

Kathleen Caprario  
Café 541, January 29, 2021

## OF WINNING...SO MUCH NOTHING

As if the relationship between one's self and one's artwork isn't complex enough for most creative folks, there's the task of navigating the often tumultuous waters between one's self as the maker and what others say about it. Sharing and receiving feedback, i.e., criticism, even when framed in the most positive manner can be stressful, create conflict, and cause self doubt to rise up and reduce to nothingness all one's prior accomplishments. A professional art career can be compared to an emotional seesaw with euphoric highs and heart-breaking lows. "I sold a piece, I won an award, they love me!" can be followed the very next day, heck, the next moment by "I'm no good, my work stinks, no one likes me."

Our ability as artists to be vulnerable and empathetic are two of our greatest strengths as creative makers and compassionate humans. However, the emotional toll and fragility of a creative life is real and manifests practically in terms of economic sustainability and subsistence as well as personal happiness. There's the well known trope of the "misunderstood genius" adopted by many—including non-geniuses—to explain away or justify falling short of being, well, on top. Of winning. The urgency placed on personal success is culturally installed at birth with its expectations tracking us throughout our lives and beyond. It may be cliché, but it's not unusual for under-rewarded creatives to soothe career setbacks and disappointment with the analgesic thought that their work will eventually be understood and valued when they're, uh, gone. Good luck.

Amy Abugo Ongiri is an associate professor and the Jill Beck Director of Film Studies at Lawrence University, Wisconsin. She's also a family friend. I had the pleasure of live streaming her 2020 Honors Convocation, "The Importance of Failure," the theme being—you guessed it—failure. It was brilliant.

"As a culture, we have tended to value winning over all other experiences but we are all going to fail a lot in life, and we need to learn early on what it means and how to think about it," Ongiri said. How to think about it, indeed. To embrace one's failures as a natural part of life and the creative process is realistic, healthy and can contribute toward overall growth and personal satisfaction.

Ongiri's thesis questions whether or not you can ever truly fail individually or is it only in comparison with others? To illustrate that point Ongiri cites the project, "Fourth," by artist and photographer, Tracey Moffat. On the occasion of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, Moffat captured the empty expressions of athletes who ranked an anticlimactic fourth-place in their events. No medal for you.

For a critique of winning and losing closer to home, artist and arts writer, Vicki Amorose presented her performance and video work, “Trophallacy” as part of Gray Space Project’s 2018 Tailgate Party for Art, hosted by Eugene Contemporary Art at Slightly Coffee’s former downtown Eugene location.

“Trophallacy” describes the Win/Lose paradigm, especially as it pertains to the arts, for what it is—a constructed hierarchy that services and maintains our cultural obsession with individual genius and celebrity through the creation of competitive systems that rank and segregate creative makers such as contests and awards selection. Amorose’s work, which included a golden trophy embedded with thorns, used well-crafted layers of wit and irony whose effect stripped away and laid bare the truth that belies the cultural tropes and clichés of success and our willing acceptance of them.

The Canadian designer and educator, Bruce Mau is well known for his “Incomplete Manifesto for Growth.” I’ve always had a soft spot for the fourth manifesto item, “4. Love Your Experiments As You Would An Ugly Child,” and its closing thought “...allow yourself the fun of failure every day.” Amen.

Now, I’m no Pollyanna. If anything, sarcasm and irony are my warm and fuzzy go-to places. I will say, however, that I’m the most successful failure I know—and I’ve never been happier.

668 words

#### **AMY ABUGO ONGIRI LINK:**

<https://blogs.lawrence.edu/profiles/2020/05/20/amy-ongiri-addresses-importance-of-failure-in-virtual-honors-convocation/>

#### **INFORMATION FOR IMAGES:**

Vicki Amorose  
“Best Art Trophy from Trophallacy”  
rose thorns, found object, metal  
2018  
Photo credit: Sunny Selby-Johnston

Tracey Moffat  
“Fourth”  
photograph  
2001

#### **BRUCE MAU LINK:**

<https://www.massivechangenetwork.com/bruce-mau-manifesto>