

The Politics of Language: Can the Way We Talk, Truly, Fail Us?

Ludovica De Cesare



Poster "A Case of Make Believe", SIGN, Kevlard666

Adele Dipasquale is a visual artist and researcher, currently based in The Hague, Netherlands. Their works focus on language, the lack of it, and its possibilities. From September the 19th, they will present their work "Tin Cry" at SIGN, taking part with the project "A Case to Make Believe" in the temporary collective exhibition "Fall: Five Fails". During the building-up of the exhibition I had the chance to stop Adele and have this conversation with them, when we talked about the concept of failure, dear to the project, the impossibility to communicate, and politics.

Failing

For Adele Dipasquale, failing is really a matter of interpretation and the result of a value system of what is considered success and what not. In our society, with its neoliberal and capitalist structure, failure is strictly connected to the concept of productivity. In this worldview we are taught to consider money, states and borders, as "true" and "real", while we dismiss other things such as spirits or magic practices as fiction: by doing so, because of our societal influences we create categories of what is real and what is not. However, if we change this paradigm and epistemology, the concept of failure crumbles on itself. In their works we can notice the attempt to look at capitalism as just another possible reality system, so as to liberate our life from the obsolete narration of failure and success.

In their artistic practice, failure is both a theme and a method. "I've never really used the word "failure" directly in my writing, because the word itself comes loaded with judgment. It belongs to that capitalist scale of success/failure." However, they would consider their work as a reclamation of failure: if success is only measured in terms of profit and social reproduction, then the failure to live up to societal standards can allow us to imagine other

ways of thinking and existing in the world. In a system in which the only gestures that an artist can produce are failures, they embrace them.

Dipasquale particularly considers failure a theme when working with language, and especially when it doesn't work properly: the cracks, mistakes and breakdowns of verbal communication, are those imperfections that really interest the artist, who actively looks for them.

“Take silence, for example. Silence is often seen as the absence of language, or the mark of someone oppressed. But silence can also be a form of resistance. If the only language available is the oppressor's language, then refusing to speak — choosing silence — becomes a political act.”

We can encounter this interest in many of their works, such as “Harpy”, which is about a woman who loses her voice and transforms into animal features. In another work, “Lose Voice Toolkit” groups of children wander in an unknown place and time, undergoing transformations while losing their voices. They no longer know where words are. These works come from Adele Dipasquale's interest in silence, loss of language, and transformation.



installation view Lose Voice Toolkit, 2024, three channel installation, 5'30", 6'00", 5'15", super 16mm transferred in 2K, at Prospects Art Rotterdam

Another aspect of communication that interests them is what we normally consider to be “language” and what we dismiss as “not language”. For example, verbal, logical, written language is usually treated as the only meaningful form of communication. If I speak, I am recognized as human, because of the very fact that I can use (a) language. Non-verbal communication, silences, mistakes, stuttering, are seen as less valid. There is therefore a hierarchy of meaningfulness in communication.

“In my work, I try to break this hierarchy by dissolving verbal language into its own “failures”. Through mistakes and miscommunication, I try to shine a light on other forms of communication, and by doing that, on other possible reality systems.”

Politics of Failure

Failure, according to Adele Dipasquale, can also be a lens to reflect on the current state of the artworld, which, of course, is not immune from these neoliberal social pressures. In the art world, and in the capitalist society we live in, in which so much is so tied to identity, it is very hard to maintain healthy boundaries between your work, your profession and who you are. But of course, in the dominant art world there's a very clear idea of what a successful artist career looks like — and consequently what a failed one looks like.

According to Dipasquale, this is something we have to work on, in two directions. On one side, there's the political and communal dimension: reclaiming this idea that our lives shouldn't be valued only in those terms. And then, on a more private level, dealing with how this affects your personal life.

