

## **Theaters of Failure**

### Queer-Epistemological Perspectives on Failure

Cultural, social, and economic uncertainties have, according to a frequently chosen phraseologism, globally condensed into a 'multiple crisis.' Those sceneries of doom, termed “Untergangsskizzen,” however, seem outdated or even obsolete and their various declinations—Brexit, the so-called refugee crisis, the financial crisis, the Euro-crisis, and many more—multiply despite current conclusions and generate an even larger array of cultural, political, economic explosiveness and uncertainty, which regularly drift off into extremist discourses. This constant recourse to the semantic field of crisis, as well as its epiphenomena like precarity, catastrophe, and decline, seems blind to solutions and future developments. The concept of failure is used to draw attention to this problem and, instead of repeatedly re-describing and analyzing crises and their effects on the status quo and thereby remaining in a state of crisis, to allow failure and disintegration and trace alignments of futurity and their potential.

In his groundbreaking lecture “How to Do Things with Words” (1955), J.L. Austin develops the so-called *performative speech act*, “the issuing of the utterance in the performing of an action [...]” In contrast to the establishing speech act that can be true or false, the *performative act* is either *felicitous* or *infelicitous*, it either succeeds or fails. One specific kind of failed *performatives* are “said by an actor on the stage [...]. Language in such circumstances is in special ways [...] used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use [...]” Judith Butler's (1990, 2004, 2006, 2015) and Jack Halberstam's (2011) queer-feminist critique on the standardized epistemology of the *performative's* failure is used as the starting point to invert Austin's devaluation of the theatric *performative* as “void,” “hollow,” and “parasitic” towards its potential to innovate, renew, and (de-)construct.

Halberstam's concept of *Queer Art of Failure* (2011) defines failure as a productive irritation, which “can be used to recategorize what looks like inaction, passivity, and lack of resistance, [...] as a way of refusing [...] dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique” (Halberstam 2011, 88). In accordance with José E. Muñoz, failure is to be understood as futurity, “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present [...] [and] essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world.” This lecture series aims to use interdisciplinary approaches to reveal performative structures, which during extensive crises in reactions and interventions, theatric-performative, political, economic, activist, and others, not only unearth (new) socio-cultural potential to go beyond the visions of decay of the crisis and release epistemological potential of futurity, but also lead to the emergence or reanimation of alternative visions of the present. Quoting Halberstam, this concern can be summarized as follows: “[The] hidden history of pessimism, a history moreover that lies quietly behind every story of success, can be told in a number of different ways [...] drama without a script, narrative without progress. The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, and in losing it imagine other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (Ibid.)

*We are looking for researchers from various disciplines to contribute to a queer-epistemological perspective on failure for our interdisciplinary lecture series during the summer semester 2019 (April-July). We are also planning a publication in the open-access series of Rostock Interdisciplinary Gender and Queer Studies. Abstracts should consist of about 1-2 pages including a bibliography and a short introduction of the author. Financial support for travel and accommodation is planned. The abstracts are due by November 30, 2018.*

gez. Christoph Behrens, Chris Hiller, Annalisa Schmidt

**Mail:** [gender.queer@uni-rostock.de](mailto:gender.queer@uni-rostock.de)

**Web:** <https://www.uni-rostock.de/universitaet/vielfalt-und-gleichstellung/gender-und-queer-studien/ag-gender-und-queer-studien/>

#### **References**

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[1] Cf. Wille, Franz: Im Kreml brennt noch Licht. Einige Entwicklungen des Theaters der neunziger Jahre. In: *Theater heute Jahrbuch* 1999. Berlin 1999. S. 46- 55. S. 49.