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update





# The Art of Failure and the Unwritten Rules in Life

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ELLEN HARVEY

by Jonathan Cohn

*Over the past 12 years, Ellen Harvey ([www.ellenharvey.info/](http://www.ellenharvey.info/)) has exhibited her art pieces around the world, from Berlin, Germany to Lahore, Pakistan. In the process, she has garnered an impressive reputation for both her intriguing uses of materials, from Polaroid™ film to etched mirrors, and her playfully devastating institutional critiques. She is an artist, though she has never felt comfortable with the term, and seems at times to question the term's relevance in a society where everyone seems to be creative. As someone who has taught and lectured in a number of prestigious universities, such as Yale and the University of Michigan, she is also currently concentrating on a number of exhibitions and her one-and-a-half-year-old son, who delightfully interrupted the interview on a number of occasions to discuss his impressive collection of hats.*

JC: It seems that your life has taken some interesting turns. For example, in 1993 you graduated from Yale Law School. How did that translate into a career as an artist?

EH: At the time I was an art school dropout and went to law school in part to cheer up my parents. After I graduated, I worked for almost three years for a large international corporate law firm in Manhattan until I'd saved enough to live for a year without a job, at which point I quit to be an artist. If it didn't work out, I figured I would just get another job, like everyone else. I was very lucky and ended up showing almost immediately. I took part in the Whitney Independent Study Program, instead of doing an MFA, in part because it was so much cheaper and didn't take so much time—I was in a big hurry to get started

after having spent so much time and energy doing something else.

It's interesting, for a long time I thought that my law degree had nothing to do with my artwork. I also felt it was somehow embarrassing, so I didn't tell anyone. But after a while I realized that the questions that interest me the most about art are also those that interest me the most about the law: How do people decide on what the rules are, either in art or the law? How do people decide what constitutes art, who is an artist? How do people come to such a consensus? My interests have always been centered on these larger social structures—the unwritten rules in life. So the two fields are connected for me, after all.

JC: Many of your art pieces seem to point to these “unwritten rules” specifically by pointing to the inabilities and failures of art and museums—the ways in which these institutions, and art in general, often seem to be inherently designed to fail at what they say they set out to do. Specifically, *The Inevitable Failure of Restoration* (2008) (see page 5), a video performance of you trying to restore/recreate the wallpaper in a room by painting the original design over the paint that is covering the wallpaper—to no avail.

EH: Yes, as part of the 2008 Whitney Biennial, I asked to make a work in a beautiful paneled room in the Park Avenue Armory. In 1992, Paul Haydon had peeled back some of the horrible institutional paint in one part of the room in order to reveal the beautiful hand-painted wallpaper that was hidden beneath. It would have been impossible for me to restore the whole room of course, but I felt a strong urge to try. So this video was about my symbolic attempt at a restoration. The video shows me trying to paint the design freehand (which is inevitably not as good as the original) and then, because I’m such a drama queen, the paper bursts into flames. The video was installed in the room so that the viewer could compare my “painting” to the original.

JC: Do you think of this kind of failure as being

an inherent part of the art-making process? Is there always a large gap in your work between what you intended to create and the finished project?

EH: Failure is inevitable, in some sense. But I think of failure as a good thing, as part of the human condition. Humans never quite accomplish what they want, and in art this disconnect is particularly poignant. Every piece you make is haunted by the dream of the piece you would have made if you had more time or more resources or were just a better artist. That’s why the main work I made for the Whitney Biennial (see page 9) was titled *The Museum of Failure*—I thought it would be best to address my insecurities head on.

JC: How do you think this high potential for failure makes art a unique practice in society, as opposed to other professions, like the law?

