László Munteán

Men on Wire

Performing 9/11

The horrid sight of people jumping from the burning towers on 9/11 has been identified as one of the major causes of post-traumatic stress disorder related to the terrorist attacks. One photograph, showing a man falling headfirst as though performing a dive, appeared in hundreds of newspapers the day after the tragedy but soon became a taboo, never to be published again. Nevertheless, reverberations of its traumatizing effect can be felt in a number of works of art. By applying Roland Barthes's terminology as an analytic tool, my purpose is to reveal inherent ambiguities in the photograph's iconography that render its "verticality and symmetry" a palimpsest of interlacing significations. I will then proceed to examine artistic responses to this silenced aspect of the trauma of 9/11 in Kerry Skarbakka's photographic performances, Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man*, and James Marsh's documentary *Man on Wire*.

> "He was trapped in the fire, and decided to jump and take his own life, rather than being burned. I don't know."   (Richard Drew)[1]

> "We don't like to say they jumped. They didn't jump. Nobody jumped. They were forced out, or blown out."   (New York Medical Examiner's Office)[2]

In the documentary *9/11: The Falling Man*, Associated Press photographer Richard Drew recalls the instance he spotted people leaping to their deaths from the World Trade Center in the morning of September 11, 2001:

> bodies were falling, so I picked up my camera and started taking pictures. That's what I do. . . . I take the camera as sort of a filter between me and what I'm photographing. I'm only seeing what's coming through my lens and that helps me sort of stand separated I guess.

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1. Peter Howe, "Richard Drew," *The Digital Journalist* (October 2001) <http://digitaljournalist .org/issue0110/drew.htm> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).
2. Cited in Tom Junod, "The Falling Man," *Esquire* (September 2003) <http://www .esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

Upon returning to the Associated Press headquarters, Drew transferred the photos onto his computer and looked at a sequence of twelve frames showing a man falling from the North Tower. He found one of the frames so riveting that he didn't even bother scrutinizing the rest. "You learn in photo editing to look for the frame," he says. "You have to recognize it. That picture jumped off the screen because of its verticality and symmetry."[3] The next day hundreds of newspapers published the photograph to the utter dismay of their readers, who responded with letters of complaint denouncing the photograph as irreverent and subversive. Before long, it vanished from the media, along with other depictions of death related to the attacks.[4] Meanwhile, images of the planes' spectacular thrust into the towers and the subsequent explosions were replayed *ad nauseam*, so as to make the anthropomorphized towers "stand" in for the dead.[5]

The displacement of disturbing images went hand in hand with the transformation of victims into heroes, to which Rudolph Giuliani's farewell address as mayor in December 2001 was largely conducive. As he said, "Long after we are all gone, it's the sacrifice of our patriots and their heroism that is going to be what this place is remembered for. This is going to be a place that is remembered 100 and 1000 years from now, like the great battlefields of Europe and the United States."[6] But, by this rationale, if Ground Zero is conceived of as a battlefield where death constitutes a willful sacrifice for a noble cause, what exactly does Giuliani mean by sacrifice and heroism in the context of 9/11? For, paradoxically, the only deaths that involved agency on the part of the victims were those of the firefighters who were killed in the collapse and the people who jumped out of the towers to escape death by fire. This latter form of volition, however, just wouldn't pass smoothly as heroism. Ellen Borakove, spokesperson for the New York medical examiner's office, claimed that "A 'jumper' is somebody who goes to the office in the morning knowing that they will commit suicide. These people were forced out by the smoke and flames or blown out."[7] Still, as Tom Junod contends,

3. Cited in Junod, "The Falling Man."

4. Rob Kroes, "Shock and Awe in New York City: 9/11 or 9-1-1? The Construction of Terrorism through Photographs," in *Photographic Memories: Private Pictures, Public Images, and American History* (Lebanon, NH: UP of New England, 2007), 170–183, pp. 179–180.

5. Albert Boime, "The Fate of the Image-Monument in the Wake of 9/11," in *Now. Images of the Present Time: Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal 2003*, ed. Vincent Lavoie (Montréal: Le Mois de la Photo, 2003), 189–203, p. 199.

