

apexart

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System Failure

submitted by: Harris Kornstein and Cara Rose DeFabio

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"Fail fast! Fail big! Fail often! Fail better!"

These oft-quoted Silicon Valley mantras celebrate the high-octane risk taking that has been the hallmark of the tech world. In start-up culture, creators earn points (and funding) for taking the biggest, boldest step, even if that takes them right off a cliff.

But who gets to fail? While technologies enable us to connect and create in new ways, they often intensify the inequities and injustices already present in our world, from racial biases and gender disparities to wealth gaps and job insecurity. In recent years, tech has produced some major blunders: AI assistants that can't parse the accents of non-native English speakers, real names policies that unfairly impact queer and trans people, and algorithms that incorrectly identify African Americans' faces, to name just a few. In this context we ask: who loses most when platforms fail? Who bears the consequences of iterating, pivoting, or bubbles bursting? And are some platforms truly too big to fail?

In SYSTEM FAILURE, we present a diverse group of media artists and culture makers whose work simultaneously critiques ideologies and instances of technological failure and also tactically engages breakdown itself. That is, while many artists bring to light omissions or discrimination in stories of success, others strategically build tools that are never meant to function properly, hack their way through loopholes in source code, or push systems further than they were meant to go.

This new art of failure occupies many forms: from the comical irreverence of Simone Giertz's flailing robots, to the deft scrutiny of Zach Blas and Jemima Wyman's video manipulation of Microsoft's quickly-turned-racist chatbot; or from Jenny O'Dell's wry digital collages of graphics found in publicly-available slide decks of failed startups, to Mimi Onuoha's sculptural attention to missing datasets. It is also popular within the darkly democratic domains of the web itself, from Tumblr's glitch aesthetics that revel in beautiful chaos, made tangible by Phillip Stearns' tapestries, to Youtube channels like FailArmy that promote the perverse attraction users have in watching our fellow humans blunder.

Presented in San Francisco, a hub not only of tech and art, but also myriad interconnected social movements, SYSTEM FAILURE shines a light on industries' and institutions' shortcomings by showcasing work by artists generally excluded by race, gender, sexual orientation, and/or ability, without being tokenized or forced to only speak about injustices. In addition to the work presented, it will include public events and hands-on workshops meant to discuss these issues and offer diverse participants opportunities to learn new skills, as well as tours for groups like Black Girls Code and Lesbians Who Tech.

Ultimately, SYSTEM FAILURE suggests that moments of disruption and collapse manifest in many ways, at different stages, and with different effects. Sometimes it's a failure to launch, to land, or to take root. At other times to hide, to see, to comply, or to surrender. Or even to adequately bend or break. And too often, it's an unwillingness or inability to hold tech culture accountable.

291 Church Street
New York, NY 10013
212.431.5270
info@apexart.org; www.apexart.org