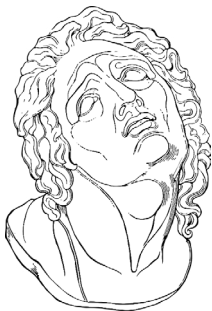


Hal Foster, *Fail Better: Reckonings with Artists and Critics*

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Rocco Memery recently completed a Masters in Modern and Contemporary Literature and Culture at the University of York. His dissertation examined the epistemological crises invoked by Samuel Beckett's appropriations of detective fiction at key points in his career. Rocco also has a keen interest in visual culture, taking an interdisciplinary approach to understanding works of literature and the ways in which literature and the visual arts intersect and diverge.



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Borrowing its title from Samuel Beckett's often-quoted maxim, "Try again. Fail again. Fail better", this anthology of essays (dubbed "reckonings" by the book's subtitle) encourages a measured view of art and criticism as more or less failed attempts at understanding one's historical moment.¹ Similar to his earlier study, *The Return of the Real* (1996), Hal Foster's recent publication *Fail Better: Reckonings with Artists and Critics*, traces the development of art and theory since the late 1960s but with a more immediate focus on how perspectives on art have shifted alongside developments in art criticism over the last six decades.² To accomplish this, the forty essays included in this volume draw inwardly from Foster's career as an art critic and historian. Boasting a "peripatetic perspective" on contemporary art, art criticism, and art history, *Fail Better* offers a multivalent, tripartite contribution.³ Firstly, it provides accessibility by housing Foster's disparately published essays and articles under one roof. Secondly, it is dynamic in scope – some pieces read like investigative biographical overviews, others like impassioned memoirs. Thirdly, the collection provides Foster with an opportunity to reevaluate and reframe his previous critical forays, fittingly evoking Beckett's play, *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), in which a reminiscent protagonist pores over the spools of his past.⁴ In this sense, Foster's anthology best represents a reckoning with himself – a reorientation of earlier ideas seen afresh.

Given that the anthology is largely free-form, Foster's introduction offers valuable guidance for navigating a potentially unwieldy text. In his efforts to justify the reprinting of these essays and articles, Foster presents himself as a refreshingly self-aware critic who is ready to admit the limitations he has discovered earlier in his career. Of these limitations, Foster reflects on the disappointing lack of diversity shown by the 'antecedents' era covered in section one of the anthology. Following the introduction, the collection is divided into three sections. The first two are concerned with artists ('antecedents' and 'contemporaries'), while the third and final section offers Foster's commentary on various critics, including himself. There are no concluding remarks. As mentioned above, the essays themselves are dynamic in scope, longer entries are typically ten to twelve pages in length, with shorter pieces usually ranging between six and eight pages.

Of the essays that resemble economically condensed overviews (such as the opening piece 'The Painter of Pop Life'), anecdotal criticisms are sprinkled in with a discernible level of restraint, as if Foster were reluctant to detract focus from the life lived and the legacy of the work in question. What is more common are the mutual influences shared between the artists, especially those belonging to the 'antecedents' section. The same names tend to crop up sporadically from essay to essay – Charles Baudelaire, Marcel Duchamp and Andy

Warhol. Another pattern emerges when the discussion broaches relevant theoretical contexts with Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Fredric Jameson each receiving numerous mentions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most explicit commentary on theory can be observed in the ‘critics’ section where differing viewpoints are often pitted against one another, as in the piece on Yve-Alain Bois, which offers comparisons between the critical approaches of Bois and Barthes.⁵

Since the text relies on such a varied assortment of artists, critics, theoretical schools and critical debates, the experience of reading *Fail Better* from cover to cover could be described as kaleidoscopic as well as peripatetic. This text is best recommended to readers with a comprehensive prior knowledge of modern and contemporary visual art and culture studies. To the acquainted reader, several stimulating topics reveal themselves. Some of these better inform influential movements of the past, as in Foster’s musings on the latent morbidity of pop art, as captured by antecedental artists such as Richard Hamilton and Warhol. Meanwhile, the essays that focus on contemporary artists are especially relevant to pressing matters and ethical dilemmas of the day. The piece on Cornelia Parker’s anti-monumental counterviolence recalls the disruptive and occasionally destructive actions taken against the art industry by proponents of the Just Stop Oil movement, meanwhile the essay on Ed Atkins prompts an insightful discussion on the uses and limitations of the ‘uncanny valley’ effect produced by computer-generated motion capture imagery.⁶

As a self-declared investigation of failure, *Fail Better* succeeds as a well-balanced anthology. Across forty essays, Foster’s focus engages in-depth with the lives and works of artists and critics, paying special attention to relevant social and historical factors throughout. Keen to advance his perspective through hindsight, the final two essays in the collection are the most personal, revisiting Foster’s own experiences and influence within the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art before concluding with a remarkably sober review of the edited volume *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*.⁷ In the latter piece, Foster’s self-perceived failures are keenly scrutinised as he reflects on the lack of women (save for one) included in the 1983 study, as well as a complete neglect of postcolonial discourse within the material included. As Foster himself admits, “most anthologies worth a damn are products of urgency and contingency”, and *Fail Better* is no exception.⁸ At face value, the book is a thorough collection of musings on a host of artists and critics, exploring several mediums of creative expression, from sculpture and painting to film, photography, collage, and computer simulation. Beyond this, the anthology reveals itself as a self-justification as much as a reckoning – a ratification of ideals and beliefs held together by the union of sound scholarship and personal anecdote.

References

1. Samuel Beckett, *Company / Ill Seen Ill Said / Worstward Ho / Stirrings Still* (London: Faber, 2009), 81.
2. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
3. Hal Foster, *Fail Better: Reckonings with Artists and Critics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2025), 362, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262552356/fail-better/>.
4. Samuel Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1990), 213-223.
5. Ibid., 322.
6. Ibid., 229-232; 263-268.
7. Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1983).
8. Hal Foster, *Fail Better: Reckonings with Artists and Critics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2025), 362.