

# No-gos, Incidents, Malfunctions and Errors: The Encyclopedia of Failed Performances

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## Abstract

Transcending conventional modes of documentation in NIME, this submission presents “No-gos, Incidents, Malfunctions and Errors: The Encyclopedia of Failed Performances”, an ongoing zine series where stories about “failed” performances are shared among the community. The issues of the zine are provocatively organised in an alphabetical order akin to an encyclopedia in stark contrast with the complex and often unclassifiable nature of the subject matter. Through an open call, we bring together first-hand accounts of moments when self-built instruments misbehave, systems jam, sounds fail to emerge, or live setups resist control. By collecting these stories and creating a space for sharing, our project aims to promote reflection on what these situations potentially reveal about artistic intention, situational adaptation, and the relationship between performers and technology.

## 1 Overview

No-gos, Incidents, Malfunctions and Errors is a project that investigates failure neither as a flaw nor a victory, but as an experience, especially within experimental music, multimedia performance, and DIY instrument practices. Traditional narratives of performance arguably tend to emphasise technical mastery and artistic success; in contrast, this project foregrounds the moments when things go wrong: when circuits misfire, mechanical systems jam, sounds fail to emerge, or a live setup goes awry. We treat these breakdowns as generative and revealing: rich sites for reflection, creativity, and meaning-making.

At its core, the project is built around personal narratives from practitioners who work with idiosyncratic, self-built instruments, custom interfaces, and bespoke performance systems. We invited artists, musicians, and performers to share first-hand accounts of “failed” performances. The project culminates in a collaborative zine that implicitly invites audiences to consider: What happens when performance does not go according to plan? How do breakdowns reshape creative processes and expectations? And what can the aesthetics of failure reveal about the relationship between artist, instrument, audience, and technology?

By reframing failure as an integral aspect of experimental performance, No-gos, Interruptions, Malfunctions and Errors contribute to contemporary discourse in performance studies, sound art, human-computer interaction, and art research. It encourages practitioners and audiences alike to embrace unpredictability, explore alternative narratives, and rethink how we understand success, error, and creative possibility.

## 2 Background

In NIME-related contexts, and more broadly in any creative experimental setups where prototypes are widely utilised, performances often do not go as planned thanks to bugs, malfunctions or other factors. Such occurrences, which we dub “failures” for convenience in this context, have been addressed within and outside the NIME community.

When the Studio For Electro Instrumental Music (STEIM) was still operative in Amsterdam, the artists there, upon Michelle Waisvisz’s advice, observed a no system reboot policy. This policy ensured that, when on stage, no matter what malfunction occurred to the setup, artists were called to face the situation without interrupting their performances.

Such a policy led to a variety of situations where artists on stage had to cope with non-working instruments, never-experienced-before bugs, and more awkward situations, but still perform (somehow). To further embrace this ethos,

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STEIM's former artistic director, Takuro Mizuta Lippit, gave, on several occasions, a short presentation titled *Dealing with Crashes*, in which he would present a series of videos showing situations where artists' setups did not function as planned. By highlighting these moments of breakdown, the presentation placed the concept of "failure" at the centre of the discussion.

Read alongside alternative views of failure in art/media theory, e.g., Cascone's "aesthetics of failure" in post-digital music [7], Menkman's account of glitch as negotiated between breakdown and commodification [18], and Halberstam's attention to failure as opening up non-normative ways of knowing and valuing [13], a widely present, controversial topic that is often underestimated by the mainstream becomes apparent: Failure has its own value. Within the NIME and associated communities, there is also interest in errors, malfunctions, glitches, crashes, etc. by understanding, reflecting on, and appropriating them: such as errors celebrated by DIY enthusiasts in making [21]; algorithmic unreliability that balance music retrieval for serendipitous discovery [10]; ML bias viewed as instrument-defining idiosyncrasies [6]; or juggling-oriented NIME that similarly frames failures as an integral part of expression [27].

