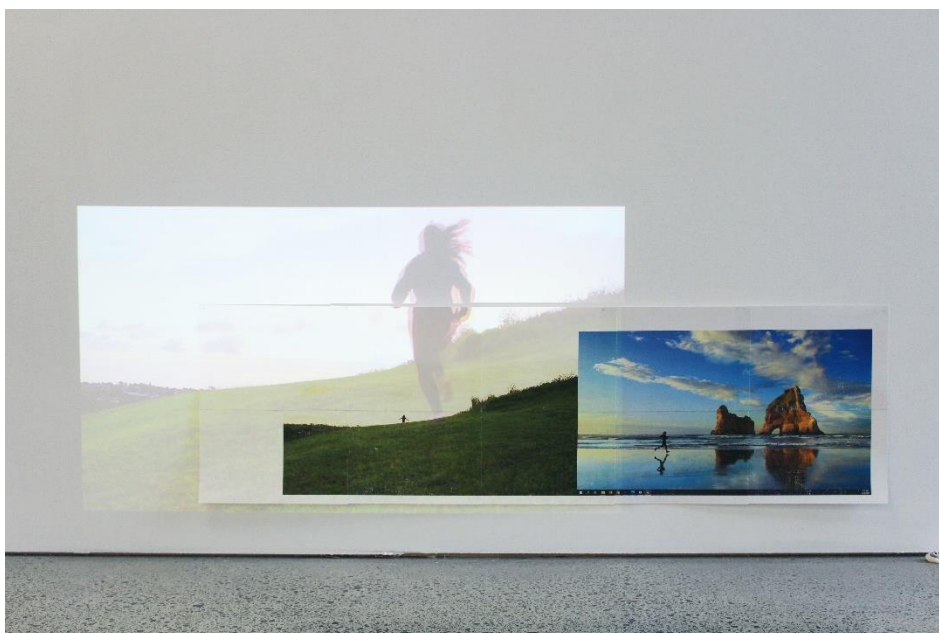
Installation details, 2021



Installation details, June 2021



Installation detail, 2021 (sunset view)



Installation view of *Happy ever after*, 2021



Installation details:

Installation view of *Lucy builds the lamp*,
2021 (above)

Confetti, June 2021 (right)