6. Rudolph Giuliani, cited in David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), p. 47.

7. Cited in Dennis Cauchon and Martha Moore, "Desperation forced a horrific decision," *USA Today* (September 2, 2002) <http://www.usatoday.com/news/sept11/2002-09-02-jumper_x.htm> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

the tag stuck early on: "They were called 'jumpers' or 'the jumpers,' as though they represented a new lemminglike class."[8]

Therefore, even if there is an acknowledgment of the hopeless situation which no one trapped inside the buildings had the power to control the term "jumper" infuses this inevitable death with the connotation of suicide.[9] Realizing the gravity of this connotation, Giuliani described this crisis of signification in an interview as "uncharted territory."[10]

Tom Junod's article "The Falling Man," which appeared in the September 2003 issue of *Esquire* magazine, was among the first to venture into uncharted territory. In the article he embarks on an investigation into the identity of the individual in Drew's photograph who (perhaps because of the import of Junod's article) came to be known as the Falling Man. Unable to identify him for certain, Junod ends his article by returning to the photograph and re-reading it as a memorial to the Unknown Soldier: "The picture is his cenotaph," he writes, "and like the monuments dedicated to the memory of unknown soldiers everywhere, it asks that we look at it, and make one simple acknowledgment. That we have known who the Falling Man is all along." On the one hand, Junod identifies the Falling Man as an everyman, but on the other hand, by rendering him an emblem of the unknown soldier, he (re)inscribes him as a hero of a war "whose end we have not yet seen."[11] Therefore, even if the article instigates bearing witness to the Falling Man, it does so by contextualizing this identification within the narrative of war (inadvertently resonating with Giuliani's and Bush's jingoistic rhetoric in the wake of 9/11) in which the disturbing ambiguities surrounding the Falling Man's death are "domesticated" as heroic sacrifice.[12]

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8. Junod, "The Falling Man"

9. As Dennis Cauchon and Martha Moore remark, "To be sure, some who fell didn't jump. Witnesses say a few people seemed to have stumbled out of broken windows obscured by smoke. But most say those jumping appeared to make a conscious choice to die by falling rather than from smoke, heat or fire" (Cauchon and Moore).

10. Phil Hirschkorn, "Giuliani Describes 9/11 Horrors," *CNN Online* (April 8, 2006), <http://www.cnn.com/2006/LAW/04/06/moussaoui/index.html> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

11. Junod, "The Falling Man"

12. This is by no means to belittle Junod's efforts that, without doubt, mark a watershed in the discourse on 9/11 trauma. His article has been serving as a platform for a number of discussion forums on the Internet that has become a virtual site of memory for the jumpers. His article was also the inspiration behind the documentary *9/11: The Falling Man* (Henry Singer dir., Darlow Smithson Productions, 2006) which came out on Channel 4 in England in March, 2006 and debuted in the USA on September 10, 2007.

In this essay I will take another angle to Drew's photograph. By applying Roland Barthes's terminology as an analytic tool, my purpose is to reveal inherent ambiguities in the photograph's "verticality and symmetry" that inform the applications of such terms as "falling man" and "jumper." I will then proceed to discuss Kerry Skarbakka's photographic performances, Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* and James Marsh's documentary *Man on Wire* as sites of memory,[13] where the repressed memory of the jumpers reverberates in multiple disguises.

The Photograph

Cathy Caruth describes trauma as an "unclaimed experience"[14] which resists integration into believable[15] narrative schemes. Unable to master it, the subject unwillingly relives the traumatic experience in the form of dreams, flashbacks, and hallucinations – symptoms that Freud calls the "compulsion to repeat."[16] These unprocessed stimuli can be conceived of as *wounds* (as the original Greek meaning of 'trauma' also suggests) imprinted on the psyche. The immediacy of this traumatic imprint and its inaccessibility for the subject that it possesses is, as Caruth suggests, inherently paradoxical:

> [T]he greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness. . . . Central to the very immediacy of this experience, that is, is a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory. The force of this experience would appear to arise precisely, in other words, in the collapse of its understanding.[17]

13. I am using the term in Pierre Nora's sense. See: Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989) 7–24.

14. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

15. For even memory, as Roberta Culbertson reminds us, "is not the remembered at all of course, but a socially accepted fabrication, a weaving together of the thin, sometimes delicate and intertwined threads of true memory, the remembered, so that these might be told. Memory is always in the end subjected to those conventions which define the believable." Roberta Culbertson, "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Reestablishing the Self," *New Literary History* 26, 1 (Winter, 1995) 169–195, p. 179.

16. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* trans. James Strachey (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1961), p. 29.

17. Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 6–7.

In this sense, the discrepancy between the experience and the actual knowing of that experience manifests itself in a temporal void which resists semiotic categorization.