Admittedly, many of the said works can be deemed essentially successful, while failure is raw material in their operation. This reflects the pluralism of what failure is and could be. More critical debate also extends the discourse beyond novel artefacts to performance ecology, by questioning how errors are perceived by its spectators (i.e., audiences) [11, 12], how errors are oscillated between success and failure through performer's mediation [2], and what aesthetic failures mean to performers both at practical and ontological levels [14, 25]. Norman et al.'s meta-reflections on NIME's pluralism could deepen our understanding: she argues for foregrounding the "lively openness" of what might be deemed failure over the closure implied by "success" - a kind of productive stance for making and performing [20].

In parallel, within NIME, there has been a long-standing debate regarding the role of documentation and its impact on the community [3, 4, 8]. Bin's call for a collaborative NIME history treats "community" itself as an object of inquiry - where the historical record is not a neutral mirror but a product of discourse that stabilises what gets recognised as "important" work [3]. It has helped foreground how documentation is inseparable from questions of representation, institution, and value formation in NIME. A similar view drives NIME towards outward-looking political and cultural accountability [19]. This type of practice often sees scholars developing community-facing, non-functional practices (e.g., design fiction, annotated portfolios) that surface tacit musical backgrounds and context-dependent values rather than treating "good work" as a single, discipline-bound standard [15, 16]. The long-lasting discourse on community and its attention to documentation have become the contextual basis for our practical implementation.

### 3 The Zine

As highlighted in the previous paragraphs, the concept of failed performances has been addressed in several contexts, and the practice of documenting NIMEs has been framed as relevant for long-term practices. However, documentation and repository efforts tend to focus on shareability and reproducibility of finished, legible artefacts and performances (e.g. NIMEhub as an early attempt to archive instrument designs) [5, 17]. Attention to documenting failure remains arguably scarce. This has become a deep motivation for our contribution: **we argue that the good practice of documenting projects can (and should) also be applied to failures.**

To this end, we propose "No-gos, Incidents, Malfunctions and Errors: The encyclopedia of failed performances", as a **zine** where members of the community can share their stories about situations where things on stage did not go according to plan. This proposition was then distributed in an **open call** with responses from the community presented in the form of a **foldable booklet** (aka single-sheet zine).

In the following subsections, we will describe the process that led to the definition of our contribution.

#### 3.1 Format Definition

The first part of our project consisted of defining a **format** for our project. In the series of brainstorming sessions, we reflected upon the fact that many descriptive elements that may be involved in failed experiences can often be difficult to describe and categorise, and the accounts that we may receive would likely vary in length, level of detail, focus, and tone of description.

To frame these heterogeneous accounts, we provocatively adopted the term "Encyclopedia", using it ironically to mock the positivist ambition of the traditional encyclopedia, based on the idea that knowledge can be neatly ordered and exhaustively classified, while addressing a subject that resists clear definition and stable taxonomy.[22]. Out of respect for the diversity and originality of performers' accounts of failure, and recognising that imperfection is an inherent part of the thermodynamic nature of the world [24], we chose a creative, flexible, and tangible format — a **zine**.

Producing paper-based zines aligns with approaches associated with critical making [23], where the form and material production of an artefact are understood as part of the critical inquiry itself. In this sense, assembling and circulating small printed objects foregrounds the processes through which knowledge is produced.

The choice of zines also draws on traditions of DIY and independent publishing, which have historically provided space for voices and experiences that do not easily fit within institutional or standardised formats [1]. Finally, the modular format supports incremental growth: while the alphabet provides a finite framework, additional stories can always be added to letters that have already been covered, allowing the “encyclopedia” to constantly evolve.

The “encyclopedia” will therefore take the form of a series of small zines, each corresponding to a letter of the Latin alphabet. This structure establishes a finite framework—twenty-six possible entries, while remaining flexible. If the project expands over time, additional stories can simply be added to letters that have already been covered or the “alphabet” itself can be extended.

We then considered several possible titles and selected “No-gos”, “Incidents”, “Malfunctions”, and “Errors”. These words reflect the pluralistic usage of wordings that indicate a “failed” performance. Furthermore, its acronym, N.I.M.E (or NoInMaEr), is a nod to a substantial community (although not the only one involved) that is concerned with this work. The subtitle “The encyclopedia of Failed Performances” serves to further clarify aim, scope and structure of the project.

