

## Four Interviews and Articles by Ludovica De Cesare

(in the context of the project 'Fall: Five Fails')

september/ october 2025

From September 19 to October 19, 2025, the project **FALL: FIVE FAILS** – New Works after Bas Jan Ader took place in Groningen. Presentations featuring work by young artists were shown at five locations throughout the city – **Block C, SIGN, Academie Minerva, Pictura, and ARTisBOOK** – inspired by the work of Bas Jan Ader, who disappeared 50 years earlier in the Atlantic Ocean during a sailing trip.

<https://sign2.nl/websign/events/fall-five-fails-a-case-of-make-believe/>

**Ludovica De Cesare**, an art history student at the University of Groningen and former intern at SIGN, interviewed artists from four locations and wrote reflective articles based on these interviews. Published here.

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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.



## Lily Dollner: On Bones, Futility, and the Fourth Dimension

Ludovica De Cesare



Michiel Schuurman, Poster for Kunstruimte Block C, performance by Lily Dollner *"The Artist as Consumer of Extreme Discomfort"*

The fourth dimension is a space that we, humans, have no way to perceive, and consequently no way to imagine. If we asked a two-dimensional shape living on a two-dimensional plane to try and imagine the third dimension, it would be impossible for it to fully be aware of it. It could understand length and width but height, the dimension that it is missing in its plane, would be impossible for it to imagine. It wouldn't even be able to try to imagine it, as it cannot understand its existence: it is a dimension in which he can't move in. This is very similar to our situation, as three-dimensional shapes living on a three-dimensional plane, the universe. We are able to move in three different directions, up, down and side to side: the fourth dimension and direction in which we could move in it, is impossible for us to imagine. However it is completely reasonable to a fourth dimensional observer...and to Lily Dollner.

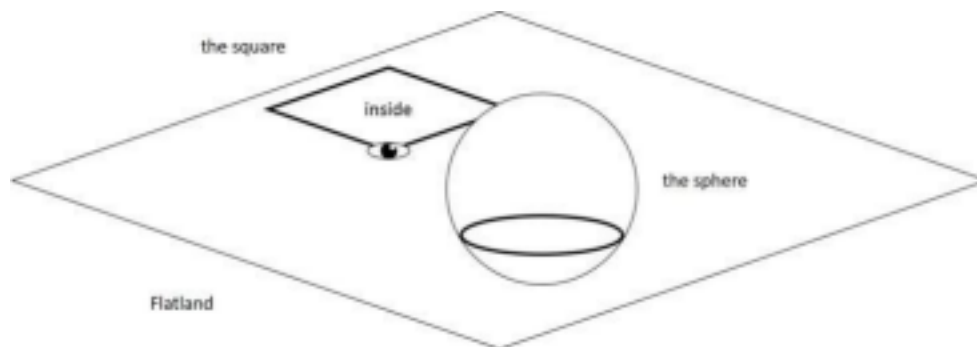
In her studio, surrounded by fragments of plaster and tools, Lily Dollner is carefully engraving one of the 525 bones that will inhabit her new sculpture. The manual repetition, the sheer patience of her labour, immediately sets the tone: this is not work made for efficiency, but for persistence, tension, and the strange beauty of futility. The piece will soon be presented at Block C's group exhibition "Fall: Five Fails".

The sculpture itself, a cube containing bones, recalls both anatomy and architecture. Yet for Dollner, it is more than a material construction—it is an attempt to suggest the existence of a fourth dimension.

"I was really inspired by the book "Flatlands"," she explains. "It's about creatures who live

on a two-dimensional plane, unaware of anything beyond it. When a sphere, a three dimensional figure, enters their world, they can only perceive it as circles growing and shrinking in size as it passes through. This story became an analogy for me. I wanted to make (for the Fall: Five Fails exhibition) a three-dimensional object that would allude to something more, a liveliness within it: the fourth dimension.”

The addition that she is going to bring to the exhibition is a cube, made out of cubes, imagined as an entity with bones and blood: meant to suggest indeed something more than an object. “I wanted it to be like the sphere in *Flatlands*: seemingly inanimate, but alive in a way that exceeds its form. That liveliness, to me, is a quality of the fourth dimension.”



