

# ***IMPRECISION:***

**the aesthetics of failure**

**CLAIRE ZAKIEWICZ**

**May 10 - 30th**

**ART13160**



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Salizzada Malipiero

San Marco,

3209/A - 3160

Venice, Italy

IMPRECISION: The Aesthetics of Failure  
Off-Site project, 58th Venice Biennale

ARTI3160 is pleased to present a solo exhibition IMPRECISION: The Aesthetics of Failure featuring new works by Claire Zakiewicz, with performances and workshops scheduled throughout the exhibition.

IMPRECISION: The Aesthetics of Failure examines the tensions between failure and perfection: the techniques, limitations and the implications. "In my drawings, I've noticed that aiming for something ugly can produce beauty. Failure creates new pathways; it disrupts prescribed patterns," says Zakiewicz. "Drawing blindfolded with one's attention on something other than the drawing, almost, always produces a quality of line, unity and balance of shapes – even – or more prominently, as control moves further away."

Zakiewicz asks: What is failure? How does failure relate to imperfection? We often think of failure as the opposite of success, however, in many ways, failure can be associated with eliminating expectation or a state of not "consciously" aiming for pure perfection. Embracing "failure" per se can often lead to a more balanced symmetry. So, is failure the resolution?

The exhibition will feature a new body of large-scale breath and observational drawings that translate the topography and architectural structures – line, form and symmetry, found in the distinct cities of New York, Venice and London, which are places the artist has been working between. Often influenced by the sounds and gestures found in each city, each line represents a fluctuation in rhythm and density, becoming a geographical typography that visualizes both kinesthetic and sonic movement. Zakiewicz examines the complexities and differences between drawing from direct observation, memory, the imagination and from a prescribed pattern.

"I layered each composition responding to various sounds, notations, and other drawing methods relating to duration. The durational aspect of each drawing is created by the connection between the brush stroke and the attention to breath," says Zakiewicz.



Claire Zakiewicz is a British multi-media artist working in New York and London. Recently named one of New York's "Top Ten Artists Working Today" by Art511 magazine, Zakiewicz's practice examines the physical and metaphorical relationships between sound and drawing. It is a scientific and philosophical practice-based enquiry - thinking through making. Her animated films have been shown at Tate Tanks and Tate Modern (London) in the exhibitions Tweet Me Up, 2012 and Label, 2012. Zakiewicz has exhibited regularly throughout the UK, USA, Italy and Norway and has produced and performed in numerous productions and international institutions including Resonance FM (UK); ARTI3160 (Venice, Italy); USF (Norway); Bill Young's Dance Studio (NYC); Mothership NYC; Last Frontier NYC and Itinerant Performance Arts Festival (NYC).

Zakiewicz studied Fine Art at Chelsea College of Art, London and Cambridge College of Art, prior to completing a research-based MFA at Sir John Cass School of Art, London. Her research predominantly examines how the body experiences the world and how we conceptualize and perceive objects, frames, repetition and embodied patterns.

For a list of works and programming schedule please contact [info@clairezakiewicz.com](mailto:info@clairezakiewicz.com)

Images: *Grow*, 2018, gouache on paper, 9.5" x 9.5" (24 x 24cm); *October Pulse*, 2018, gouache on paper, 9.5" x 9.5" (24 x 24cm)



## Schedule of Events:

### Preview and Performance

Friday May 10

1:30 - 2:30pm

Dannie-Lu Carr and Claire Zakiewicz

### Opening Reception and Performance

Saturday May 11

6:30 - 9:00pm

Claire Zakiewicz

### Japanese Calligraphy Workshop

Sunday May 12

9am - 4pm

Anita Cerpelloni and Claire Zakiewicz

RSVP [info@clairezakiewicz.com](mailto:info@clairezakiewicz.com)

### Performance

Wednesday May 15

7:00 - 8:00pm

Paul Morgan and Claire Zakiewicz

### Experimental Printing Workshop

Sunday May 12

10am - 4pm

Anita Cerpelloni and Claire Zakiewicz

RSVP [info@clairezakiewicz.com](mailto:info@clairezakiewicz.com)

