

Episode 4: Is there a party for being rejected somewhere?

Yael Keijzer: You are listening to Taking Art Apart, a podcast presented by West Den Haag.

Rosa Zangenberg: I am Rosa Zangenberg, visual artist and writer.

Yael: I am Yael Keijzer, philosopher and writer.

We're launching an experimental series of themes that one may come across when stepping into the artworld, whether as a young artist, established institution, or curious viewer.

Gideon Eillert: *I think it's interesting that in a business world, you would kind of very easily pinpoint what a success it's when you break even. It is when you make more money than you're losing. And that's it. Whereas in the art world, not so much - like we, because it's not so easy to reach that point. And you are considered earlier not, not earlier, but you are more like considered successful in the art world when you have a lot of shows, make a lot of networking, have for lots going on, but they don't really look necessarily if you're breaking even, uh, in world so much, I think.*

Yael: Today we are talking about the notion of success in an artist's practice. And perhaps more importantly, the rejection. Is art only validated with success? How do artists deal with and play with pressure and competition? Seeing as we are young professionals in the art world as well, we take a more personal approach to this topic. We explore the experience that most artists, curators and art venues share, but never really mention publicly. This also includes the transition from child, to art student, to professional artists - the million ways it can be done, including the million challenges. Is there an ideal for the art practice, such as a certain sense of autonomy and being able to live from your art alone, or rather an embeddedness in current society with a relevant profession? Also art academies are always evolving as they try to keep up with more universal academic standards, expectations of the market, and not in the least, the political climate.

Stella Loning:

They blinded my third eye
It could not see
What was right in front of me
Whenever I saw beauty in the mundane
They always asked me to explain

My luke-warm showers lengthen as I dwell in my mind
Looking for answers I could not find
A stream of water on which I can't stand
Fingers all wrinkled as I look at my hand

Drinking coffee until 3 am
I rather have my stalker back than doing the exam
My eyes got used to the dark
It was only afterwards that I regained a spark

Writers will write and artists will art
Anything is right when it comes from the heart
I learnt at school I don't need a school for that
Yet in retrospect I am grateful and not at all mad

Yael: We just heard a poem by artist Stella Loning. She works as a host at a contemporary art museum, as well as with children in an artistic context. She is also a sporadic poet. Spending a few years at the art academy, department of Photography, she felt ambiguous about the competitive atmosphere. How can one incorporate an artist's practice into 'regular' life, and make it one's own? Next up, we hear Rosa elaborate on this. In a financially fragile world, artists and institutions continually grapple and adapt to changing values of art.

Rosa: This episode may be rather radical because it mainly explores the loser's point of view. To me, this is a refreshing point of view as I am so used to experiencing a more or less constant flow of success stories. And I expect that I am not the only one. They confront us everywhere, and all the time and, frankly, mostly for the better! They give us inspiration, aspirations, motivation and hope, as we think and dwell on the fact that "this could be me some day". They allow us to dream big about a better future - or even an alternate reality.

I believe that the distribution of successful stories is so normalized that we may start to think that having success is the norm. And this is certainly also the case in the art world. A world always financially fragile and always fighting to be taken seriously by the broader society. It can only be shown from its best angles to avoid any suspicion of being corrupted, and to prove that it is not as lazy as some powerful politicians might tend to announce. So, the little spotlight it gets fittingly reflects the little amount of success it can actually allow in.

In reality, the art world is filled with unsuccessful stories of failures and rejections - at least that is what I tell to myself for comfort because, in truth, how would I know? My sources of information rarely tell me how many people lost, failed, were rejected or were denied - these countless individuals are possibly like me - moving on from the let down and awaiting another attempt to achieve a moment of success. Because in the competitive and ever threatened art world, there is no space for demotivating news.

It doesn't require much research, however, to realize the huge, and unexciting difference between success and unsuccess of artists.