Graph showing the different dimensions.  
Source: Medium.com

## **Breaking Cubes, Finding Tension**

Dollner’s work is deeply tied to repetition, destruction, and tension. On the 19th of September, for the opening of the exhibition, each cube will be broken open, by Lily herself, to reveal what lies inside. Yet often, the bones inside, also made out of fragile plaster, will shatter in the process.

“It takes a long time and a lot of energy to break these cubes,” she says. “There’s futility in it, because sometimes I fail to preserve the bone. But that failure creates tension. You don’t know what’s inside until it’s destroyed, yet you sense that something is there.” Destruction is then a fundamental element, making Lily Dollner able to activate, and free, the entity in those cubes.

This fragile suspense recalls her admiration for Bas Jan Ader, the Dutch artist whose practice balanced vulnerability and risk. “I think his work isn’t about falling or gravity itself, but that suspended moment before impact, before the box falls over him (Tea Party, 1972) for example—the tension of the inevitable. That’s what I want to capture: not just one kind of tension, but many coexisting.”



Bas Jan Ader, *Untitled (Tea Party)*, 1972, photo series, colour photographs.  
Source: Elephant Magazine website

### **Vulnerability as a Tool**

Vulnerability runs through Dollner’s practice, often by using her own body, like in the video part of the project “The artist as Consumer of Extreme Discomfort” where she presented herself in front of the camera in the vulnerable position of cutting her long hair. She sees this not as confession but as a method.

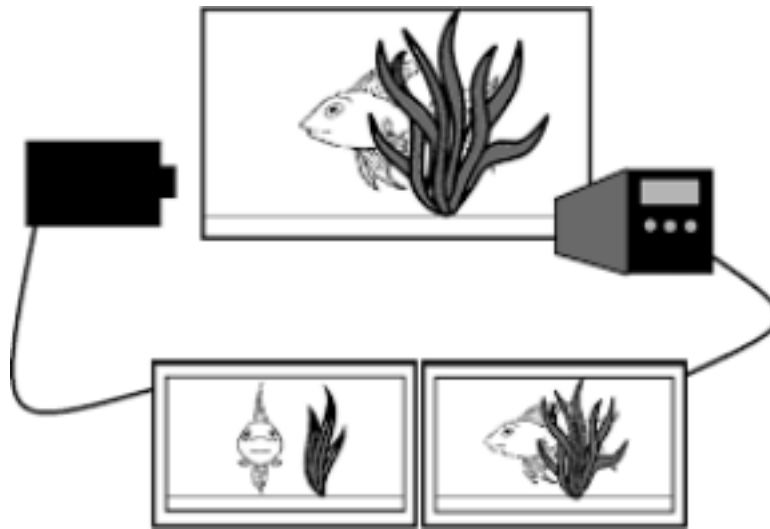


Lily Dollner, frame of the video part of the project *The artist as Consumer of Extreme Discomfort*, 2025. Source: Block C website

“For me, vulnerability is a tool to suggest the fourth dimension. You can’t depict it directly, but you can gesture towards it through empathy, risk, or rawness. Bas Jan Ader cried in front of a camera or set himself in precarious situations, not just to show emotion, but to point to something beyond our grasp.”

She links this feeling to physicist David Bohm’s holographic theory of the universe: “It’s like

a fish in a bowl, seen from multiple monitors, each giving a different angle but of the same reality. Bas Jan Ader's works create sympathy, you feel what he feels, even from a different perspective. I am trying to do the same. That's another way of reaching that extra dimension."



David Bohm's holographic theory of the universe, explanation graph of the fish in a bowl image.  
Source: Spiderum

### **Futility, Failure, and Rebellion**

The exhibition *Fall: Five Fails* asks artists from each venue that will take part in the project to reflect on failure. For Dollner, failure is not an end but a condition of process.

"I don't like the word 'failure' so much," she says. "When you expect something to fail, is it really failure? I see it more as miscommunication—when I fail to share what I intended. But failure can never only be negative. It proves you had a will, an intention. Every failure brings you closer to discovery."