### Book Binding Workshop

Sunday May 26

10am - 4pm

Anita Cerpelloni and Claire Zakiewicz

RSVP [info@clairezakiewicz.com](mailto:info@clairezakiewicz.com)

### Finassage and Performance

Thursday May 30

6:30 - 9:00pm

Hector Canonge and Claire Zakiewicz

## Imprecision: The Aesthetics of Failure

Claire Zakiewicz, April 2, 2019



In a room where other artists are focused on the body, Claire stands behind her DJ table, creating music for the purpose of moving her proxy painter, Siw, whose operatic voice echoes through the building. Siw holds small black charcoal bars that match her blindfold. She makes black skyscraper marks on the white paper and screeches in tongues. She holds charcoal between her toes, as if to free herself as much as possible from conscious control. Claire then alters the music, speeding it up to a scream. When this chaos clears there are voices in the noise, reading poetry by Danni-Lu Carr "Salty salty salty/ salty wounds to heal/ crashing waves/ salty air cleansing the demons from my mind/ salt in the soul." Siw's mouth has become black from charcoal. Some of her wild gestures mark the paper -- others do not. Now she is on all fours making animal noises. Now she is pointing at nothing and speaking in tongues. Siw is singing over a Steve Reich sample. Siw is manipulating invisible marionettes. Siw is Claire's marionette. She removes her blindfold and reenters the world. They bow. The crowd applauds.

Lenna Pierce, ["Dispatch: Art out of the World,"](<http://hypocritereader.com/88/art-out-of-the-world>) *Hypocrite Reader*\* Issue 88

The quote above is a description of one of my performances where I collaborate with actor Siw Laurent and poet Dannie-Lu Carr for the Itinerant Performing Arts Festival, New York, 2018.

My research is predominantly focused on exploring relationships between sound and drawing. Some of these relationships are more physical, while others more conceptual. Drawing sound is an act of performance. In this essay I discuss the fundamental components of the act of improvisational drawing -- particularly the tension between failure and resolution, and the balance between control and surrender -- and suggest how my experience both draws and sheds light on the cognitive processes that underlie our emotional relationship with art.



Studio View, New York, 2016, Claire Zakiewicz performing drawing, photo: Isaac Rosenthal

## **## Vitality Forms**

Drawing on paper is an act of movement; my drawings materialize movements.

Gestures are shaped by conceptual metaphors, which present an abstract domain. For example, Jackson Pollock's drip paintings were described as a "gesture of liberation from value – political, aesthetic, moral." (Rosenberg, *The American Action Painters*, 1952). Philosopher Mark Johnson, in his book *Metaphors We Live By* argues that "meaning, in the proper sense goes far beyond conceptual and propositional content".

Gestures can be spontaneous, intuitive, performative, temporal, cohering out of the body, vitality, noise, and objects whose presence and significance extend across multiple modes of perception.

Improvised gestural forms have a visible sense of spontaneity, symmetry and flow, and look very different from composed and perfected ones. When practicing improvised gestures in drawing I recognize Cezanne description of his process:

There mustn't be a single link too loose, not a crevice through which may escape the emotion, the light, the truth. I advance, you understand, all of my canvas at one time-together. I bring together in the same spirit, the same faith, all that is scattered... without my thinking about it. They take on volume. They acquire value.<sup>1</sup>

Although drawing is generally a solitary practice, my own approach is often collaborative. My ensemble *\*Assembly\** consists of artists from multiple disciplines -- including musicians, visual artists, poets, and dancers -- who focus primarily on concepts of improvisation. Communication between modes of perception is the main focus.

Last year I crafted characters such as a submissive, blindfolded draftsman who responds intuitively to touch or sound through gestural mark-making. In one performance, I moved further away from the source of control by becoming a paintbrush as I was moved like a tool by a composer/choreographer through improvised dance. During another performance, I created a drawing by manipulating the movements of an actor who drew in response to my own improvised soundscape. Their role was to instinctively respond to the sounds from moment to moment within a prescribed set of limitations.



