

The late magician and comedian [Tommy Cooper](#) made a lifelong virtue out of failure. Discovering early on in his career that his magic tricks delighted audiences even when they went wrong, this manic Welshman turned his immensely popular stage performances into a feast of failed conjuring. By supplementing this purposeful bumbling with the occasional failure-free trick, he also maintained the element of surprise.

For the rest of us, however, the idea of failure seems to be straightforward enough: mistakes, both large and small, are something to be avoided; the opposite of success; the currency of losers. They're expected of the young as a necessary part of learning, of course, but increasingly less tolerated with the maturity that supposedly grants us enough experience and accumulated wisdom to succeed in life more or less flawlessly. This in spite of the fact that creative luminaries such as [Charles Rennie Mackintosh](#) ("There is hope in honest error; none in the icy perfections of the mere stylist") and [Samuel Beckett](#) ("Try again. Fail again. Fail better.") continually remind us that we should perhaps openly embrace failure rather than assiduously avoiding it.

So, what of productive failure with respect to graphic design and typography? The idea of failing again and again for a reason? Does it somehow help to define the limits of professional practice, as in: "If you're making mistakes it's because you're not a professional and you don't know how to use the tools of design properly?" Is it tolerable or even necessary in terms of process? Perhaps the overriding factor is scale: small failures, however numerous, might be taken in stride, but if the failure is big enough, it's a bone fide disaster (think [Florida ballot](#), or [Tacoma Narrows Bridge](#)). Then again, the movie [Apollo 13](#), about an abortive moonshot, confounds this notion, as a life-threatening failure of engineering is recast as a triumph of scientific and technical ingenuity in the face of terrible adversity.

After taking a little time to reflect on these ideas, and in talking to creative types about what it might mean to Fail Again (which is, not coincidentally, the theme of this year's [DesignInquiry](#)), I heard some interesting things, and invite Design Observer's readers to add to, or challenge, these ruminations — or perhaps even to confess to failures I'd never even imagined. (And all due credit to those I've already spoken to: trust designers to be humble enough to be willing to talk about failure.) That's not to say that there aren't design failures we would prefer no one knew about, like the award-winning calendar I have on my wall: right there between the 28th and 30th September is the 39th. (True to form, though, it was actually one of the calendar's designers who tipped me off.)

### **Failing Again: A Routine and Necessary Part of Creative Practice**

From our earliest days in school many of us are encouraged to court failure; to learn by our mistakes. [Nancy Skolos](#) remembers that one of her teachers used to say, "A good failure is worth a lot of mediocre successes." To varying degrees, we carry this sensibility through into professional practice. For example, [Jonathan Hoefler](#) says, "Increasingly I think about the work that I do not so much as a directed effort, but as

the ability to recognize accidents and interpret them productively. Even failures have their place, since without them there's no progress: anything that's truly 'experimental' has to run the risk of failure." Hoefler describes these moments as "happy accidents:" "Several times a day, some misstep on the computer produces an unexpected result, and sometimes these results are fetching, intriguing, even provocative." Hoefler — like Skolos and her partner Thomas Wedell — hangs onto his 'failures' for potential use in future projects.

Deb Littlejohn recounts two particular instances of techno-serendipity: one in which the clutter of discarded bits and pieces at the edge of the computer screen ended up looking dramatically better than the artfully arranged stuff on the poster she was designing in the centre of the screen. The second story involves creating a poster for the Walker Art Center: faced with a sudden Photoshop malfunction ("the screen completely freaked out and totally garbled the image – totally redrew the pixels in the wrong order") Littlejohn had the foresight to do a quick screengrab; the resulting image was not only "really beautiful," it actually suited the poster's theme to a tee.

[Paula Scher](#) goes further still, locating a fear of failure at the core of her design practice: "I've spent my whole career overcoming my failures....My tendency to aggressively fill up spaces comes from an inability to be succinct, reductive, or simply to know when to stop. I tend to overdo everything because I am always very self-conscious about what I have made and I want to hide it by covering it up with more stuff. I've learned that if I keep on going with it to the point of obsessive ridiculousness, it starts to get good." (Here she makes specific reference to her justly celebrated Noise/Funk posters for [The Public Theater](#), her design for the exterior of the [New Jersey Performing Art Center School](#), and her [map paintings](#).)

While [Stefan Sagmeister](#) is more circumspect about the productive role of failure, his anecdote about one such moment is hilarious. A few years back he commissioned Ken Miki to design a six-page spread featuring one of his [maxims](#) (in this case "Money does not make me happy"). When the piece finally appeared in a technology/art/design magazine called *.copy* it became painfully evident, if only to Sagmeister, that a rather unhappy accident had occurred during repro and printing. The legend now read: "Money Does Does Make Me Happy." As he notes dryly, "Next month the magazine ran a tiny correction: Stefan Sagmeister now thinks money does not make him happy after all." This abject failure — not a failure to communicate so much as a 180-degree reversal of meaning — actually provided the inspiration for his design of an installation on the exterior of a huge Austrian casino: the main façade reads "MONEY:" only by passing down a side street can one see the rest of the maxim.

### **Failing Again: A Key Feature of "Obscene" Amateur Practice**

Historian [Philip Meggs](#) once described desktop publishing as the arrival of nothing less than the "obscene typography machine". More recently, [Ellen Lupton's Design It Yourself](#) initiative has been interpreted by some designers as a dangerous form of

popularization that can only be damaging to our hard-won professional status. While, sadly, anyone with a pulse can call themselves a graphic designer (and indeed in the UK anyone can call themselves an engineer, as in "plumbing engineer"), an alternative view is that these kinds of developments are not as cataclysmic as they might at first seem. Where some see only "obscene" typography and design, others sense the development of a vibrant vernacular (which is precisely what architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown suggested we [learn from Las Vegas](#) in the 1970s).

What might this mean for typography and design, right now? Do we just continue to "borrow" from vernacular forms (think of delightful typefaces such as [Gotham](#) and [Los Feliz](#)) thereby converting them into "proper" design tools, or can we more fully embrace popular "mistakes?" This may depend on whether we see typography only as a rightly cloistered, esoteric activity, a treasured possession; or, alternatively, as one which is an increasingly ubiquitous tool, alive to the legions of curious non-designers who showed up to see [Helvetica](#), for example, or have, at the very least, discovered the font files lurking on their computers. Perhaps typography should be treated like language itself, obeying an implicit set of rules, of course, but developing organically (a point lexicographers have understood for centuries, as Simon Winchester points out in his book [The Professor and the Madman](#)). Put more bluntly, perhaps we should heed the words of the [Critical Art Ensemble](#) when they warn that "dismissing the amateur out of hand can have a detrimental impact on the practical aspects of applying a specialization....New versions of expertise must be constructed."

### **Failing Again: Not an Option?**

It seems clear that failure is far more complex than it might at first appear, in terms of "routine" creative process, for sure, but especially as it relates to the fraught boundaries between professional practice and amateurism. Perhaps an expanded discussion among typographers and designers will serve to highlight some of these dynamics. In the meantime, the final word belongs to DesignInquiry regular Nancy Skolos. Remembering her design for a chair that was striking in its appearance but very uncomfortable, she says, "If you really want to fail, it helps to cross borders into other disciplines."

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