Her practice embraces futility deliberately. In her earlier project "A Way", she engaged in long, fruitless travel as an artistic medium. "Doing something repetitive and useless is a rebellion against the capitalist obsession with productivity. A lot of people work very hard and are never rewarded for it. Nature doesn't work on that linear promise. By doing fruitless work, you train yourself not to accept the system as inevitable, to reconcile the meaning of labour against the fraught presumption that we live in a meritocracy"

For Dollner, "unproductiveness" is both resistance and method. "Because sometimes doing something the long way is how you get a lot more out of it. I think that if you spend a really long time doing something that could have been done quicker, there's more humanity in it. So in trying to be too useful, you actually get closer to uselessness. Then the theory is that perhaps by trying to be useless, you get closer to understanding what usefulness is."

### **Silly and Serious**

Dollner finds kinship with Bas Jan Ader not only in themes of vulnerability and risk, but also in a refusal to separate seriousness from play. "He wasn't afraid of being silly, and neither am

I. I take silliness very seriously. Something can be silly and serious at once. I think the most serious things often are also silly.”

This fluidity extends to her use of mediums. For her, materials are secondary. “The medium I’m most in love with is an idea, a thought, or even a conspiracy theory. That’s the constant. The objects are just tools to communicate that research.”

### **Art as Research**

Dollner resists seeing art as an end in itself. “I’m not in love with art as an idea. What matters to me is the research it allows. Historically, artists were scientists—people experimenting with how we perceive the world. I think art still has that potential.”

Asked about her artistic future, she laughs. “People keep inviting me to do projects, so I keep going. But for me, it’s not about the success or the objects: it’s about getting closer to this thing I can’t yet name. Recently it’s been the fourth dimension, before that it was futility. Every project crystallizes it a bit more.”

Her works suggest that failure is not an end but an opening, that futility is a method, and that vulnerability is a tool for grasping what cannot be grasped. In her cubes—fragile, futile, alive—one feels a tension that hints at something just beyond reach: a fourth dimension.

### **Performance**

On the 19th of September 2025, I attended the performance that I anticipated in this article: for the opening of the collective project “Fall: Five Fails” Block C presented Lily Dollner, her fourth dimensional sculpture, and its destruction.

The sculpture was placed in the middle of the room, and on the wall behind the artist, the video of her cutting her hair, mentioned already in the article above, was presented. The sound of the video was overwhelming with her crying filling the room and creating a suggestive and emotional environment. Lily Dollner’s tears and laments were juxtaposed with the sound of the hammer and the chisel against the plaster of each cube. Hence the binary that she referred to during our conversation, one project doesn’t have to either be emotional or mechanical, but instead there can be a combination, the coexistence of both polars in one room, in one experience.



Lily Dollner, *The artist as Consumer of Extreme Discomfort*, performance, 2025, Block C, Groningen. Photo by: Marinus Augustijn

Lily Dollner during these mechanical, almost industrial movements was behind the sculpture, intent to extrapolate the bones out of each cube. It is common to have the stereotypical idea of the egocentric artist taking the space of the exhibition, especially when talking about performative art. However, that was not the case for Lily Dollner's performance. Although her face, her crying, and her presence filled the room, the real central focus remained the cube. It was as if the cube was brought -back perhaps- to life by Lily Dollner, and its activation, aliveness, was the true main character of Block C.

The tension, the same that she mentioned talking about the search for the fourth dimension in Bas Jan Ader's works, is the central element of the performance: we, in the audience, are waiting for her to succeed or fail in extrapolating each plaster bone, and we are hanging on every chisel strike.

Lily Dollner, in her latest project *The artist as consumer of extreme discomfort*, succeeds in representing what she so thoroughly researched on: an entity, a three-dimensional object in which, thanks to its activation, you can see the shadow of the fourth dimension, its aliveness.



Lily Dollner, *The artist as Consumer of Extreme Discomfort*, performance, 2025, Block C, Groningen.

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## 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.