*Summer Salon at The Mothership, New York, 2018, Mariana Alviárez and Claire Zakiewicz performing drawing*

While documenting and reflecting on these live drawing experiments, strange patterns became apparent. On one occasion, I drew without sight for one hour onto a 25' roll of paper with the Brooklyn-based singer/cellist Meaner Pencil. My focus was on her music, which I responded to via automatic drawing. I soon lost track of my location in the room, but the resulting image was impossibly balanced. Another video records my body returning to the "correct" patches of colour when a collaborator passed pots of paint as I worked blindfolded for hours with my attention fixed on the sounds within the room.

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<sup>1</sup> Joachim Gasquet quoting Cezanne in Earl Loran, op.cit.p.15

The prominent psychoanalytic psychiatrist and theorist Daniel Stern proposed the term “vitality affect contours” which describe how improvised forms emerge from rushes of feeling and shifting patterns of feeling within us. This concept suggests how music causes us to move and attune to others across modalities, beyond the confines of language, and demonstrates how sound can be interpreted through image, word, and dance.

Dynamic shifts make up our first experience of the world as infants. This flow of feeling is a navigation through the moving forms that are connected to the vital processes of the body, such as breathing, sleeping, and the waxing and waning of emotions. Stern claims that in any musical work, the structures are analogous to felt patterns within our bodies.

Our appreciation of the arts becomes more sophisticated as we develop throughout our lives, yet these patterns of feeling remain a major role in our experience of art. The process of attunement explains the communicative aspect of this emotional experience.

Stern’s theory is that properties of attunement include motion, number, intensity, timing, and shape, and their characteristics can be perceived across modalities, and evoke a reciprocal reaction between an infant and a caregiver, or two dancers, or between a draftsman and their object of focus. These properties are abstracted and translated into other modalities of perception. For instance, if an infant’s expression is vocal, a carer’s attunement could be gestural or facial, and vice versa. Similarly, a rhythm such as “long-short” (\_\_\_\_\_) can be delivered in or abstracted from sight, hearing, smell, touch, or taste.

While infants have a non-conceptual, pre-linguistic, physical experience of sound and drawing, adults are fundamentally shaped by conceptual metaphors. Philosopher Mark Johnson has used Stern’s work to explore how the flow of meaning in music is grounded in our bodily experience. In Johnson’s book *The Meaning of the Body* (2007), he analyses how the structure of music can convey striving to reach a goal through a sense of inner drama, tension, energy, and resolution. This is achieved by sonic structures: pitch intervals, rhythmic changes, and variations of intensity.

My own drawing practice entails a constant emotional navigation through anticipation, tension, struggle, striving, surrender, submission, resolution, abandonment, and so on. The transition I find the most interesting and rewarding is between struggle and resolution -- using mistakes as material, exploring the balance between the unfinished and ambiguous. Failure, disruption, intentionality, control, chance happenings, chaos, entropy, emergence, and degrees of letting go are important elements in the flow of time. Failure creates new pathways; it disrupts prescribed patterns.

## **## The Tension Between Failure and Resolution**

We often think of failure as the opposite of success, but it can also be: a neglect of expectation or a state of not functioning, not completing, not fulfilling dreams, not caring, not keeping going, rejection, rubbish.

How does failure relate to resolution? Is failure a resolution? A lack of resolution? Does it preclude resolution, or does resolution preclude failure?

Traditionally, the public doesn’t see creative failure, but failure is an important part of my studio practice. Improvisation in drawing embraces the aesthetics of failure, the unfinished and uncontrolled -- the accidental and the incidental. Improvisation involves letting go, acting intuitively, allowing for and perhaps embracing disruptions and mistakes, taking risks, and a good performance involves moving past one’s identity and persona -- being willing to look bad, to fail, and to lose control. Musicians and painters sometimes speak of entering a trance-like state where they feel as if somebody or something else is controlling their performance and they take the willingness and courage to give up control.