Lastly, we agreed to publish the stories anonymously to protect the privacy and reputation of contributors, unless they explicitly request otherwise.

### 3.2 Open Call and Community Action

After defining the format and the title of the project, we launched an open call to collect stories about failed performances.

To fulfill this task, we created a webpage <sup>1</sup> and an email profile specifically for the initiative, and spread this open call within the experimental music and multimedia arts community.

More specifically, the call was distributed through relevant mailing lists, published on social media, and directly sent to members of the authors’ network of collaborators.

What we asked the contributors was to provide via email:

- A written account of a performance that you consider a failure (we recommended 300 to 800 words).
- One word that, in the contributor’s opinion, captures the essence of the story.
- Optional: Photo and/or video documentation of the story.

In the call, contributors were given complete freedom in how to write their submissions. Stories could take different forms—such as short narratives, anecdotes, poems, or other textual formats—allowing authors to choose the style that best suited their experience. Rather than imposing strict formal constraints, the call only provided recommendations regarding the ideal length of the contributions so that the texts could fit within the format of the zines. To clarify the spirit of the initiative, an example story was also included.

In addition, participants were asked to provide a single word characterising their story. This word would serve as a tentative entry point for associating the contribution with a specific letter of the alphabet. While contributors were invited to propose this term, we specified that the editorial team retained the possibility of modifying it if necessary to accommodate the alphabetical structure of the publication better. Finally, the open call clearly stated the project’s anonymity policy, allowing contributors to publish their stories without attribution if they preferred.

The call was initially launched, including a deadline, and later on kept open as an ongoing project. The call received a positive response in terms of both informal feedback and reception of stories from the community. At the time this text is written, we can cover approximately 50% of the alphabet.

After gathering first-hand accounts from practitioners, we edited these contributions into a self-designed zine series, developing its format and layout. The stories are organised alphabetically in a deliberately provocative manner, inspired by the structure of Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*. The alphabetical structure of the zine loosely draws on the encyclopedic tradition of organising knowledge, while applying this ordering to the often messy and unpredictable stories of failed performances[9].

### 3.3 Design of the Zine

After collecting an initial set of stories, the project moved into the design phase of the printed platform itself. The result is a foldable zine produced from a double-sided sheet that can be folded into a small book-like object. (fig 2 - fig 1 - fig 3) This approach allows the publication to remain lightweight, easy to reproduce, and adaptable to different contexts of distribution.

To facilitate printing and circulation, the layout is based on a single A3 sheet that is folded into eight equal sections (fig 4) and, through a cut along the centre, assembled into a small pamphlet (Attachment 2 shows a video of the zine’s configuration). This format supports a modular arrangement of the material and allows different types of content—stories, editorial text, and visual elements—to coexist within a compact structure.