In the realm of photography, the paradoxical structure of trauma is reflected in Walter Benjamin's concept of the *optical unconscious*, which he defines in his "Little History of Photography" as a realm of experience unavailable to the human eye but registered by the technological eye of the camera.[18] This virtual quality of the photograph, which Benjamin understood as an imprint of what remains unseen, thus offers a portal to traces of the past that resist integration into narrative schemes and render the phenomenal world a fragmented void, rather than a continuous flow.[19] Thus the photograph, as Ulrich Baer remarks, "can provide special access to experiences that have remained unremembered yet cannot be forgotten."[20] By this rationale, the twelve frames captured by the unconscious optics of Richard Drew's camera in the morning of 9/11 are portals to Benjamin's virtual reality of traumatic experience that resist easy assimilation into larger narrative schemes of 9/11. The one that he chose for publication, however, significantly differs from the rest.

In order to trace the inner dynamics of this photograph's "look," I will employ Roland Barthes's concepts of the *studium* and the *punctum*, which he describes in his seminal work on photography entitled *Camera Lucida*. The former, Barthes explains, entails taste, a general sense of like or dislike of the image contingent on the observer's cultural background. Thus the *studium* elicits culturally grounded, contextual readings of the photograph.[21] This field is disturbed by Barthes's second concept, the *punctum*: "A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."[22] Significantly, the *punctum* is not something inferred from the photograph, but a wound in which there is no possibility for semiotic structuring. The power of the *punctum*, as Barthes implies, does not stem

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18. Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2., ed. Howard Eiland and Gary Smith. Trans. Edmund Jephott and Kingsley Shorter (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 507–530, p. 510–511.

19. This is also reflected in Benjamin's famous analysis of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* in his "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), 249.

20. Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 7.

21. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1993), 25–6. For a detailed discussion of Barthes's concept of photography see also: Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 453.

22. Barthes, p. 26–7.

from "my sovereign consciousness" trained to make sense of the perceived image but rather from an unconscious, unpredictable, and highly subjective reaction particular to each and every observer.

In a later section of his book Barthes discerns another type of *punctum*, which does not occur as a detail. "This new *punctum*," he writes, "which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* ("*that has been*"), its pure representation."[23] To demonstrate this, Barthes takes Alexander Gardner's 1865 photo-portrait of Lewis Payne, a young man sitting in shackles leaning against the prison wall, sentenced to death for attempting to assassinate the American Secretary of State.

> The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence.[24]

Now let me turn to Richard Drew's photograph and apply Barthes's terminology to its iconography. My general interest in the image is raised by its shocking content; I see a person's imminent death suspended forever in a freeze frame. The photograph informs me of a gruesome aspect of 9/11, the fact that people jumped to their deaths after the planes hit. The background texture is defined by the dazzling repetition of vertical columns; some darker, others lighter, divided by the joints between aluminum panels forming lines that run across the picture in a diagonal fashion. This holographic texture fills the background completely, providing no clue as to the building's base, top, and side, as if the same pattern were repeated endlessly beyond the frame. The section of the façade behind the falling body looks intact, although I know from context that the man's fall was precipitated by the destruction which remains invisible in the picture. My interest is also triggered by the peculiar position of the man. His fall in midair seems to be halted as he assumes a position in harmony with the verticality of the façade. Even his bent knee, which seemingly disrupts this harmony, is positioned in parallel with the delicate diagonal lines formed by the joints between the panels. For me, this is the picture's *studium*.

Where is, then, the element which disturbs this *studium* by its capacity to wound me? Indubitably, just like the other photographic and filmic representations of the jumpers, this photo also shocks viewers; but the element of shock would not

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23. Barthes, p. 96.
24. Barthes, p. 96.

amount to a *punctum* in this particular image. More than any other detail it is the man's left leg bent at the knee that irresistibly arrests my gaze. While it is the formal detail that disrupts the uniform verticality of the photograph's texture, it also reminds me of a gymnastic performance.[25] It is as though his fall (or performance rather) were a planned spectacle, a performance, completely under control. My reading of this aesthetic dimension reverberates the qualities of verticality and symmetry that informed Drew's selection of the image in the first place. But what Drew registers as pure *punctum* here seems to fold back on itself as a means to absorb the tragic context of the man's fall by juxtaposing it with the illusion of his composed posture. What happens is that the aesthetic element of the photograph, which I registered as part of my general interest (the *studium*), here sneaks *insidiously* into the realm of the *punctum* as a signifier of control.