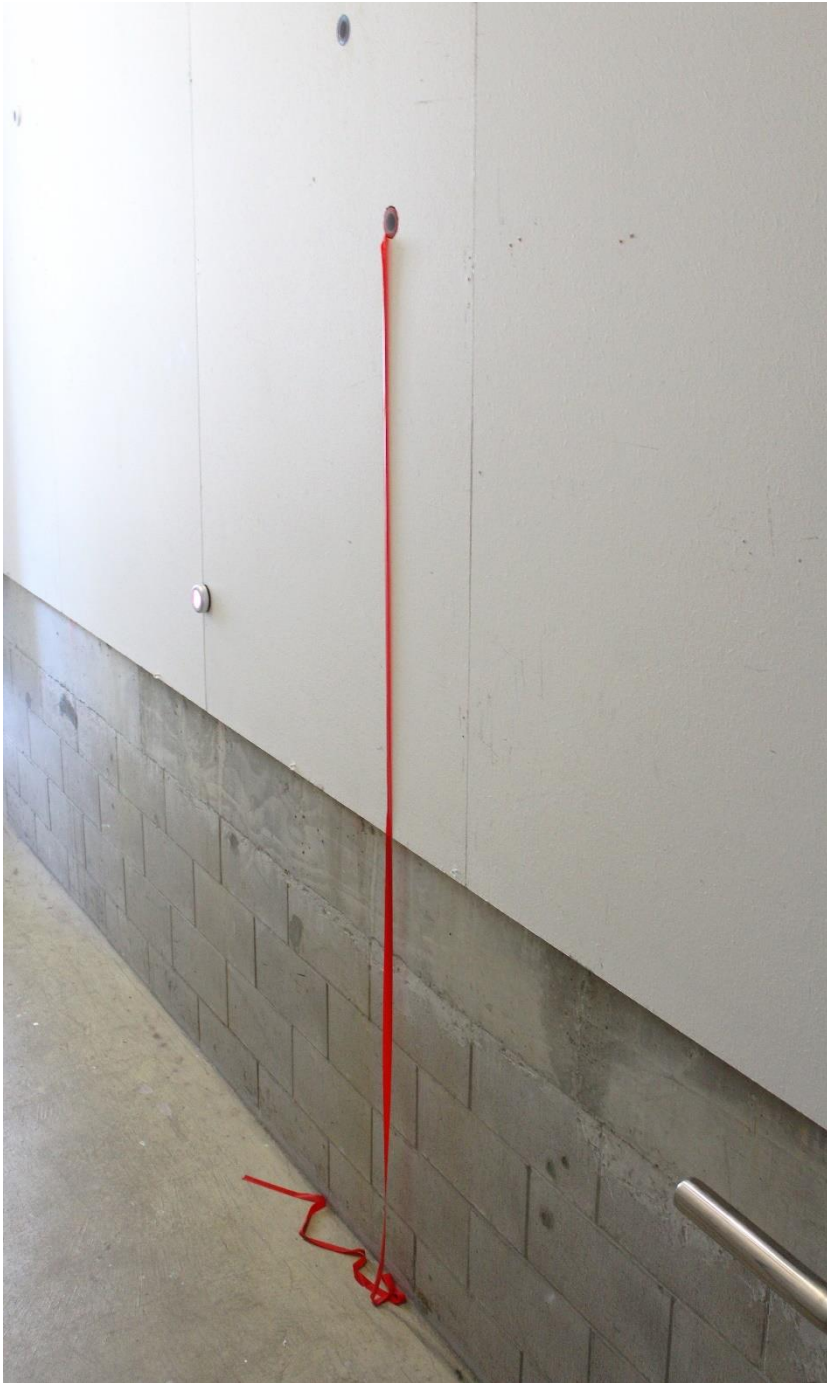
Confetti detail, June 2021



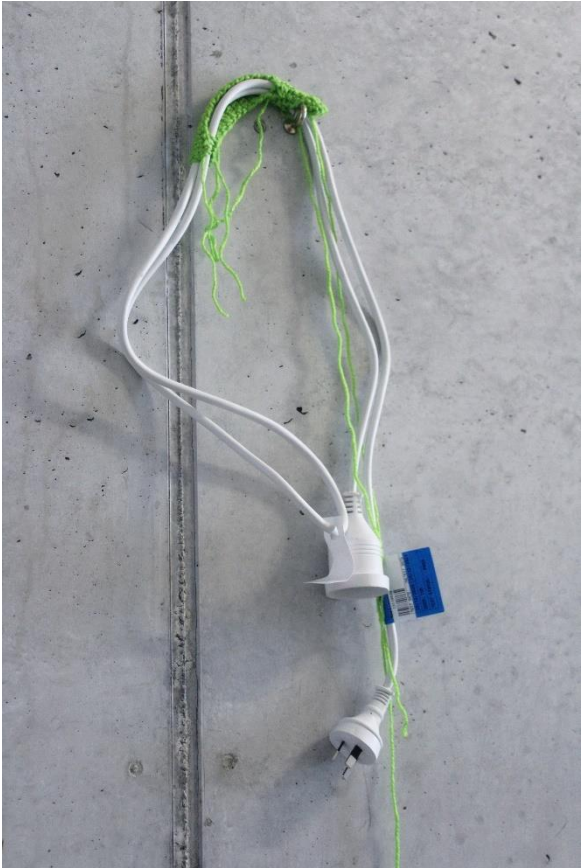
Installation view of *Party parasol and Confetti*, 2021