Taking a look at the cold facts shared by various websites of art schools, residencies, galleries, institutes, magazines who offer open calls for art education, artists' studios, financial grants and worldwide exposure, the distribution between supply and demand is pretty harsh. In 2020, for instance, only 3,5% of the artists who applied for the master in fine arts at the Danish Royal Academy of Art, were admitted. A similar, sometimes even smaller percentage of artists are admitted every year to the attractive post graduate residency programs in the Netherlands.

There is an article that sparked my critical interest in this matter and it was released last year in a Danish online art magazine. It highlighted the big masses of professional artists who, every year, receive a devastating rejection letter from the Danish Arts Foundation. A foundation that offers a number of working grants for applying artists. This article also questioned the fact that these rejected masses

are silenced to give space for the few artists who actually got through the eye of the needle. In my opinion, this gives a delusional vision of the realities for many working artists.

The delusion is emphasized when one artist, who expressed themselves in this article, shared their rejection letter on a social media platform, in the hope that the foundation would share their news, just like they did with the grant recipients. But, of course, they didn't. The way in which these rejected masses are hidden also helps to conceal the bigger issue: the fact that there is just not enough money for the arts. Instead of addressing and problematizing the far too small amount of money there is to give, the art world tends to thankfully glorify the few people who, after immense hard work, can actually benefit from the well-deserved money.

While the distribution of financial funding for artists is more generous in the Netherlands than in Denmark, these application and acceptance numbers still imply that the selection is rough, whether it is to study or to work professionally with an art practice. It is not a mystery that the success of artists is so highly glorified, given the fact that an acceptance letter can be as extraordinary as winning a prize with these numbers. It truly feels like winning, thereby forgetting the fact that this so-called "prize" is the result of countless hours of hard work. Additionally, the prize is actually not just a nice thing to receive when you are an artist but it could actually be an essential condition for being a full time artist.

Contrarily, the feeling of rejection resembles the feeling of losing. We are accustomed to keeping this experience to ourselves, and thereby making this experience a very intimate moment. Rejection becomes a moment of silent sorrow, only shared with the closest of people, and mostly so, if the sharing feels necessary. The rejection is suppressed into a little insignificant event, even if the well kept secret could leave a lasting stain of failure and demotivation for the artist. We might even start to treat the rejection as a taboo - an act so common, yet not worth fitting into how the art world is portrayed in society. Exposing our rejection to an audience means exposing our artistic inadequates and weak points - simply, the fact that we are not working hard enough. The fear is that this rejection could potentially become a

determining piece of information for our already vulnerable artist existence.

I oftentimes get short of breath when going over this thought, especially as this little artist-existence starts to resemble a place in a competition: a cruel and tough one. One that requires an unmerciful participation fee and doesn't promise any hope. After all, "only a few of us will make it", as a teacher reminded me a few days before the momentous and anticipated graduation show at my art academy. Probably intended as a joke or, at least with a humorous tone in it, this sentence left a bigger stain in my mind than I would have hoped for. It instantly transformed the otherwise festive and celebratory event into a conclusive, competitive moment. All of a sudden, the graduation show was a definitive gamble with our artist futures. It was an unsettling reminder, that success in the art world was not a given, and, at the same time, that the notion of success was about to change into a highly attractive currency.

With these words said, I know that my view on failure and success can sound a bit fatalistic. Without doubt, I take these rejections quite seriously and, perhaps, I give their significance too much space in my mind. I know, however, that I cannot be alone with these feelings, and I do think there is something crucial to address about the way we hide, and persistently try to move on from our rejections, expecting that this is what we have to do. It is very likely that the reason why we give the rejection so little space is part of the bigger problem, namely, that the art world is a fragile place. In this world, success is not just a luxurious extra - it is the prospect of stability. I dare to say that success is the most important currency.

I worry that the notion of success is becoming an achievement that is impossible to feel without comparing ourselves to others. Has success become the main validation of art? If that is so, how, then, do we dare to talk about our unsuccessful, rejected, and failed steps in this process?