This illusion of controlled movement, however, is dialectically counterpointed by what Barthes calls the *punctum* of intensity. In a way similar to Barthes's reading of the *Portrait of Lewis Paine*, this second *punctum* shatters my illusion of suspended time: I know that this man is going to die. In the face of impending death, Barthes longs for the boy in the Gardner photograph to live, while he knows that his fate is already written in the "past perfect," so to speak. Having seen the other frames of Drew's sequence of the man's fall, the illusion of his composure dissolves in disorder and chaos; his emblematic pose lasted only for a fraction of a second or less, visible only to the camera's eye. In the other frames he falls just like the other jumpers, limbs flailing, shirt flying off. What wounds me is not so much the nearness of death *per se* but a manifestation of this life, this composure, assumed even if for a fraction of a second, at the moment of death.

At another level of this iconographic palimpsest, the same discrepancy between what I read into his body as a voluntary act (*punctum* as detail) and his inevitable death awaiting him (*punctum* as time) morphs into a disconcerting connection between them. For the element of agency, which I ascribe to the position of the body, simultaneously posits death a result of a voluntary act, whereby the man's

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25. There are a few other photographs on the Internet that offer similar interfaces for identification. Each of them features a detail that evokes well-imbedded cultural practices: in one photo a man seems to be holding his cell phone to his ear while jumping out of a gaping hole of smoke and fire; another photograph shows two people holding hands in their fall with the façade of one of the towers occupying the right side of the picture; while in another one a man seems to be falling with arms and legs "raised" skyward as though looking constantly upwards. Still another image, in Tom Junod's description, "shows people jumping in perfect sequence, like parachutists, forming an arc composed of three plummeting people, evenly spaced" (Junod, "The Falling Man").

controlled pose lends itself to be read as a cipher for suicide. Junod's slightly euphemistic phrasing in his article registers this unsettling effect as follows:

> Some people who look at the picture see stoicism, willpower, a portrait of resignation; others see something else – something discordant and therefore terrible: freedom. There is something almost rebellious in the man's posture, as though once faced with the inevitability of death, he decided to get on with it; as though he were a missile, a spear, bent on attaining his own end.[26]

What Junod describes through the paradoxical notion of a "terrible freedom" is in fact realized in the act of decision leading to the transgression of the taboo against suicide. Freedom is "discordant" because it constitutes a transgression of a norm which informs the viewer's gaze. For the falling man is never just perceived but, by virtue of being perceived, he is also *produced* as an object of the gaze which renders his act "discordant" with the norm. At stake here is a discordance of discordance, a transgression of the suicide taboo on the one hand and, simultaneously, a destabilization of the discursive mechanism that activates that taboo as a norm to be applied.[27] What manifests itself as a discordance, however, is thus not merely the transgression of the suicide taboo itself but the crisis of signifying processes that infuses the taboo against suicide into the confluence of the illusion of artistic performance and the realization of the inevitability of death.

The uncanny[28] emergence of the phantasmagoria of suicide constitutes a *punctum* which is neither a detail nor a temporal category, though intimately related to both. Borrowing Petra Rau's term, which she coins in her analysis of Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room*, I would call this a *spectral punctum*,[29] which stems from the peculiar position of the man – the same pose which allows me to invest it with the illusion of a gymnastic performance. As this aesthetic aspect trickles into the *punctum* without ceasing to be a *studium*, I recontextualize the man's fall as a performance, which simultaneously dovetails with the *punctum* of time, that is, my knowledge of his death in the past. As part of the visual palimpsest thus formed, behind the man's *fall* a phan-

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26. Junod, "The Falling Man."

27. See Enikő Bollobás, *They Aren't Until I Call Them: Performing the Subject in American Literature* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 71–96.

28. Throughout the essay I am using this term in Freud's sense. See: Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" in *The Uncanny,* trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), 121–162.

29. "It occurs," she writes, "when the photograph comes to subjectively represent what its content does not record and cannot denotatively signify." Petra Rau, "Beyond Punctum and Studium: Trauma and Photography in Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room,*" *Journal of European Studies* 36 (2006) 295–325, p. 298.

tasmal image of his *jump* comes into the open, without being denotatively exposed in the picture. Just as the photographic images in Seiffert's *The Dark Room* acquire a *spectral punctum* by becoming "'loaded' or supplemented with the signification of the other pictures,"[30] so does the *Falling Man* subscribe to a similar dynamic. Like the "wound" inflicted on the building that will subsequently cause its (and his) inevitable fall, the locus of the man's imagined jump settles in as a *specter* evoked contextually through my memories of other photographs and videos of the 9/11 jumpers. As the iconographic signifiers of artistic performance unleash the specter of suicide, his act comes to signify a contrived, macabre spectacle. Unlike the *punctum* as detail, which arrests my gaze at the level of denotation, the *spectral punctum* emerges uncannily from the *studium*, and exerts its effect at the connotative level. If the *spectral punctum* points to what is unseen, it is through the intrusion of this "blind field"[31] that the photograph becomes imbued with the uncanny.