EH: The most important thing about art for me is the way it affects people and connects them. Most of the voices we hear are essentially those of large powerful entities, like corporations and governments and their representatives. We seldom get to hear nonexperts speak. I feel that ideally the artist stands in for the individual who perhaps doesn’t really know what they’re

talking about but who has something to say. Artists, like amateurs, never have the resources to really accomplish our goals. No artwork that I make will ever be able to compete with the titans of our media culture. In some ways, failure is my only option. Fortunately, I love failure. Everything interesting that happens in the world happens because someone failed or was trying to do something else. The only people who never fail, or think they never fail, are the megalomaniacs.

JC: So success is unhealthy, or a pathology?

EH: Success is just fine, but it’s important not to be complacent, to recognize that there’s room for improvement or that perhaps that a piece’s failure is the most interesting thing about it. Maybe succeeding too much is ultimately unhealthy. Everything in moderation. Although I’m not sure how success and failure should be measured. I certainly don’t believe in the market as the ultimate arbiter of value.

JC: Much of your work seems particularly interested in the failures of self-representation in art, especially through self-portraiture. This is particularly relevant to *Twins* (2001) (see page 7), a work in which you recorded both your face while drawing a self-portrait and the self-portrait



Twins, 2001

itself being created. Did you find that you were adequately represented by the finished self-portrait?

EH: I think I did that recording five times, and in my opinion none of the finished sketches were particularly good. Since I needed to keep my face and drawing within the frame, I was very uncomfortable. Part of the point of the recording is to show how much better the video is if you want to know what I look like. Video is just a much better technology of representation than pencil.

JC: Was it your intention to make an accurate self-representation?

EH: I was trying but that wasn't the primary motivation behind the work. It's very much about the fact that we live in a world of instant image gratification. Few people have any idea of the time and effort it takes to make a handmade image. Since the recording is in real-time, it actually gives a good sense of how long it takes to make a drawing, and it also gives the viewer a glimpse into the process that takes place in that highly romanticized place, the artist's studio. People often think the art process looks like Jackson Pollack having a really intense and fabulous time, but actually it's more often than



*Invisible Self-Portraits (Polaroids), 2006*



2008 Whitney Biennial

not rather dull. I'm always mystified by the fetishization of process. When I first showed *Twins*, I was deeply surprised that people were watching the whole thing. I didn't think anyone would want to sit and watch it for the entire half an hour.

JC: Is there anything about the process of making a self-portrait that makes it impossible to really represent yourself the way you think you look?

EH: Well, artists generally look quite serious in their self-portraits. I think it's because it's hard to hold a smile for that long. Also, staring at yourself in a mirror tends to make for an intense and slightly cross-eyed expression, no matter the general demeanor of the artist. You can be really happy and still end up looking like you just lost your cat.

JC: If the self-portrait ultimately fails to capture how the artist appears, in what ways do you think it succeeds?

EH: Self-portraiture traditionally was primarily an advertisement for the artist as an artist that showcased their skills and presented their artistic persona. For me, that means that self-portraiture is ideally situated if you're interested in exploring what it means to be an artist,

which is a fascinating profession in that way. Historically, anyone can declare themselves to be an artist. Of course, you'll need to generate some consensus if you want to actually live from your work. So these self-representations were often highly artificial constructs that are geared towards creating that consensus. They're a cliché. But clichés are clichés for a reason, and I love taking them to logical conclusions and seeing what happens. One example is *Invisible Self-Portraits (Polaroids)* (2006), where I took Polaroids of myself in mirrors with the flash on and then painted my obscured face onto wood panels. They're self-portraits in which my face is hidden and all you can see of me is my context and a big piece of expressive white paint. It's a piece that's also about painting as a technology of representation that has been superseded by photography. You'd never send someone a painting of yourself if they wanted to know what you look like. I used Polaroids, because like paintings they're unique singular objects that are also the product of a technology that's past its prime. However, unlike paintings which are subjective, frequently valuable, and take quite a bit of time to make, Polaroids are objective (especially compared to easily manipulated digital photography), disposable, and all about instant gratification. It makes for an interesting counterpoint. I made another series also called

*Invisible Self-Portrait* (2007) (see page 1) where I just used regular photographs and then found frames so that it would look as though you were actually looking in a mirror. As you can tell, I really like to paint flashes – they're a little bit of abstract joy in the middle of all that trying representation.