“I would put more emphasis on the communal, political side. For example, how artists' unions can create conditions where artists can work in a more sustainable way — economically, with wages, with proper working conditions: for example where working-class, mother, BIPOC, marginalized artists are supported. Then the pressure around failure or success shifts to another level, the capitalist one. In that sense, doing something that is considered a failure can be a political act.”

However, some artists, especially those that belong to a marginalized community, have a more complex relationship with failure: an example brought up by Adele Dipasquale is “The Queer Art of Failure” by Jack Halberstam.

Success and failure are always measured by a certain scale, which is of course the product of patriarchy, capitalism, heteronormativity and a Western, white system. Therefore when marginalized communities enter this system, they are already questioning its nature. Each artist has to find their own way to navigate that as there are different strategies, different methods of attacking it, and it's the combination of all these voices that can actually make the system crumble. In the Revolutionary Letter #8 Diane di Prima well explains this concept: “NO ONE WAY WORKS, it will take all of us / shoving at the thing from all sides / to bring it down.”

“Reclaiming that space is definitely a political statement. It's like reclaiming the margins, as Bell Hooks (Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness) says. You could say similar things about reclaiming failure.”

Vulnerability and the Role of Silence

When you're putting yourself in a failing position there's always a level of exposure in it and therefore inhibiting a position of vulnerability. However, it also depends on the context — where you're working, who you're addressing, and whether you feel the need to be in a fighting mode.

Although, the idea that sees vulnerability as some kind of superpower, feels currently

overused to Adele Dipasquale: according to them there's still a lot of work to be done in the art world around these issues, especially concerning mental health. Although there's more attention now, it's far from enough.

However powerful of a tool, vulnerability can be, it also risks being romanticised, especially when marginalised communities reclaim that space and use it. In Dipasquale's works, the patriarchy and women's issues are common themes and they are aware of the problem that this may lead to.

“Patriarchal narratives often depict women as unable to control emotions, constantly vulnerable, crying, angry, shouting. Showing vulnerability or reclaiming rage can be powerful, but from the outside there's always a risk: you're put in a box, interpreted through that lens, no matter what you're actually trying to say”

The risk of female artists being framed as the “the vulnerable ones” often leads to avoiding this tool at all, as a form of self-defense.

Especially when Adele Dipasquale's work depicts a woman with no voice (Harpy, 2020), it can become controversial: *oh, silence is so poetic when women have no voice*. But for her, and for many artists, silence can be used as an extreme form of expression.



Harpy (video still), 2020, digital video, 4K, stroboscopy of vocal chords by James P. Thomas M.D. 5'30"

The question is: what does it mean to use silence from the perspective of a subject? It can be recognized almost as a sign, because if you're constantly negated, if your voice isn't acknowledged as meaningful discourse, then silence itself becomes a language.

“There's a long philosophical tradition — Aristotle, for example — that claimed certain groups of people couldn't produce meaningful language. The word *barbaros* literally comes from stammering, from being unintelligible. The “Other” was always defined as someone who couldn't speak logically, who produced meaningless sound.

So when you refuse to speak in the oppressor's language, silence becomes the only escape,

the only way out of that structure.”

Inclusivity in Language

According to Adele Dipasquale with whom I share the same mother tongue, Italian, the lack of inclusivity in many languages is a very important problem. A lot of work has been done in the last few years, for example with the neutral schwa, but Italian still remains mostly not inclusive. In fact, it is not enough to take these kinds of measures, but it is something that should go side by side with material and political change. Changing language and changing material conditions are equally important.

“ In the last few years, there has been a lot of attention on language, and that’s good — it’s important to use a language where people feel better and more comfortable. But we also need to change the conditions of life themselves. So it can’t be one strategy; it has to be multiple strategies, multiple tools, that together transform how we deal with and understand the world.”

However, chasing linguistic inclusivity and focusing on representation, could result in its commercialization, in something appropriated by the system, just to bring us back into marginalization.

According to Dipasquale, this is something that is already happening, for example by having a female prime minister who promotes laws that are completely un-feminists (Giorgia Meloni *ça va sans dire*): representation is there but the substance is missing.