Set against the monotonous verticality of the World Trade Center's façade, the position of the body simultaneously harmonizes with and contrasts the building's texture. Although his limbs are parallel with the girders behind him, the body of the Falling Man can also be perceived as a wound inflicted not so much on the face of the towers but on our anthropomorphized perception of the towers.[32] Shortly after the fall of the WTC, various entailments of the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE BUILDINGS emerged in many textual and graphic representations of 9/11. Within this urge to render anthropomorphic qualities to inanimate objects, the World Trade Center also acquired such attributes.[33] The *Falling Man*, however, subverts this conceptual dynamic of metaphorization with the intrusion of the target domain's (people) corporeality into the picture. Perfectly enveloped by the architecture behind him, the man in Drew's image constitutes a "discordant" echo of Leonardo's Vitruvian Man, whose body stands as an ideal measure for the built

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30. Rau, p. 305.

31. Barthes, p. 57.

32. George Lakoff's essay "Metaphors of Terror" is illustrative of this process of attributing human qualities to buildings: "Tall buildings are metaphorically people standing erect. As each tower fell, it became a body falling. We are not consciously aware of the metaphorical images, but they are part of the power and the horror we experience when we see them. [...] If we metaphorize the building as a person and see the building fall to the ground in pieces, then we sense – again unconsciously but powerfully – that *we* are falling to the ground in pieces. Our systems of metaphorical thought, interacting with our mirror neuron systems, turn external literal horrors into felt metaphorical horrors." George Lakoff, "Metaphors of Terror," in *The Days After* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, September 16, 2001), <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/News/911lakoff.html> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

33. Marita Sturken, Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 222.

environment around him.[34] The Falling Man, on the other hand, is defined by the architecture that enfolds him, evoking the inseparability of architectural debris and human remains in the ruins of the World Trade Center (and their hasty removal from the site).[35] In this sense both the ruins and the photographs of the jumpers had the potential to undermine the prevailing trend of anthropomorphizing the towers insofar as they translate the PEOPLE ARE BUILDINGS conceptual metaphor on the *terrain vague* of the metonym.[36]

Ironically, the monotony of the towers' geometrical façade,[37] which defines the texture of the photograph, offers nothing but the falling body as a fixed point of reference to hold onto. Because my gaze cannot rest on any other detail but the man himself, my position as a spectator is destabilized by the holographic texture of the photograph. Even though he does not look into the camera, he stares back at me. The closer I look, the less I see of his face, and the more foreign he becomes in his uncanny familiarity. This potential of the photograph to return the gaze of the viewer becomes a cipher for what Caruth calls the "unclaimed experience" of trauma, which reverberates in the works of art I am going to discuss in the following.

The Suspended Signifier: Kerry Skarbakka

Chicago, June 14, 2005. A cantilever structure equipped with pulleys and wires protrudes from the roof of the Museum of Contemporary Art to keep performance artist Kerry Skarbakka from hitting the ground, as he gets ready to jump off the museum's roof over 30 times in his first public performance. With each jump, sus-

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34. For a psychoanalytic analysis of the role of Vitruvian proportions in our appropriation with the built environment see: Neil Leach, "*Vitruvius Crucifixus:* Architecture, Mimesis, and the Death Instinct" in *Body and Building: Essays on the Changing Relation of Body and Architecture,* ed. George Dodds and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 210–25.

35. In her essay Patricia Yaeger points to the uncanny amalgam of human remains, architectural refuse, and poisonous residuum that the towers' ruins contained. "This is dirt that bites back, that does not lend itself to the cleanliness of ceremony" Patricia Yaeger, "Rubble as Archive, or 9/11 as Dust, Debris, and Bodily Vanishing" in *Trauma at Home: After 9/11,* ed. Judith Greenberg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 187–94, p. 189.