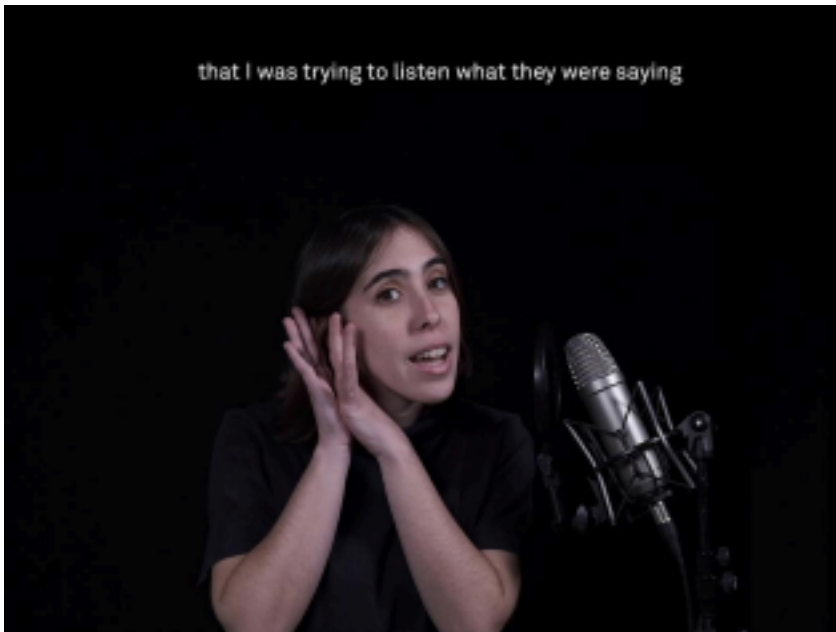
The hierarchy is not only for languages but also for certain dialects or accents, as they are

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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## Anastasija Kekš: Playing With Failure

Ludovica De Cesare

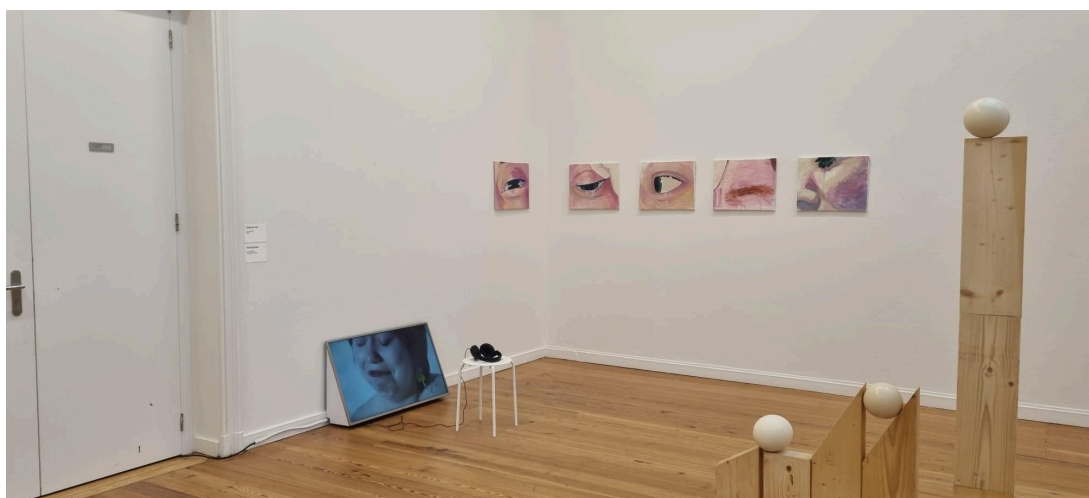


Poster Fall: Five Fails for Minerva by Noemi Bohlken

For artist and Minerva student Anastasija Kekš, failure is not something to fear, but something to play with. In her creative process, mistakes and setbacks are not endpoints but opportunities. “Failing is a natural event in the creation process, and it is often an excuse to learn,” she says. “I want to see failure as something to play with.”

This outlook directly resists the prevailing notion in the art world that failure is synonymous with stagnation, loss of expression, and even the inability to sustain a career. For Kekš, failure is not the opposite of success—it is part of the journey toward it.

### Vulnerability on Display



Anastasija Kekš, *I am sorry* and *For crying*, 2025, Acrylic paint on canvas and video. Picture by Anastasija Kekš

Her works for the Minerva addition to the exhibition *Fall: Five Fails*—the paintings *I Am Sorry* and the video *For Crying*—may appear at first to contradict her playful stance. Deeply inspired by Bas Jan Ader's *I Am Too Sad to Tell You*, the former shows drawings of the artist herself crying and the latter shows Keks crying in front of a camera. Both pieces, however, do not use failure as material but instead represent the feeling of being a failure itself: failure is then used as a theme by Keks.