Yael: We have invited some artists and close friends, who may also have different ideas of what they think about failing and getting rejected, namely Gideon Eillert, Giulietta Pastorino

Verastegui and Judith Reijnders. Together with Rosa, they are part of CORE Collective. They think about how to deal with the described experiences, in terms of sharing together, as a community - leaning towards more compassionate and caring connections between artists.

Rosa: Gideon, Giulietta, Judith and I are part of the same artist collective - CORE collective - that was established during quite unique circumstances. We all graduated from our fine art bachelors in 2020 which was an unusual year to say the least so our main interactions, at least to begin with, were solely online - but the biggest reason for why we actually became a group in the first place was rooted in the idea of connectivity rather than competition. As our graduation year was heavily influenced by covid lockdown, many physical shows got canceled, so for the first time ever, all the 9 fine art bachelors in the Netherlands decided to take this into our own hands and establish one big, combined graduation show. During the preparations of the show, which finally happened last year, April 2021, we also formed a special connection, as we were all more or less dealing with the same experiences, that of leaping into the professional artworld.

Rosa: So welcome to Judith and Giulietta and Gideon who I am sitting together with right now. Judith and Giulietta, physically and Gideon over Skype because he is currently in Sweden. I was thinking we could first introduce each other.

Judith Reijnders: Uh, yes, I'm Judith and I'm, as said already, an artist. I'm at the moment living in Arnhem.

Giulietta Pastorino Verastegui: Um, I'm Giulietta and I'm also an artist and, but I'm also an art historian.

Gideon: Uh huh. I'm Gideon. And I am from Enschede, the Netherlands. I'm also an artist. I am mostly a painter and also a musician.

Rosa: I would like to start with a big, quite big question, uh, because this was one of the questions I ended up asking in the text. Which is the question: Do you think that success has become the main validation of art?

Giulietta: I was thinking about how, you know, there's like a stereotype on success, like us as humans, you know, like. Like in every sort of scene, there is like the arts scene and the financial scene or any other geopolitical scene or whatever, you know, in also in our stages, in our lives, there's kind of a stereotype of what success is, you know, like in the art scene, it's like having shows and having exhibitions and getting funding and getting all these accessibilities to all these different ways of promoting your art, you know? And then it's also the financial freedom of being able to be an artist.

Judith: Yeah. So actually success is already very close to the subject of the podcast. Like I think, then, success means you can share a lot of good news. And you're getting what you're trying to achieve.

Gideon: I think it's interesting that in a business world, you would kind of very easily pinpoint what a success it's when you break even. It is when you make more money than you're losing. And that's it. Whereas in the art world, not so much - like we, because it's not so easy to reach that point. And you are considered earlier not, not earlier, but you are more like considered successful in the art world when you have a lot of shows, make a lot of networking, have for lots going on, but they don't really look necessarily if you're breaking even, uh, in world so much, I think.

Rosa: No, and that's what I meant with the fact that I feel that success is a very social thing. Like it's very... It's almost, I think you said that like, it's the, the idea of sharing good news. It's maybe less about the actual good news, but more about sharing the good news to the public.

Giulietta: Yeah, like I think I mentioned it earlier in the group that we had, and um, about this silence and noise contrasts. About, like, if there's a kind of rejection, you know, there's kind of a silence and a taboo aspect to it. And then when you're successful in receiving whatever you want to receive, like, you know, you want to exclaim it to the world, then you would talk to your parents or your friends, and then everyone congratulates you, you know, and maybe there's a party. Is there a party for being rejected somewhere too? I don't know.

Gideon: I wonder, like, I'm thinking about this break-even concept like that, there's now more in the world of social media that people will be sharing their success mainly because success, like, it tends to attract also more people and, uh, and you can like kind of pretend to be successful before you're actually successful. And through this means become successful then. And that's when they look at people who are trying to. So people that you perceive as "Oh they're very successful, might be still thinking of themselves as like, oh, I'm totally not actually like, um, dead broke.