As the process of drawing has increasingly become the subject of my practice, my focus has become directed on the tension between failure and perfection. British philosopher Andy Hamilton noted that the original meaning of the word “imperfect” is unfinished. In his essay “The Aesthetics of Imperfection,” he states that there are three overlapping perfectionist

tendencies in contemporary art: "(i) assimilation of visual arts to performance; (ii) stress on process or making; and (iii) valuing of the unfinished work."

The ascent of digitalism and conceptualism has fostered a cultural attitude that privileges ideas themselves over their ultimate realization. A growing focus on "process in art" raises the fundamental question of when (or whether) we consider an artwork to be finished. There is a growing view that producing highly finished art products implies an investment in sales, prestige, consumerism, and conservatism, which focuses on the endpoint, with a concomitant absence of continued inquiry. However, in addition to this theoretical problem with artistic completion, it has also been a trap for the perfectionist in me who struggles with knowing when a work is finished. The most striking moments in my practice are when I experience resolution -- an essential aspect of duration -- often coming out of a period of tension, disruption, failure, and assertion.



Collaborative Control, New York, 2016, still image from film with Anna Chirescu, Pierre Guilbault, Claire Zakiewicz and Lenna Pierce

What does it mean to resolve a failed drawing? Formulae such as the rule of thirds or graphic design knowledge can help a drawing to have symmetry or balance, but I prefer resolving a drawing that lacks visual symmetry in an unexpected way. Rather than planning out the shapes and motifs in my drawings, I devise strategies to control or restrict movement, such as drawing downward strokes with my attention on my breath, setting a tempo for the movement and following the shape of the page. When working from observation, I draw what is immediately around me -- objects in my studio, friends, self-portraits, outdoor scenes. I don't think much about it. I develop strategies to deal with disruptions and distractions. To cease control and offer myself to a spontaneous improvisation, I sometimes make use of accidental marks: I might lay a canvas or paper on the floor while working on another piece on the wall. The floor work catches particles of pigment, creating dust or an accidental drawing. Sometimes I apply paint to a dancer's feet, asking them to focus particularly on the movements of their upper body so that the mark making doesn't have an "intentional" feel.

When I feel that a drawing is resolved, it is sometimes comparable to the feeling of resolution in music after a period of tension, such as when a DJ finally drops the baseline the dancers have subconsciously been waiting for. However, unlike the experience of music, resolution in

visual art is often less physical and more difficult to recognize. This is one of the reasons why I edit and analyze separately from the drawing process. It often seems that the harder I try in drawing, the less compelling a work becomes: as Giacometti said, "The more one works on a picture, the more impossible it becomes to finish it."<sup>2</sup>

I often produce drawings in response to musical recordings, which provide a set duration as well as a structured pattern that I can repeatedly listen to. One piece of music that for me exemplifies dramatic periods of tension and resolution is Steve Reich's 1983 piece *The Desert Music*. The title and texts sung by the choir come from William Carlos Williams's book of collected poems by the same name that give an impression of the fundamental principles of music: repetition, pace, tension and resolution.

"it is a principle of music  
to repeat the theme. Repeat  
and repeat again,  
as the pace mounts. The  
theme is difficult  
but no more difficult  
than the facts to be  
resolved."

My piece *Tip Tap Night Diptych* is composed of 'automatic drawings' produced in response to *The Desert Music*, which is approximately 48 minutes in duration. I worked in continuous motion, blindfolded, without stopping to look between drawings. I selected the colors from a box of pastels while blindfolded, and I changed colors on impulse. The size of the paper was measured to fit my entire body with my arms stretched out in all directions. To put my attention fully on the sound and allow my movements to be spontaneous and impulsive, I used my Meisner acting training. (I have been studying Meisner Technique since 2011, when, during a live-drawing rehearsal with musicians, a collaborator asked whether I could move in a more animal-like way, and I realized I didn't know how to begin influencing the character of my own gestures while maintaining the level of conviction I felt was necessary.) The drawings were finished when the music stopped. The perfect drawing involves the draftsman losing track of time and space. Sanford Meisner told actors not to think and not to create but, rather, respond impulsively, so in a sense the drawing fails if I struggle to surrender my thoughts and efforts to take control of the drawing.<sup>3</sup> This is one reason why I like to draw with a blindfold when drawing music – so I can listen more closely.