“I grew up in a societal context where it was very rare to see people get sad,” Keks recalls. “I haven’t seen many people crying growing up. I think I internalised crying as something bad, something you should be ashamed of. I also feel the stereotype of women who can’t cry without being labeled as ‘too emotional.’ I want to challenge that.”

Vulnerability therefore becomes central to her practice—together with the discomfort that comes with exposing it. “I was fighting myself while creating these two works. I thought: nobody should see this, nobody will want to see this. I was also afraid that my tears would be romanticised. There’s already this cliché: ‘a crying woman is so beautiful.’ Crying is beautiful to me, because of the rawness and realness that comes with it. That’s why I am interested in portraying tears: I am interested in vulnerability itself.”



Bas Jan Ader, *I am too sad to tell you*, 1970-71, 16mm film. Source: Museum Boijmans

### **Failure as Privilege**

Keks also recognizes that the ability to fail is not equally available to everyone, but that it is indeed deeply privileged. “Being able to fail is a privilege—not everyone can afford it,” she explains. “I feel privileged to be in the Netherlands, to study art with the support of my family. Without that, maybe I couldn’t even be an artist. I want to believe that in the future, failure won’t cost people their lives or careers. That everyone can experiment and try again. For me, art is full of failing, doubting, trying again. You need failure to become better.”

Her reflections also expand to art history, where the voices of women and non-Western artists remain marginal. “In art history, most of what we learn is about white men from Europe or the U.S. I’m starved for other voices. When I finally had a course about global artists, it was like, ‘Hell yes, they exist, they matter!’ That inspired me.”

### **The Business of Being an Artist**

While Keks sees failure as necessary, she also critiques how the art world often commercialises this fragile process. Young artists, she observes, are pressured to constantly self-promote.

The expectation to be both artist and entrepreneur weighs heavily. “As an artist, you’re not only an artist. You have to be a businessman too, constantly saying ‘this is me and my art.’ It takes away all the poetry of art. It feels like you’re doing it not only for art, but also for money. And then—when does it become more about one and less about the other?”

### **Performing the Strain**

Keks has even staged this tension through performance. Fascinated by consumerism and the pressures of capitalism, she created a piece in which she played the role of an auction host “selling” her own body parts. Dressed in a self-made costume, she offered a hand, an eyeball, and finally a heart to her audience. One participant “bid millions” for the heart; Keks handed it over, spat fake blood, and collapsed in mock death.

“That’s how I feel when I have to promote myself,” she reflects. “Like I’m selling parts of my body, pieces of my heart. It feels like lying sometimes, or making things look more beautiful than they are.”

### **Stuck in a bubble**

When you study or make art, you often surround yourself with artists or enthusiasts. This safe and inspiring environment can often alienate you from the wider world. It reinforces the elitist boundaries of the art field, where those without the proper background may feel excluded.

Failure, futility, and repetition are sometimes used in art to bridge this divide by foregrounding the human, imperfect and relatable. Yet for Keks, this strategy can backfire. “It is even harder if the artist in question is famous and gets to earn much from their work. How can they relate with the audience, when people have to work and they can just earn by failing in something? Not everyone gets that privilege.”

This gap in understanding is not just economic but educational. Works such as Duchamp’s *Fountain*, often hailed as a turning point in modern art, may appear to the uninitiated as nothing more than a urinal. Intentions and ideas now hold as much weight as skill, but the tools to decode them are not accessible to everyone.

At the same time, Keks observes how over-commercialization and digital technologies desensitize audiences. AI-generated art, for example, makes creation appear effortless, erasing the labor and reflection behind an artwork. “There is often a lot of work before the completion of the final art piece that takes time and study. However, the public sees only its final condition.” An example brought up by Anastasija Keks explaining the difficulty to grasp the meanings or intentions behind performative art, is Bas Jan Ader’s *Nightfall*. “Even today, after these years studying and practicing, I would still look at many artworks like “What is this? Why do I need to admire this and why does this have such a high position? I could have done it!”



Bas Jan Ader, *Nightfall*, 1971, 16mm film. Source: Museum Boijmans

For Keks, education and practice are the best ways to close this gap: “Everybody should make art, even if you think it is bad. Any art is good!”