Judith: Yeah, the thing about social media, that it is a medium basically made for good news. And when people are sharing bad news and okay for this, let's stay in the art scene. Yeah. It also feels like what's the point of sharing that because that's not what you want to know. Because, like you said, you can, if you have good news to share, you would probably get the ball rolling and get quite quickly a lot of success, good news-thing. Uh, but it feels sort of scary to share that you got rejected because maybe after I've applied for something next month for something else, they see that I didn't get it from this other place, why would they give it to me? Yeah, it feels like you're, it's, it's some sort of, yeah, I'm afraid that I would put myself in a downward spiral if I would share to everyone that I got rejected for things.

Giulietta: Yeah. Yeah. There's no talk about it.

Rosa: But in that way, I also think we are quite hard on each other in the art world. At least, maybe not when we are sitting together and drinking some coffee and drinking some tea. But in this online community, I feel like, yeah, I have this feeling that there is... that we are tough with each other and in that sense, we have no room to show our self-pity and our fears and tragedies and sadness and ... yeah, just, the fact that we are not doing as good as we hoped we would be doing.

Judith: Yeah. But yeah its showing.. vulnerability.. because you're showing your weak moments,

Giulietta: But then you can't be vulnerable. Like you cannot really talk about those things. I mean, people just want to hear the good stuff as well. Like they don't want to hear how bad you are as well.

Judith: Yeah. So it's not just that it's scary to share. It's also indeed that others don't want to see. Or hear it, or indeed ask "why are you sharing this? Are you okay? Do you need pity from us? Or what the fuck?" So maybe there's just an issue with the whole society that we cannot deal with bad news.

Giulietta: But I also think it has something to do with mental health. In the sense that, you know, you constantly are having all these images from the media about, you know, global situations that you have no control over, you know, in a, in a way, you know, cause I mean, do I have control about anything global? No. And of course, like I'm affected by it, you know, but sometimes you just have to turn off the phone and turn off the media. To be able to like let your brain calm down and, you know, and see what you can do about it as well.

Rosa: So, if I will translate this into the art world, turning off all social media or communication online to have control, I also don't think that is the absolutely best solution if you are feeling down from rejection or feeling down from any kind of failure that you might experience, because it can also make this false.. I don't know, like when I, for instance, myself, I'm getting rejected for residencies or to applications for schools and all of these things. I put it a lot on myself and I think, okay, it's mainly my own fault. And, uh, I should get over it, and it's not worth it, it's not really significant. Or it's, it's something I should just move on from. And in that, this is what, this is the main thing where I think it's, it's not really healthy to, to, to, to push it down, to pick, to make it become such a little thing. Of course, we should also not make it fill the whole world and make it the most important thing. But I think we should acknowledge at least the impact it can, it can have on you. It does bring in some kinds of insecurities and some kind of de-motivation that should be shared. And should be talked about maybe with other artists. I think this is just, yeah. Where I'm searching for this compassionate relationship between artists that I think, right now can only happen if you are successful in the art world, yeah you can only feel the love, so to say, in being the sharer of good news.

Gideon: Yeah, you get together at the exhibition, and you celebrate the success of whoever is exhibiting and such. I was thinking about Greek tragedy and such that you have that in

Greek society, uh, where you just kind of have a play that revolves around failure. That kind of revolts around tragedy and failure and everything that's bad in life and has this played out like very dramatically, and everybody can get to around this, uh, that it's, it's kind of then walled off from the rest. Like, I don't think this is ever going to work on Instagram. I don't think there's any way to like, do this on social media. That is just like that. And will always be like that. Yeah, there is a need, I think, for another place, where it is accepted that it's outside of the whole... like the common story of, "okay, here we want to promote our stuff and ourselves", that's fine. And then you have another bracket where you can come together around the negative - around what's not going well in life.