Installation detail, June 2021



Installation view of *Firefly* and *The red string of fate*, 2021



Installation detail, June 2021

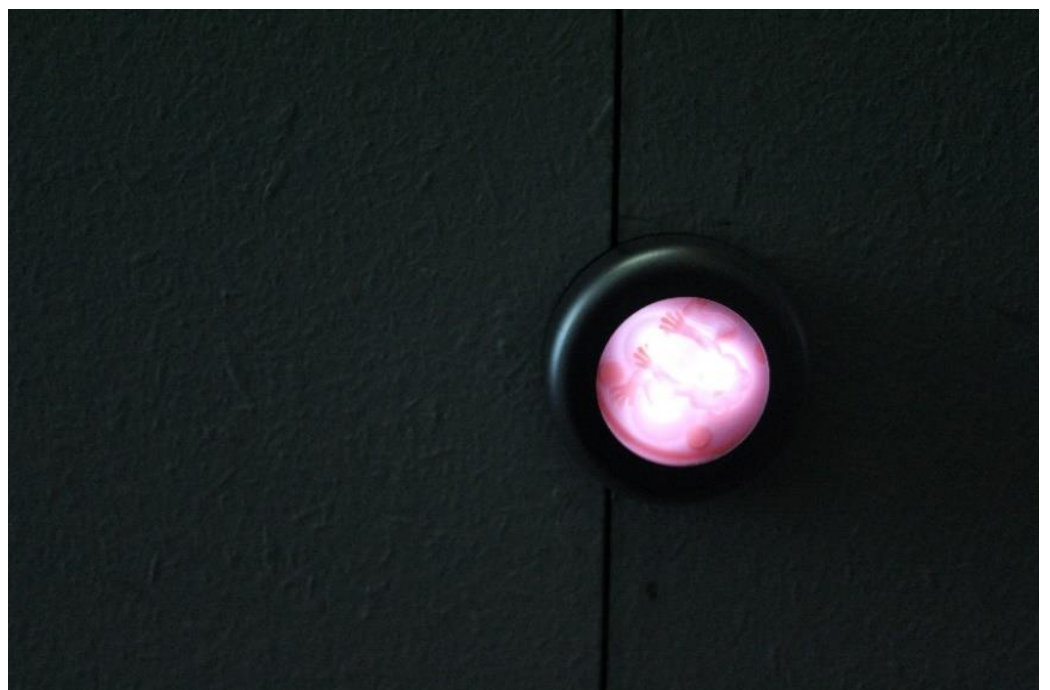


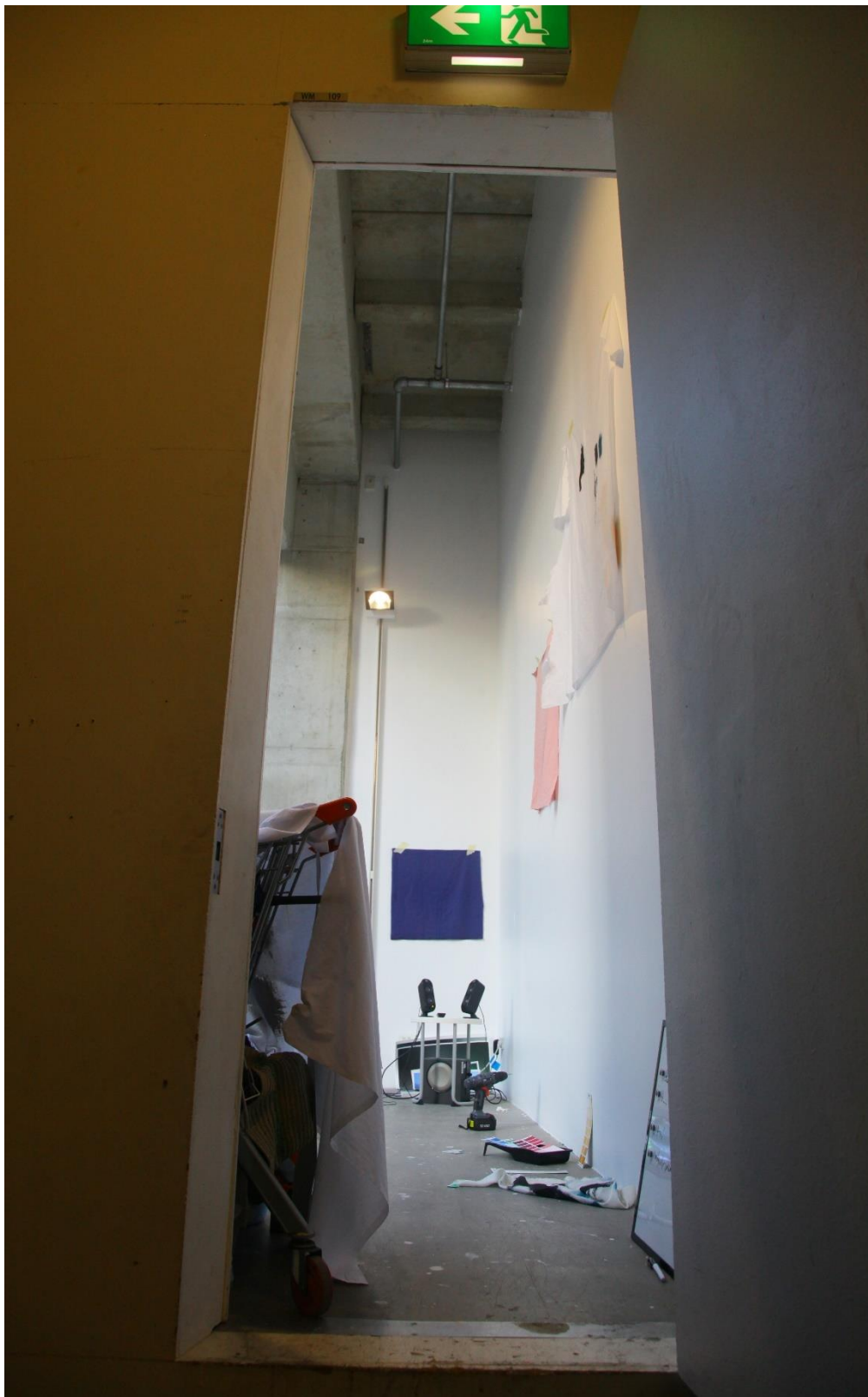
Installation details:

Filler earth, June 2021 (above left)

Void filler, June 2021 (above right)

Firefly, June 2021 (right)





Installation view of window, 2021 (night view)



Installation view of window, 2021 (day view)



Installation detail, 2021 (night view)



Installation view of *Minted hat and 5 minute crafts*, 2021



Installation view of *All the Things I Did Instead of Make Art*, 2021



Installation view, June 2021