### **Finding the Right Medium**

However, it is complicated to find the right medium to fully express yourself and your creativity, and Anastasija Keks knows something about it, as she is currently experimenting with different ones in order to explore both failure and vulnerability. Though a design student specializing in illustration, she moves across painting, performance, and video. “I was raised by YouTube, and I was influenced by edits. Making videos was more of a hobby for me at the beginning. I do enjoy it and it helps to portray rawness: In this case with *For Crying*, thanks to the video medium, I could really focus on the eyes and it made me self-reflect. The video came naturally. I want people to feel something in front of my work—uncomfortable perhaps. I have no idea how people felt. But I hope they felt something. That was my goal.”

### **Bas Jan Ader’s Influence**

Both *I Am Sorry* and *For Crying* are deeply influenced— and a clear reference— to Bas Jan Ader’s *I Am Too Sad to Tell You*. While initially an assignment at Minerva, Ader’s figure has become a lasting influence. “Our teacher told us about his life, his childhood and his background, and every time I would hear about it, I would cry.”

Her admiration was cemented during a visit to the retrospective in Hamburg. “After going there I became a fan of Bas Jan Ader, because he is so funny! I love when artists don’t take themselves too seriously. Sometimes being silly is the best. His way of phrasing things is especially smart to me. Think of *I Am Too Sad to Tell You*: he said everything, I understood everything, in one sentence.”

### **Conclusion**

For Anastasija Keks, failure is not a mark of weakness but a site of play, vulnerability, and resistance. Her works remind us that failure is not equally distributed—some can afford to stumble, while others cannot. At the same time, her practice questions the elitism of the art world and the strain of constant

self-promotion under capitalism. By embracing crying, discomfort, and even mock death, she insists on the humanity behind art-making. In doing so, she carves out a space where failure can be both privilege and necessity, both painful and liberating—a force that shapes art as much as success ever could.

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## The Unspectacular Fall

by Ludovica De Cesare



Poster "If you Fail, Fail Again, Fail Better" for Pictura. 19/09/2025-19/10/2025

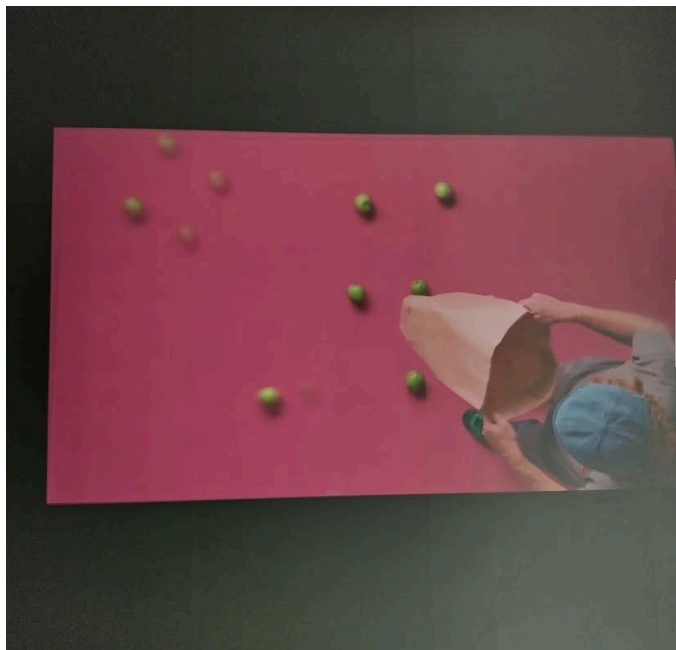
Failure, for Feiko Beckers, is not about catastrophe. It's not the burning building, the career-ending collapse, or the tragic fall from grace. Failure, for him, is the small, familiar, inevitable kind. That same kind that lives quietly in the everyday: the bag that rips open, the fruit that slips from your hand, the conversation that doesn't land.

In *If you fail, fail again, fail better*, the recent exhibition at Pictura, part of the collective project *Fall: Five Fails*, Beckers returns to these micro-failures with his signature mix of dry wit and precision. His video work features a simple, absurd act: a bag tearing, again and again. Nothing changes, nothing progresses. The scene loops, as if time itself is caught in a mundane glitch.

“I’m interested in the kinds of failures that are normal, predictable, familiar,” he tells me.

“There’s no drama in them, no spectacle. But they’re human. And they’re everywhere.”