<sup>1</sup><https://chihauccisoilconte.eu/noinmaer>

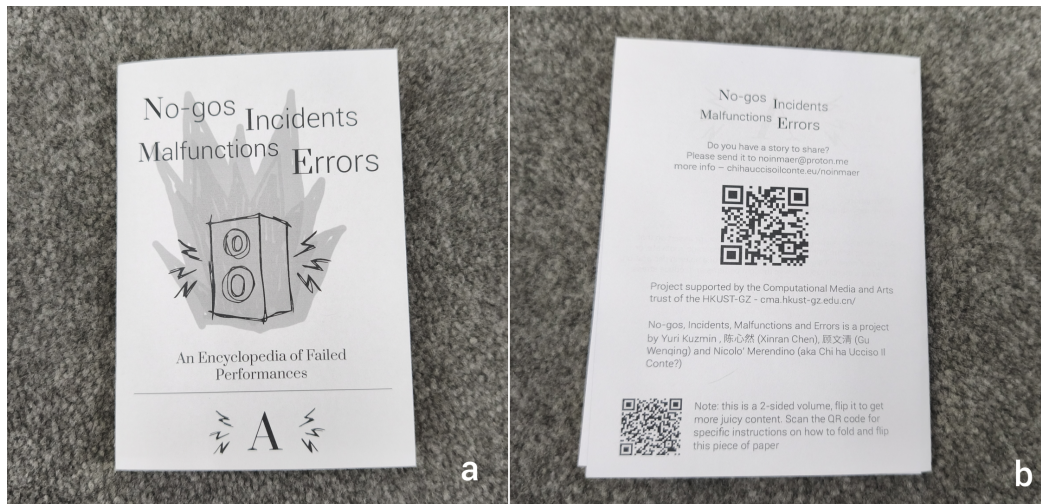


Fig. 1. Pictures of the zine’s cover (a) and back (b)

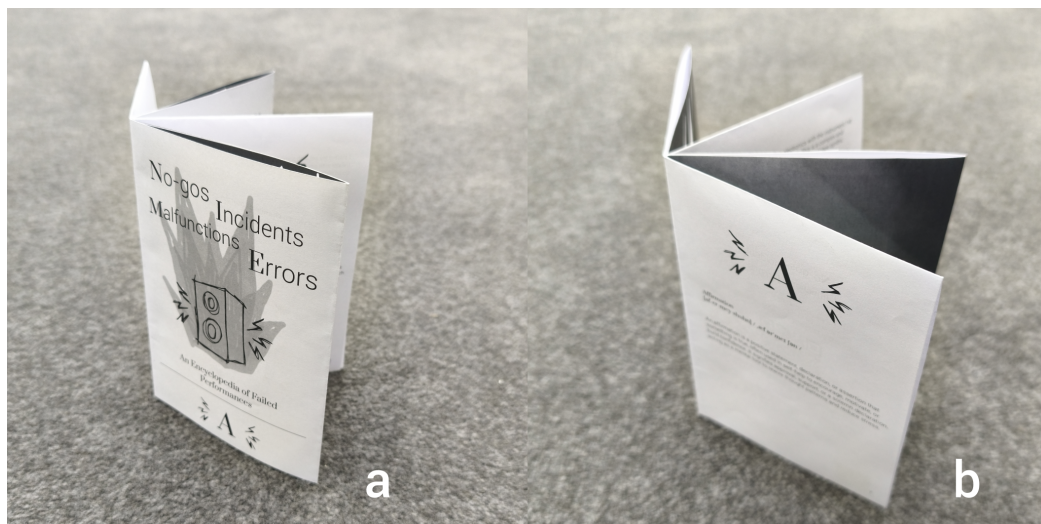


Fig. 2. Overview of the zine folded: Front side (a) and back side (b)

The graphic design intentionally reinforces the ironic tone of the project. Titles use a serif typeface that evokes the formal and authoritative aesthetic traditionally associated with encyclopedias, while this visual language is contrasted with simple, handmade-style illustrations. For the text of the stories, we prioritised usability by using a sans font. The combination of these elements mirrors the conceptual tension between the authoritative format of an encyclopedia and the subjective, often messy nature of the stories it contains. When contributors provide images, these are incorporated directly into the layout; otherwise, hand-drawn illustrations are produced to accompany the stories and visually interpret their content. The graphic is based on high contrast elements to foster accessibility in reading, and the zine is meant to be printed in black and white.

Each issue of the zine includes two stories, a short editorial text, and a call for further contributions. In addition, QR codes provide access to the project’s website and a short video explaining how to fold the sheet into the final zine format.

At the current stage of the project, an advanced mock-up of the first issue, the “A” volume, has been completed (presented as Attachment 1). The project is planned to be released at the beginning of summer 2026 and will be distributed across a selection of venues that we already identified. The zine will also be available online through the project’s website. After launch, we will continue this project as an ongoing open call. As we receive new stories, we will keep publishing them.