Judith: I think it would be very important to have it more open. Cause I also have some friends, who didn't get quite a lot of things in the success part of the art scene. Um, but they feel lonely. They only see that everyone around them has gotten things and had an exhibition here and a fund there and a project doing now. And they don't have a clue how many rejections they got before they finally got a yes, because we don't share it.

Giulietta: That's true.

Judith: And then the ones who didn't get it feel like they're so bad because they didn't get the yes yet, but because everything is so closed, the gap between the successful and the non-successful artists will grow bigger. Um, yeah, so for the community, in the art scene itself, it would be very very good to have it more open.

Giulietta: I also was thinking about, um, process.. that it's a lot about process. It's never just the end game and it's not about, you know, oh yeah, that's it. That's how I got it. It's a lot of hard work.

Judith: Yeah. That also feels a bit like the word success. It's like you've made it, but then what, what then. It's like, when a dream comes true, it's like, yeah, no, fuck. Now we have to find another dream because now I have no nothing to go for.

Gideon: Yeah. And failure is kind of part of that. That makes you want to overcome it as well, like a feeling of failing and that you want to go back at it and get more done this time. I was thinking we have kind of an advantage maybe, as an artist, as compared to other fields of succession where you have like the common story of the super successful person who has everything and now achieved everything they ever dreamed of, and what are they going to do now? And then they have to then realize, they got in a crisis or something, and then they have to go and find meaning in life. Whereas people in the art world are already busy finding meaning in their life, right from the beginning. And it never really ends.

Giulietta: That's what I meant before.

Gideon: Yeah. Like, even if I'm sure, like if you're Gerhard Richter, then you're still like, "Yeah but I haven't made my best painting yet". And it doesn't matter how much money you make or how many, like, if you're... I'm maybe being romantic, but I feel like if you're really into arts for the right reasons, then you don't really care and you just want to continue until you have made the ultimate work, which you will never do. So it will always be nice. I can keep going. I can just keep going on.

Giulietta: I think failing is very personal. It's something that hurts. It's just a lot of pain and anxiety. And there is the depression and disappointment in yourself, but also the fear of the people around you, like your family being disappointed in yourself, you know? And then, yeah, just, it's very taboo for oneself to feel this failure. It's very lonely and. It's hard to come out from that shell sometimes because there's also a lot of forgetfulness, you know, that a lot of people and artists who we think are successful now also had this struggles, you know, and we forget about the process of achieving the successfulness that people, you know, think successfulness is.

Rosa: I also think that the people that actually are very successful are also lonely. Because there are very few of them. So we, or not we necessarily, but the masses of people who are maybe considered less successful feel lonely because they don't know how to share it and don't necessarily want to share it. So that creates this loneliness. But the few people who are actually having quite a lot of what we consider

success, have a hard time sharing it, or they have, they can share it, but they have a hard time connecting.

Judith: Yeah. But I also spoke to some artists who are, then, successful, but they are at a certain point afraid to share their success because they wanna be nice to everyone and don't be arrogant and say "Hey, I got this project again!". They almost feel embarrassed that they got asked for something again in such a short time. That's, that's the opposite because yeah, at a certain point, you got picked up and then we label those artists as successful, but then they get lonely and afraid that the less successful artist won't like them anymore because they had too much.

Giulietta: So I guess loneliness is in the spectrum.

Gideon: It is an interesting, um, procedure every time and I tend to take it as a test of myself, oftentimes, where you always, like... I know this with my first letters that I wrote to apply for stuff and I see the success rate is like 3% or something, uh, of people get this, that applied. So I sent this mail and I feel chill about it, like, uh, because I'm not going to get accepted anyway, you know? So, uh, almost like that way in the beginning, like you, you kinda do it like that. And, um, and you can, but you might as well try it. So, and then you get the rejection letter and I was like that steeled to be rejected, but then still, I was feeling bad about it. And yeah ok that didn't work. That all like "steeling" myself, setting myself up for failure, apparently, is not really an effective strategy to deal with this.

Rosa: And can we also, just for a moment, talk about how inhumane these rejection letters actually are always?