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<sup>2</sup> Alberto Giacometti in: James Lord (1965), *Giacometti Portrait*, p. 11-12; as cited in: James Olney (1998), *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*. p. 331

<sup>3</sup> D. Longwell and S. Meisner (1987) *Sanford Meisner on Acting*



*Tip Tap Night Diptych* parts 1 & 2, 2014, ink and pastel on Arches paper, 51" x 80" (130 x 203cm), Claire Zakiewicz.

The gestures involved in this technique have a similar quality of line to the traditional Japanese “*ensō*,” a circular ink drawing, symbolizing enlightenment and the universe. Zen practitioners relate the idea of the *ensō* to the aesthetics of imperfection, or *wabi-sabi*.<sup>4</sup>

In his book *The Craftsman*, sociologist Richard Sennett talks of the advice from Zen masters “don’t try to hit the target.”<sup>5</sup> Sennett explains that improvisation is a craft that draws on the “metamorphoses of type-form over time... As in jazz, other forms of improvisation involve skills that can be developed and improved... as they become more selective about the elements they choose to vary.”<sup>6</sup> Related to this development, Sennett writes,

Every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking; this dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and these habits establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding.... There is nothing inevitable about becoming skilled, just as there is nothing mindlessly mechanical about technique itself.<sup>7</sup>

To control is to compose, plan, set standards, organize, edit, direct, perfect, correct -- to influence a behavior or course of events. The more one practices, the easier it becomes to let go. Improvisation in drawing is related to the aesthetics of imperfection, the unfinished and uncontrolled -- the accidental and the incidental.

In my drawings it is clear that improvised gestures have a greater sense of unity and flow than those made with conscious thought. I have also noticed how deliberately aiming for something ugly can produce beauty; drawing blindfolded or with one’s attention on something other than the drawing almost always produces a balanced quality of line and symmetry, even -- or especially -- on a large scale for a prolonged period as control slips further away.

In Meisner classes that I have taken it has become clear that allowing ways of being that I naturally prefer to hide -- weakness, nervousness, wobbliness -- can be the ingredients for the most compelling performances. Psychoanalyst Thomas Moore has written about the need to “carry the fool” as an essential ingredient in the creative process.<sup>8</sup> With that in mind, some of my methods with collaborators include exercises such as swapping roles. I might take a singer’s role, and the singer might become the dancer. I also regularly spend time making “bad” drawings as a means to make myself think outside the box. Surprisingly often, “bad” ideas have turned out to be “good” ideas in one way or another.

When discussing experimental art, focusing on expectations and functionality can break down the strictly binary success/failure polarity. Allowing imperfections to be not only visible but in focus allows us to consider the life, history, and value of the hand-made object. Although connected to deadlines and death, failure and resolution are both as fleeting as any other point in the flow of time. What comes next is making something new.

## ## Pictorial Forms

A good drawing, like a good performance, reveals the essence of things. I translate speech, sound, beats, poetry and silence -- empty space -- into drawing using gestures, and also iconic motifs. The relationship between the image and the source may be very clear; for example, a high-pitched sound might be represented by a high mark on page, or the response may be more complex, abstract, or random.

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<sup>4</sup> Seo, Audrey Yoshiko; Addiss, Stephen (1998), *The Art of Twentieth-century Zen: Paintings and Calligraphy by Japanese Masters*.

<sup>5</sup> R.Sennett (2009), *The Craftsman*, p.214

<sup>6</sup> R.Sennett (2009), *The Craftsman*, p.236

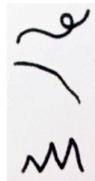
<sup>7</sup> R.Sennett (2009), *The Craftsman*, p.9

<sup>8</sup> T.Moore On Creativity (1993)

The placement of shapes within a drawing affects a viewer's reading of them. The force of gravity dictates our responses to horizontal, vertical, and diagonal shapes, as well as our responses to the placement of shapes on a page. We humans are most stable when we are horizontal because then we can't fall down. I find that smooth, flat, horizontal shapes give me a sense of stability and calm. They are associated with the surface of the Earth, the horizon line, the floor, or a calm sea. I perceive vertical shapes as more active, as they rebel against gravity. They imply energy and a vertical reaching toward the sky. Trees, plants, and skyscrapers require energy to become tall. They will release a great deal of energy if they fall. Vertical shapes are monuments to the kinetic energy of the past and the future and to the potential energy of the present.