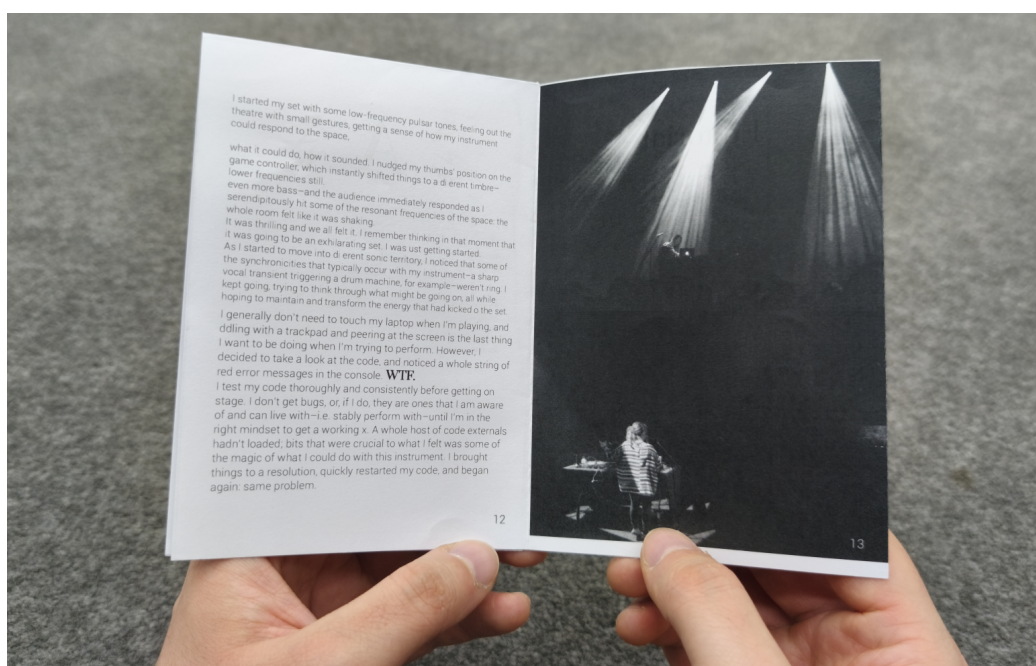


Fig. 3. Image of the zine in use

#### 4 Pseudo-Discussion

In this section, we reflect on the wider implications of our exploratory practice. In doing so, we do not directly engage with the content of the stories we have received so far, as it is not the focus of this contribution.

##### 4.1 Heterogeneity of “Failure” in Documentation

Our practice suggests that failure can be documented and can constitute a contribution in the context of NIME and beyond.

Unlike the repositories focused on successful works, failure exhibits considerable heterogeneity - its causes can be technical (equipment malfunctions), personal (performers being off their game), or social (uncooperative audiences). This means that the received descriptions are not only tech-specific; they may also contain spatio-temporally specific, socio-culturally specific, and even personal details that can be linked to the eventual unsatisfactory ending. Therefore, documenting “failed” works requires finding expressive methods to present these situated details, experiential sensations, and generative knowledge that transcend specifics merely aimed at making artefacts function properly. Our solution to this challenge is essentially a stylised repository presented in the format of a zine.

##### 4.2 Failure-Sharing as a Community Contribution

Beyond the zine itself, we regard community action as our contribution.

Since Bin’s thought-provoking reflections [3, 19], an increasing number of NIME studies and practices have begun to regard the community as a subject of interest. However, most of the work is theoretical and critical, with a smaller portion focused on providing technical solutions for the community, such as templates, tools, and instruments [8, 16, 17]. Our practice, leveraging altNIME’s flexibility through the open call, mobilised performers both within and outside NIME to encourage sharing of failure experiences. The enthusiastic response revealed a community need for failure-sharing (along with underlying technical struggles, awkward moments, comical incidents, or stage lessons). We interpret this as a tendency towards “de-stigmatising failure”. For a community with a long history of inclusivity toward novices, marginalised groups (including those economically marginalised), and partners from other communities, many of whom could easily encounter failures, we view our community-based practices as an alternative, more socially engaged contribution.

##### 4.3 The Ontology of Failed Performance

Failure can be... just failure, even if it ultimately yields nothing.

