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**Judith Jack Halberstam. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 224 pp. Paperback.**  
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Why would anyone devote their time to a project on failure? Judith Halberstam has willfully taken the risk of not being taken seriously. Her new book is dedicated to ‘all of history’s losers’ – it brushes the dust from the forgotten archives of those who seemingly do not write history. Yet the aim of this truly inspiring and thought-provoking publication is not to rescue any alternative visions or forms of knowledge from the bottomless pit of oblivion. *The Queer Art of Failure* celebrates forgetfulness, spectacular failure and outlawed absurdity. In this sense it is rather an anti-archive manifesto that looks for a political alternative in ‘low theory’ and what she calls ‘silly archives’ (Halberstam 2011, 19). In a witty style, Halberstam dismantles the overwhelming logic of success that is inevitably linked to the capitalist mode of production and heteronormative hegemony. Instead of guiding this journey with a pantheon

of dead white philosophers, she provocatively quotes SpongeBob SquarePants and The Sex Pistols. From the animated revolt of cartoon characters, through stupid comedies for adolescent males and Valerie Solanas’ anti-male manifesto, to Yoko Ono and queer artists who strive to capture unbecoming, *The Queer Art of Failure* strikes with anti-heroines and anti-heroes making a detour from the conventional, academic, proper mode of writing theory. Halberstam avoids fetishizing or glorifying the queer rebellion, resistance and counterhegemony. Although some of the chapters of the book were available before in other edited volumes such as *Queering the Non/human* (Giffney and Hird 2008) or in articles (Halberstam 2008), the framework of failure as a new iteration of the anti-social turn in queer theory proposed by Halberstam forms a very coherent and powerful structure. In each chapter

she boldly outlines queer theory's relation towards cultural phenomena that can be easily dismissed as unacademic, childish, insignificant or even as racist and homophobic (e.g. the movie *Dude, Where's my Car?*)

In a neoliberal system that rests upon the idea that every individual is an architect of his or her own fortune, behind every winner, there is a crowd of losers. From the introduction onwards Halberstam argues that it is exactly this pressure to be successful along with the desire to be taken seriously that makes people stay on well-trodden paths, instead of exploring unknown territories of alternative knowledges and queer strategies of unknowing. She even writes that 'failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well' (Halberstam 2011, 3). This statement raises some questions: Why would queers serve as scapegoats? Can somebody excel at failing and should we then treat it as a form of success? For Sara Ahmed, to queer something is to disturb the order of things (Ahmed 2006, 161). According to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner the 'queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projecting horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies' (Berlant and Warner 2005, 198). In this sense failure and the disturbance of heteronormative teleologies are always inscribed in

queerness. In *The Queer Art of Failure* Halberstam goes even further and questions the normativity of the humanness for the purpose of arguing for failure as a truly queer way of life.

The first chapter introduces a lively menagerie of both animated and blood-and-flesh species that in Halberstam's analysis gracefully transcend the hetero-familial schemes of reproductive and productive imperatives. With creatures like a Hegelian possum from the animated movie *Over the Hedge*, 'feminist' chickens from *Chicken Run* and 'gay' penguins from the New York Zoo, Halberstam vividly and convincingly shows that larger-than-human worlds are not only a valuable source of critiques of capitalism, of the heteronormative order and of kinship structures, but that they also offer alternative scenarios of an anarcho-queer revolt. It might seem counterintuitive or even dangerous to engage in an argument that links animals and queerness. Greta Gaard in her article 'Toward a Queer Ecofeminism' warns that 'queers are feminized, animalized, eroticized, and naturalized in a culture that devalues women, animals, and sexuality' (Gaard 1997, 119). However, Halberstam explores this connection amidst its negative connotations in order to un-think modernist rigid taxidermic taxonomies and to re-think queer embodiment and social relations. Drawing on the work of Donna Haraway she

invests in monstrous cyborg unities, and in this way manages to add 'queer' to the Marxist dictionary (Haraway 1996). In the children's animation *Chicken Run* Halberstam traces Gramscian structures of counterhegemony and Hardt's and Negri's praise of collectivity and technologically enhanced multitude (Hardt and Negri 2005). Paradoxically the rebellious feminist potential of this animation has already been acknowledged and taken very seriously by the Iranian political regime – the documentary *Traces of Zionism in World Cinema* from 2008 focuses on *Chicken Run* as a western tool for smuggling revolutionary propaganda (IRINN TV). Indeed, Halberstam would probably agree that what she calls the 'Pixarvolt' genre in kids films is a highly political enterprise, which by privileging collective cooperation over selfish individualism, diverse communities over untrammelled consumption and social bonding over family kinships, poses a threat to both authoritarian and neoliberal political regimes. Her analysis makes important connections between the elements of the animation/animality/animism triad. This allows us to imagine what transcending borders between the human and the nonhuman, reality and imagination, life and non-life, objects and subjects, might look like.