JC: What about in your portraits of others? At the 2008 Whitney Biennial, you sketched one hundred people and asked them to comment on how well they thought you had portrayed them (see page 9). Were you surprised by any of their responses?

EH: In 2001, I had done the same kind of portrait series, except I was drawing for free on the street. I'm pretty sure that my skills as a portraitist remained stable (if they didn't actually decline), but perhaps not surprisingly people were much more complimentary about their portraits when I was doing the project in the Whitney. They also wrote a lot about how much they enjoyed meeting me. On the street, people mainly complained that I hadn't made them good-looking enough.

JC: In fifteen minutes what attributes are you able to display in a portrait sketch?



EH: When things are going well, you can get the shape of the face, the general placement of the features. It really depends on how well the person is able to sit still. Some people insisted on smiling through the whole process, which was awful since the smile inevitably waxes and wanes, and I'd spend the whole 15 minutes erasing and redoing the mouth and teeth. The biggest problem is that in fifteen minutes it's impossible to do justice to people with exciting hair. Also everyone looks somewhat blonde because you don't have time to get the hair dark.

JC: Perhaps not surprisingly, you often use etched mirrors in your work, which is a more direct way of making people aware of their physical bodies and the space around them.

EH: I've always been fascinated by the cliché, "art holds a mirror up to nature," and I thought it would be fun make art that was an actual mirror. After some experimentation I discovered that if you engrave a mirror and illuminate it from behind you get a really beautiful kind of drawing in light. The first major piece I made using this technique was in 2005 for a solo show at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art celebrating their 200th anniversary. The Academy has such a beautiful building that I was worried that any installation I made would simply be

overshadowed; so, I thought I'd just recreate their incredible entrance hall. I ended up engraving a 360 degree drawing of the hall as if it had been abandoned in some dystopian future. It was a bit of a comment on the dwindling place that the academy has within contemporary society. I loved that viewers could see themselves in the piece and thereby in this sad future where art had no place.

JC: Even as you continue to make art that is on some level representational in nature, many of your pieces seem to suggest that this pursuit is ultimately impossible. What can you accomplish through such a project?

EH: This question is perhaps central to my work *The Irreplaceable Cannot be Replaced* (2008), a project which is all about the value of symbolic action. Dan Cameron had asked artists to come to New Orleans and make artwork out of debris for an exhibition at the Contemporary Art Center titled "Something from Nothing," and I just kept on thinking how I would feel if an artist were to make a work from the wreckage of my life. In the end, I decided that I'd rather have the artist replace some of my lost things, especially those that were irreplaceable. So that's what I tried to do. With the help of the *Times-Picayune*, I asked people to submit images and

descriptions of things that they'd lost to Katrina that were irreplaceable and offered to make seven paintings of those things that I would give to the participants at the end of the show. I got thirty responses eventually and decided to make thirteen paintings in all, choosing the recipients at random. It wasn't possible for me to make thirty paintings although I would have liked to. The stories were all incredibly moving and I ended up exhibiting them as well.

JC: How did the people respond to the paintings?

EH: The recipients all seemed very touched by the paintings and happy to have them. What was more interesting to me was that the narratives seemed to be as important to people as the paintings. Everyone wanted to get their framed narrative once the show came down. People seemed to feel very validated by having their stories exhibited in a museum context. They may just have been being polite. The truly impressive thing was that almost every participant wrote me a thank-you note. A culture of gentility still exists in New Orleans; they must have all have had very strict parents.

**Jonathan Cohn** is a doctoral student in the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA. He is currently interested in issues pertaining to auto-spectatorship and he has published papers on podcasting and video games.