In the realm of art, the avant-garde ideology that regards various forms of failure as an aesthetic choice has long been embraced. On the one hand, this acceptance of failure as a creative source highlights a pluralistic value orientation in the post-growth era, countering the outdated narratives that idolise perfectionism. On the other hand, people’s uncritical

acceptance of this approach to failure risks falling into another capitalist trap - at its core, it remains awaiting a successful deliverable. However, as the antithesis of success, failure is never merely subordinate; it is a complex intersection of technology, culture, audiences, and emotional individuals within a specific context. Due to publishing pressures, the post-hoc accounts in traditional documentation often smooth out the messiness, frictions, and partial breakdowns, behind which lies a lens that allows us to observe the most primitive performing ecology existing outside of purely instrumental rationality and technicality. Our position in this project motivates us to move beyond treating failure as a material for successful performance. Instead, while de-stigmatising failure, we adopt a stance of critical neutrality to the stories we received. Inspired by a more pluralistic, Rashomon-style epistemology [26], we believe that the underlying psychological, social, and technological assemblage leading to the becoming of failure - that is, the ontology of failed performance, is equally meaningful and awaits more attention in the future.

### 5 Pseudo-conclusion and future work

This contribution offers NIME practitioners, their community, and other actors in the field of experimental music a platform to share failed performances that were long viewed as a wrinkle to be smoothed out (or outright ignored) in the documentation of successful work. In the future, we aim at continuing the project as an ongoing initiative, and we believe our practice-oriented project may have the potential to provoke fresh and alternative discussions on documentation in the context of NIME, as well as interest in the social and cultural instability behind the performing ecology of what is deemed a failure.

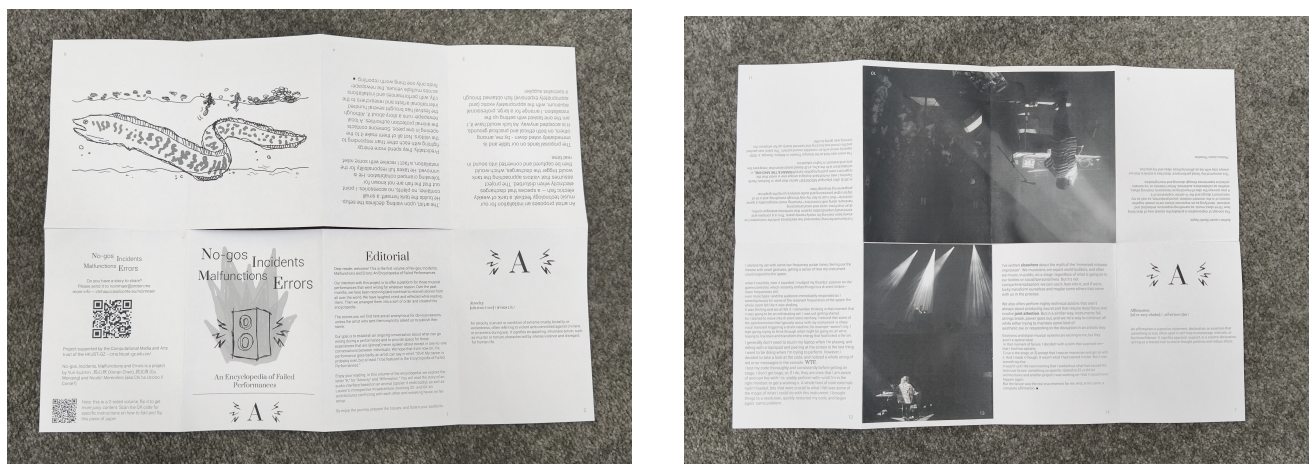


Fig. 4. View of the zine unfolded

### 6 Media Links

- Website: <https://chihauccisoilconte.eu/noinmaer>

### 7 Ethical Standards

We believe that this contribution aligns with topics (knowledge sharing and sustainability) explicitly or implicitly mentioned in the ethical code of NIME. The initiative presented here is completely non-profit, and all the people involved contributed to it on a volunteer basis. All contributions will be published anonymously, unless explicitly requested. Additionally, we designed our zines to be easily printed virtually anywhere in the world, avoiding the need for shipping.

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