In the second chapter Halberstam continues to build the framework of failure as a way of life. This time she turns to stupidity and

forgetfulness as queer strategies that help to reveal false narratives of heteronormative continuity and succession. By using the counter-example of loopy idiocy in *Dude, Where's My Car?* Halberstam paints a startlingly accurate analysis of the messy relationships between amnesia, stupidity, masculinity, whiteness and temporality. Later she points out that stupidity and forgetfulness are deeply gendered ways of knowing. While 'Dudes' exemplifies male stupidity, an amnesiac fish named Dory from *Finding Nemo* represents a female model of queer time, knowledge, kinship and cooperation.

In chapter three Halberstam eloquently challenges queer theory's rejection of the child figure, criticized as the embodiment of 'reproductive futurism' (Edelman 2004), by recognizing childhood and childishness as queer experiences. Leaving the Darwinian motto of winners aside, she focuses on the 'not close enough' losers of the Olympics photographed by Tracy Moffat, the punk junkies from *Trainspotting*, George Brassai's social outcasts in 1930s Paris, and a butch lesbian from *The L Word*. The failure of this last character, according to Halberstam, legitimizes the fabulous lesbian figure of this popular TV series that successfully attracts a heteronormative gaze. She writes: '[d]yke anger, anticolonial despair, racial rage, counterhegemonic violence, punk pugilism—these are the bleak and angry territories of the antisocial

turn; these are the jagged zones within which not only self-shattering (the opposite of narcissism in a way) but other-shattering occurs' (Halberstam 2011, 110). Later in chapter four she proposes that radical passivity and masochism can form strategies for envisioning difference in lesbian femininity. Refashioning victimhood that is beloved by liberal feminism (which is still invested in generational logic of passing down knowledge), Halberstam stands for 'shadow feminisms' that through apparent passivity and negation resist the unchoosable choices posed by the capitalist imperative of striving for happy endings (Halberstam 2011, 4).

In arguing for what she calls 'pirate cultures' Halberstam acknowledges that pirates can actually be bloodthirsty bandits (Halberstam 2011, 18). It becomes clear in chapter five where by uncovering dark histories of the Nazi past she explores the troubling relationship between homosexuality and fascism. This part of queer history is unwanted and unwelcome by the 'pink triangle activism', because it does not neatly fit into the narratives of the persecution of gay people under the Nazi regime. For Halberstam it's a pretext to raise questions about the erotics of history and ethics of complicity. In the last chapter she comes back to the animated worlds of posthuman creatures that often (but not always) offer a promise of 'antihumanist, antinormative,

multigendered, and full of wild forms of sociality' (Halberstam 2011, 181) other-worldly becomings.

I think that *The Queer Art of Failure* is an immensely valuable resource not only for those new to queer theory, but also for students and scholars who are more invested in the field. I was pleased to discover that Halberstam has managed to create an alternative queer archive that is composed of artists, outcasts, cartoon characters, and punks. However, her insightful critique of the gay male archive (preferred by queer theorists like Edelman and Bersani) as being completely western- and male-centric, although present in her previous article (Halberstam 2008, 152), was unfortunately not included in this book. Nevertheless, *The Queer Art of Failure* is a path-breaking radical project which, thanks to the engaging and lucid writing style, is an accessible read. Halberstam has chosen a truly queer approach that does not follow a straight path; it takes unexpected detours, but at the same time does not shy away from troublesome and complicated memories of queer pasts and doesn't try to please readers with a big bang fairy-tale moral in the end. Instead we are left with a deeply political, anti-capitalist, fleshy project that posits queerness within the framework of the wacky, hopelessly absurd art of failing spectacularly.

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