“Representation and visibility are important, but they’re not enough. We need actual changes in people’s conditions and rights. Otherwise, it’s just cosmetics and appropriation.”

Poetry as the Science of Language

Language, however, can fail us in many ways, especially when in our case, we mainly use our second language to communicate: sometimes you can’t say exactly what you mean—concepts shift and feel different.

When I asked Adele Dipasquale about this issue, they talked about poetry.

“What helps me is looking at how poets describe their practice. I love how they treat words as materials, the same way as an artist works with clay or paint. Poetry works in the cracks of language, in the places where language doesn’t function. A poem is like the science of language — it shows both its limits and its possibilities.”

Through poetry and poets, Dipasquale finds faith in words, because of the very fact that they can fail us: in failure there’s often something more truthful. It shows that existence goes beyond language. Otherwise, you’d have to say that children, who don’t speak yet, or animals, don’t have meaningful existence — but of course they do. Silence, gestures, sounds: they’re all meaningful ways of being.

“There’s an artist and activist I admire who made a video piece called *In My Language*. They don’t use verbal speech, but they show that their way of interacting with reality is still a form of language. They explain: “Sometimes I translate my language, which isn’t word-based, into your language — but that doesn’t mean my original way of being isn’t meaningful.” I found it very powerful.”



Mel Baggs, *In my language*, 2007, Youtube video

Language has always been a central element in Dipasquale’s works, both to fill that gap that they always felt in how we relate to one another, and both of course for their love for words. “I like using words, using voice, and even exploring their failures.”

There’s also a hierarchy that has existed historically: written, logical language has always been considered the highest form. Then comes oral speech, then oral speech without words, and finally just sound, just voice.

“I like turning that hierarchy upside down — showing that sound and voice are just as important.”

Language as a Political Act

English is definitely the most political of all languages, as it is so widespread that not speaking it makes people feel excluded, as if they are not fully recognised. Language choice is entangled with national policies, colonial histories, and power relations. Which languages are valued and which aren’t is part of broader politics of the world.

The intersection between identity and mother tongue is deeply political. For some people English was imposed; for me and for Adele Dipasquale it was a choice and a tool that helped reach other artists and writers. That difference matters.

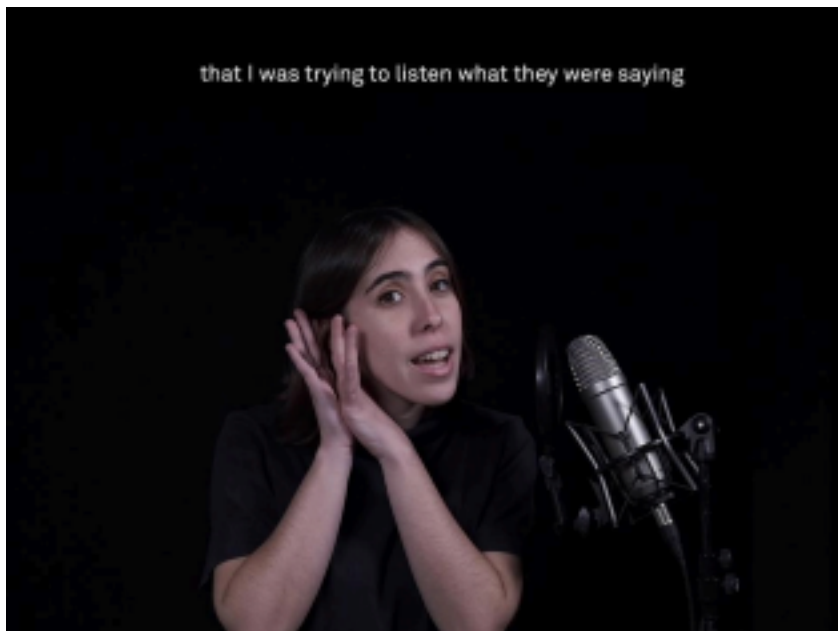
The hierarchy is not only for languages but also for certain dialects or accents, as they are

judged as less valuable.