In 1948, developmental psychologist Heinz Werner proposed a mode of perception attuned to the expression of expressive attributes of, for instance, faces, gestures, mood, and also to inanimate objects.<sup>9</sup> He coined the term "physiognomic perception" and in his view, a line, color, or sound can be perceived as:

happy  
sad,  
or angry...



Shapes, he argued, have metaphysical associations that have been prevalent throughout our cultural history and can be explained in part by our physical experience of the world, upon which our conceptual metaphors are based. Zigzags can be angry or dangerous like teeth or lightning while circles are often conceptualised as being representative of faces, life, or the cycle of time. The most immediate associations are with the human face and all its emotional displays, then to objects and shapes in our physical world. For example, a curly line can be read as happy while a downward line can be interpreted as sad, which is perhaps connected to the shape of a human smile. The emotion of a line acts as the currency into which stimulation in any modality, such as sound and vision, can be translated.

For an imperfectionist aesthetic, I have to consider how to set about creating imprecision. The mind and body may feel satisfied when resolution occurs but according to neurologist Semir Zeki<sup>10</sup>, the best works of art have high levels of ambiguity because then it can put together visual cues to make meaning and to finish the unfinished with higher levels of perfection – because perfection can only exist in the mind and not in reality. The shapes in my drawings are often intended to function as Rorschach ink-blot tests, while at other times I allow the forms to take a more recognizable shape and play with ambiguity in a different way. According to Zeki, the brain forms synthetic concepts, which constitute his neurobiological explanation of Platonic ideals; these ideals have no existence outside our individual minds but change with time. According to Zeki, our ability to form concepts and be creative is one the great triumphs of the brain, but it also exacts a very heavy toll. The acquired concept is the result of all the experiences that an individual encounters during life. Having seen many houses, I am likely to have not only the concept of a house but also of an ideal house. But the particular house that I may visit to purchase may not satisfy the ideal concept for a house formed in my brain. Artists may have concepts that they want to translate. But the end result commonly does not satisfy the concept in their mind. Zeki argues that the way our brains form concepts is the root of our creativity and enriches our experience of life in a comparable way, he says, to love. While not finding a perfect house is unlikely to cause extreme misery, artists and lovers have long suffered in their search for perfection. Zeki argues that ambiguity or unfinished works of art can actually be *more* satisfying to a viewer, as they are able to, in a sense, finish it themselves.

<sup>9</sup> Rosar, (1994) *Film Music and Heinz Werner's theory of physiognomic perception*

<sup>10</sup> S.Zeki (2008) *Splendours and Miseries of the Brain: Love, Creativity, and the Quest for Human Happiness*

But rather than translating concepts, my own drawing practice explores the processes of drawing itself. I ask: "How does sound perform in drawing? How can we draw words? What is it to draw from observing the world around me? What is it to draw from memory? How do I draw the imagination?" The drawings could become graphic scores as I explore how the interaction of colour and form affects our spontaneous responses.

As I continue making and looking at drawings, I wonder how much we can really escape the confines of our prescribed patterns -- whether in our brain synapses or our muscle memory. To what extent are we governed by our own physicality and the influence of our conscious and unconscious perception? Control will only take me so far and produces a certain quality of image. When I try to control things, it becomes impossible to behave intuitively. Yet, spontaneous or intuitive gestures seem to involve a flow of pre-learnt embodied patterns. Finally, I find myself asking whether training allow us to create more space, freedom, and perfection? Or perhaps control, like time itself, has multiple forms, of which some are real and others merely an illusion.