

On the possibility of endless failure



Visual artist Daniel Arsham discusses the power of perseverance, being willing to fail, and understanding the role of luck.

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As told to Katy Diamond Hamer, 1556 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Beginnings](#), [Success](#), [Process](#), [Focus](#), [Failure](#).

What was the experience like for you writing the book? As someone who knows the art world well—as you describe it with a capital “A”—I found a lot to relate to. How did the book come to fruition?

I came up with the idea after I did a big show at Perrotin in New York titled “The Secret History of Everything” in 2020. I’m coming up on twenty years of working with him. I started thinking about actually writing a book more seriously during the pandemic, since I had so much extra time.

The book has a narrative, storytelling quality, but at times it also feels almost like a diary.

I think part of the reason why the book reads so easily is that I didn’t write it—I spoke it, about 90 percent. It is based on an outline of areas and topics I wanted to address. A friend of mine who is a writer helped me stitch it together with suggestions and questions to answer. You can almost hear me speaking in the writing. I worked with an editor to pare back the recordings and edit them down. The idea of writing something on a keyboard was so daunting to me that this was a really great way—dictating and letting the stories flow very easily.



Arsham studio

What was it like for you to talk about some of the more personal things, such as memories from childhood?

A lot of those stories are personal, but there's not really much about my family. It's really about how the idea of entering the art world when I finished college felt so daunting to me and so intimidating. Part of the drive behind the book was to demystify a little bit of that. It's not only for people within the art world, but for other creators as well. If you're a musician and you look at the recording industry, it can seem incredibly intimidating.

I went through different areas of my life and experiences, and I recorded a lot more than what I included in the book. When I originally put the text together, I actually did it 100 percent chronologically, which felt a bit too obvious as a way of organizing the chapters. I ended up moving things around so that they were pieced together differently. I had the idea of quoting a "mentor," which, when you read the book, you will understand, and that became a theme throughout.

DANIEL ARSHAM

ARSHAM

FAILURES,
DISASTERS,
DETOURS
AND HOW
I MADE A
CAREER AS
AN ARTIST.



FUTURE RELIC

Future Relic cover

Do you see the book as didactic?

I tried to think about how I could give others a guide—a rule book for how to navigate some of the daunting

feelings that come up. I wanted to instill an idea that I came to realize was deeply embedded in the book—how many times I didn't actually succeed.

There's a whole story about the Whitney Biennial that I was never in. All of these things were forming my way of working, which is very much about perseverance and accepting failure.





Arsham studio

I have that story highlighted in the copy of the book I have. You tell it in such a visual way, and as a reader I felt like I was in that space with you, opening the envelope. There was such intense disappointment in not getting into the Whitney Biennial, especially after meeting with curator Chrissie Iles. Yet you quickly respond with a list of things that you've learned from failure: "Failure encourages growth, learning, and innovation. Failure builds resilience," and so on. What helped you gain this type of insight?

It was never so formulated in my mind until I wrote the book. It was more of a practice I had for approaching big goals in life.

In creative spaces, it's not like you have a career where you're working for someone else. Instead, you're inventing your own job and your own reality. You have to make your own work schedule, run your own business—all of those things.

The biggest thing for me was this feeling that failure is possible to accept, but regret is very difficult to accept. So you have to be willing to do these things and accept failure. I promise that you're never going to go back and say, "Fuck, I didn't try that thing." I didn't go for it, or I didn't get that close to being in the Whitney Biennial, for instance. I went after that in every way that I could. And okay, I failed at it, but I have no regrets about that scenario.

In the first chapter, you talk about power in a very direct way, which I appreciate. I'll just share the part that I highlighted:

"We often associate power with domination, danger, and evil, but there's more to it. Any scenario in life contains a power dynamic—either you're exercising power or it's being exercised upon you. You have to understand this in order to play the game of life or the business of art. Most people don't want to. They want to avoid it. But avoiding the game of power is death in the art world or in any creative world. The game is there—either you play it or it plays you."

Can you say more?

A lot of power has to do with intimidation, because the art world deals with a lot of money and very powerful people who operate large businesses, or who are famous in their own right. There's a lot of ego and many personalities that come into the world, so it's natural that there are going to be various power structures and games happening all around.

Some of it is just accepting that this is the way the art world works, and there's probably more of a power dynamic struggle within it than in a lot of other industries where, I think, people might be more collaborative—or at least not sharks in the water. Sometimes you just have to accept, "Okay, this person is never going to assist me. This person is never going to do anything that's going to push my career forward." Everyone has their own agenda in the art world, and you start to realize that, me too, I have my own agenda.



Arsham studio

So besides the fact that I think what the book really speaks to is perseverance, what are your thoughts on luck?

Yeah, luck is manufactured. It's this idea that talent exists, but it has to find you working. You can't just say, "Oh, I'm going to be talented at this thing that I never did." You may be predisposed to it. Luck is the same way. Luck can find you, but it has to find you working. The more you work, the more you're putting your work out there. Inevitably, somehow luck is going to find you.

It's about failure, perseverance, and the willingness to continue. I was still living in my studio until I was 31, without hot water or a kitchen. That was right at the inflection point when my work started to gain a lot of traction. And I've been very successful over the last decade. I would say that it lasted about 15 years, and up until that point there was no guarantee. I was living in this scenario, continuing on with no guarantee, and you have to accept that this could be your reality forever. If you're not willing to do that, you probably don't have the chance to succeed.

That was very frustrating for me when I taught a class at Cooper. There were a couple of students who were just like, "I just want to skip to the end part."

And I said, "No. You will never reach the end part. You cannot skip it. That's not even the point." Even if you could magically get to the point where you're super successful, you're going to fail immediately once you get there. I think that most people just don't have the willingness to fail for ten years. That's what separates many of the people who are ultra successful. You mentioned having interviewed [Takashi \[Murakami\]](#) for *TCI*—he is an absolute maniac of production.

I like how you give—or rather insert—history into some of the objects that you've created, like a vintage camera—hence the series and book title, *Future Relic*, right? It's almost as if you've placed the viewer—or in this case

the reader—into an episode of *Star Trek*. You, the artist, are in the future, coming back and saying, “Well, what would be the items of today that people would look at with mystery?”

Future Relic, the book, was really an experience for me, similar to making an artwork or an exhibition. I’ve worked hard, I’ve had failures, but now I’m doing well. I have done my own thing, which I’m proud of. It’s like you get to this point in your career where you’re like, “Oh, I’ve kind of made it,” right?

Daniel Arsham recommends:

Casio Casiotone MT-500

Pentax K1000

Porsche 993A

mentorship

crystals

Name

Daniel Arsham

Vocation

visual artist, author

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