“When I show my work people sometimes tell me stories about how they were told their language was dead or unimportant — that’s a common experience across many places. Language offers an entry point into political discourse.”

When talking about languages and their stories, it is impossible to not recall Dipasquale’s work “Farfallino”.

Farfallino, or the butterfly language, is a secret code language spoken by Italian children of all generations: it doesn’t matter the context, if it is scholastic, domestic or simply to not let someone understand you, it is a way to bond with your fellow kids. It creates intimacy, it makes you feel seen. Dipasquale made a video installation, exploring these complicated feelings, this vulnerability of talking a secret language.



Farfallino, Adele Dipasquale, Full HD, found footage, VHS-C and 16 mm transferred to Full HD, performed by Cristina Lavosi, 7'24"

“People often respond with stories about language games: for example, when I was still studying my MA tutor, artist Babak Afrassiabi, told me that in many families in Iran there was a language, a variant of Farsi, with similar rules of Farfallino, using the letter Z instead of F. Apparently it is not spoken by children, but women. Also in this case, the language was developed in order not to be understood by others. These tongues are often intentionally private - they help communities survive and protect themselves.”

This kind of language practice is of course strictly a political act, by creating a private language it functions as a collective strategy and protection. Language is produced by policy, history, and social conditions: it’s a collective responsibility to create spaces where languages and practices can manifest.

“I find these practices powerful: they exist between innocence and strength. Many people have told me about similar children’s secret languages — in Greek, in French, elsewhere —where the same idea repeats: a small community develops an internal code to be together

and to protect each other.”

It is interesting that many of these secret languages are named after flying creatures.

“In Italian there’s a “butterfly language”, in Greek, the language of the crows ; in other places, languages linked with spirits or ghosts. The metaphor of flight appears again and again: flying as escape, as defiance, as a way to find a private space to be yourself. That image — language as flight or as escaping away in the air — really interests me.”

“Tin Cry” at SIGN

Adele Dipasquale’s contribution to the exhibition “Fall:Five Fails”, and particularly to Sign’s project “A Case of Make Believe”, is “Tin Cry” an audiovisual piece. The film combines landscape frames, full of layers, history and geology, with written entries. The written entries are as well rich of poetry, recalling our conversation over mysticism and poems.



Adele Dipasquale, Tin Cry, 2025, Sign, Groningen.

“I do write a lot. I like reading, theory, and thinking through words. Even though much of my work deals with the refusal of words, language is still useful — it lets you enter someone else’s mind, even across time or geography. That fascinates me.”

However we expand our understanding of what language is, it will always fall short. Language is always shorter than society, there’s always some gap — like debates about gendered jobs in Italian, or pronouns today. Tomorrow there will be a new issue. According to Adele Dipasquale the only solution is proliferation: as many languages, as many pronouns, as much multiplicity as possible. That’s the only way: to recognize all the possibilities in human and nonhuman life.

“In a perfect world without money, everyone would speak all the languages. (laughs) But I’m terrible with languages. English actually erased the other language I used to speak.

If I could choose, maybe I’d want to understand some animal languages — the language of whales, for instance. That would be incredible.”

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-Mel Baggs, In my language (Translated in Farfallino)

(It is meant as a strong statement on the existence and value of different kinds of thinking and interactions in a world where how close you can appear to a specific one of them determines whether you are seen as a real person or an adult or an intelligent person. And in a world in which those determine whether you have any rights, there are people being tortured, people dying, because they are considered non-persons, because their kind of thought is so unusual to not be considered through at all. Only when the many shapes of personhood are recognised will justice and human rights be possible.)

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Ludovica De Cesare (2003, Rome) is an Art History student at the University of Groningen, where she is also part of the Honours College. Her research and writing often explore contemporary art, curatorial practices and the intersection between art, vulnerability and society.