Judith: Yeah they are very general.

Rosa: Very general, one line or two lines.

Judith: Oh, I also had one, which was a whole story. And then you have to read it like six times before you get the message because they use so many difficult words. You're like, just say, just say no, but then it's clear...

Gideon: Just a fat "NOT ACCEPTED". I have seen some that did that actually.

Judith: That is harsh too.

Rosa: Yeah. You would rather hear it in the title of the email so that, you know, you can actually just know, because like this moment opening up the email is like... because you cannot see, but always when it says "Dear applicant", you're like ok this is not good..

Gideon: And your internet doesn't work and your gmail is like "would you like to upgrade to the next version?"

Judith: Yeah. If you see it in the title, you can always choose not to open it and then you know it before you know it and maybe that's even better.

Rosa: Or leave the email for a moment where you feel really powerful and really in a good mood.

Judith: Or get a shot of whiskey.

Gideon: But I do feel it's getting a bit better over time that I like to write the application and send it. And I am more able to completely let go after that and not really pay, like, uh, often when I see the rejection letter in this case, and then I'm like, "oh yeah, that's right. I did apply for that, and I completely forgot put it in". But I think if it just hits hard, then also you have to kind of like let that in as well. I think that's also very important to not be, uh, thinking "Uh, I can't feel this"

Rosa: Not reject the rejection.

Gideon: Yeah exactly, you have to like, kinda let it in and, uh, let it do what it does.

Rosa: Yeah. And, and make it have this impact and realize that impact that it can give on you.

Rosa: So thank you very much for coming here. I was really happy to... I'm still really happy to see you, but I was very happy to see you and glad that you could make it, most of your physically.

Gideon: I wish I was there physically, but it's been good.

Giulietta: Thank you Rosa for inviting us.

Cecilie Fang - *i reject*

Cecilie Fang: I reject the thought of rejection
yet in that exact rejection
rejection of a thought
I start thinking

how we
create of of
spaces boxes thinking
thinking we know
that we
knew
that the boxed other
is the one
the only one
the true one
and so
we reject to see the other
from the box grown from
aperceptionathought
a self constructed truth
that one box
imprisoning oneself
that one box
mirroring oneself
and yet
that one box
becoming and inheriting one's own imprisoning
in the end

in the end
all change comes from rejecting the rejection
rejecting to not see the other
another
and so
rejecting to see oneself

Yael: The poem you just heard marks the concluding words for this episode. We hope that these various thoughts and approaches to the ungrateful rejection have made you think

about the way we deal - or do not deal at all - with this very real condition. The poem was written and spoken by young artist Cecilie Fang, and was originally released in April 2022 in the zine publication Yin Yang created by Floor van Meeuwen.

That was it everyone.

Special thanks to: Stella Loning, Giulietta Pastorino Verastegui, Gideon Eillert, Judith Reijnders, and Cecilie Fang for taking part in this episode.

If you want to know more about the guests and their practices, as well as extra source materials, please have a look at our description box. This podcast is made possible by West Den Haag.

Tune in for the following episode, where the notion of success becomes a monetary currency, and we look at the artist-in-business.

Guests in this episode:

Stella Loning, <https://stellaloning.nl/>

Giulietta Pastorino Verastegui,
<https://www.thehagueartists.nl/cv/81572/> /
<https://researchplatform.art/people/giulietta-pastorino-verastegui/>

Gideon Eillert, <https://www.gideoneillert.com/>

Judith Reijnders, <https://judithreijnders.com/>

Cecilie Fang, <https://www.fresheyesphoto.com/portfolio-cecile-fang>

Further references:

Det Uskønne Afslag (Trans: The Ugly Rejection)
<https://kunsten.nu/journal/de-uskoenne-afslag/> (article in Danish)

'ALL INN - National Fine Arts Graduates Show' at Het HEM,
<https://hethem.nl/en/Het-Hem/Calendar/2021/03/ALL-INN>