His fascination with the everyday echoes throughout his career. Beckers turns accidents into performances of absurd clarity. Each one is carefully staged, perfectly timed. “When I make the work, there’s no room for failure,” he says, smiling. “It’s ironic, but true. To stage failure, you have to be in control.”



Rise and Stumble, Feiko Beckers, Pictura, 2025

### **Failure Without Redemption**

*Failing forward*, the expression often featured in the self-help culture, sees failure as productive, as necessary to move forward and to grow. However, Becker's view is slightly different.

“I was once invited to speak at this thing called a *Fuckup Night*,” he recalls. “Everyone there wanted to talk about how failure leads to success: one step back, two steps forward. But that’s not how I see it. I don’t want failure to become productive. I want to stay in failure.”

For Beckers, failure isn't a lesson — it's a state of being. It's what makes stories worth telling. "If someone tells me their trip went perfectly, I don't care. But if they say it was a disaster: that's interesting. There's humanity in that. That's what makes a story interesting: failure."

### **A Clean Chaos**

Beckers' works are immediately recognizable: carefully arranged interiors, clean geometry, balanced colors. Yet, within that order, something always goes wrong. An object slips, a movement falters, a sequence repeats too long.

That tension, between control and accident, precision and absurdity, is central to his practice. "I like filming something stupid, like fruit falling, but treating it as if it's the dramatic climax of a very serious film," he says. "The contrast between trivial action and cinematic seriousness creates its own humor."

And humor, for Beckers, is essential. "It's a form of generosity," he explains. "When I perform, I introduce myself, I tell the audience what will happen, how long it will take. Humor does the same thing: it opens a door. It invites people in."

### **Between Intimacy and Distance**

Though Beckers' works often feature himself or people close to him, his mother, his brother, friends, he's careful not to let them become confessional. "Every time the work felt too personal, I'd introduce something artificial," he says. "It's a way of keeping distance. There's always a negotiation between sincerity and artifice."

That balance gives his performances a strange tenderness. He's not trying to confess or expose, but to connect. Vulnerability, for him, isn't raw emotion, it's a structure of openness.

“When you’re honest with an audience, they feel it,” he says. “They start to open up too. Sometimes people even share their own stories during performances. That’s beautiful, but also a little scary. You realize how much people crave that space where it’s okay to fail.”

### **The Politics of Ineptitude**

Failure, Beckers suggests, can also be liberating, especially in an art world obsessed with skill, innovation, and success. “Performance allows you to work without needing technical mastery,” he says. “There’s space for mistakes, for experimenting.”

As a teacher, he often reminds his students that their weaknesses can be creative tools. “Use your inabilities as material,” he tells them. “Don’t hide what you can’t do, make it visible.”

It’s a quiet form of resistance: one that undermines the pressure to perfect, to polish, to perform success. Failure, in Beckers’ hands, becomes not just a theme, but an ethics: an alternative to progress.

### **Falling vs. Stumbling**

When I bring up Bas Jan Ader, the Dutch artist who famously disappeared at sea while attempting to cross the Atlantic in a small sailboat, Beckers’ tone sharpens. “Everything Ader did before that moment wasn’t dangerous,” he says. “Then suddenly he sails off alone? It doesn’t fit. It’s too romantic, too tragic.”

For Beckers, Ader’s *fall* is too big, too final. He prefers the *stumble*, the small, recoverable kind of failure that doesn’t destroy, but interrupts. His recent work makes that distinction explicit: “I’ve stumbled more than I’ve fallen,” he says in the video. “Falling sounds dramatic: stumbling feels real.”

Stumbling, he suggests, is closer to life. “It’s not about falling apart,” he says. “It’s about tripping, hesitating, continuing anyway. That’s what we do, all the time.”

### **Embracing the Awkward**

Watching Beckers’ work, there’s a sense of comfort in the absurd. He offers us permission to fail, to be clumsy, to exist in the middle of things. His characters, often himself, keep missing their marks, yet never stop performing.

“It’s not about laughing at failure,” he says, “but about laughing with it. There’s a difference. It’s not mockery. It’s recognition.”

Maybe that’s what makes his art so quietly disarming: it mirrors the fragile rhythm of daily life: full of repetition, hesitation, and small collapses that somehow keep us moving forward.

In Beckers’ world, failure is not the end of the story. It’s the story itself.

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