36. I would like to thank Martin Kayman for calling my attention to this detail.

37. The repetition of vertical and horizontal lines dazzled the eye of the observer and exerted a hypnotic power, as Charles Jencks commented years before 9/11: "The effect of extreme repetition may be monotony or a hypnotic trance: positively it can elicit feelings of the sublime and the inevitable because it so incessantly returns to the same theme." Cited in Eric Darton, *Divided We Stand: A Biography of New York's World Trade Center* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 128.

pended in midair, Skarbakka assumes various body positions as though captured in a freeze frame witnessed by a sizable group of onlookers and journalists. Almost immediately after the event, however, he finds himself in the crossfire of harsh criticism – primarily from New York. Mayor Michael Bloomberg denounces the performance as "nauseatingly offensive" and Governor George Pataki calls it "an utter disgrace."[38] All the charges raised against him seem to give the same reading to his performance: a distasteful and irreverent reenactment of the horrors of 9/11.

In his apology, Skarbakka acknowledges that images of people falling from the twin towers on 9/11 have partially inspired his work but no work of art, he claims, can be reduced to one single message. "In the past few years," he writes, "I have fallen from trees, porches, bridges, train trestles, stairways, ladders, roofs, mountains, volcanoes, water towers, fences and billboards – without anyone ever mistaking my work for a representation of our national tragedy."[39] What was it, then, about his performance in Chicago that caused such outrage?

Prior to the event Skarbakka had been working in isolation from the public eye, taking leaps of faith and breathtaking jumps solely for photographic documentation. In Chicago, for the first time in his career, he intended to include the public, which certainly did not go unnoticed by the media. Nevertheless, beyond such signifiers as the suit and the modernist façade, that may have been regarded by many as direct references to 9/11, Skarbakka's incorporation of performance and photography in his art or, more precisely, his performative use of photography, entails a number of other constellations of the uncanny that can be productively read as an artistic response to the traumatizing sight of the falling bodies of 9/11. If performance appears as a *spectral punctum* connoting suicide in the *Falling Man* photograph, what significations are present in the continuum of body-performance-photography in Skarbakka's work?

Before returning to his controversial performance in Chicago, let me explain the "mechanics" of Skarbakka's photo-performances by turning to his earlier work. In the photographs included in his first photo-series, entitled *The Struggle To Right Oneself*, we see him slipping, jumping, and falling in various circumstances, giving evidence of the artist's compulsive return to the experience of falling. Some of his images capture banal accidents in the home (*Kitchen*, *Naked*, *Stairs*, *Studio*, *Shower*), while others recall action movies (*Engulfed*, *Fence*, *Interstate*) and even mythological scenes, as Henry Thaggert's comparative analysis of Skarbakka's *Na-*

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38. Cited in Fred Camper, "Is Art Defaming 9/11 Deaths?" (July 10, 2005) <http://www.skarbakka.com/portfolios/lifegoeson_statement.htm> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

39. Cited in Camper.

ked and Rubens's *Abduction of Ganymede* demonstrates.[40] Thaggert views Skarbakka's photographic performances as a sequence of an unfolding narrative of an allegorical Everyman's physical and metaphorical struggle with gravity's pull.[41]

No matter how convincingly "real" the accidents may appear, Skarbakka's performances are staged leaps and jumps, often secured by safety harnesses which he digitally erases from the final image. In her essay "Anxiety and Remediation: The Photographic Images of Kerry Skarbakka," Corey Dzenko explains how Skarbakka uses digital manipulation in order to remediate the illusion of photographic immediacy and, simultaneously, redirect attention to the image's constructedness. For instance, in *Naked*, which Thaggert compares to Rubens's *Abduction of Ganymede*, Dzenko traces manifestations of hypermediacy in such obvious signifiers of a staged performance as the "improbable positioning of the man and the overall quality of exaggeration."[42] Technology would certainly allow Skarbakka to avoid the risks of bodily performance by constructing his images completely through digital means but, as Dzenko argues, being aware of the entire process of Skarbakka's work "allows for a dynamic understanding of the ambiguity of his images as they shift between transparent documents of his body projection and digitally altered photographic constructs."[43] What seems to be at work here is a process of remediation, a digital camouflage designed to feign immediacy, which, in a self-referential gesture, becomes revealed as a staged performance. Immediacy, a central constituent of both Benjamin's and Barthes's approach to photography, here becomes not an intrinsic quality of the image, as Benjamin's notion of the *optical unconscious*

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40. Henry Thaggert, "Kerry Skarbakka: Art that Takes Risks," For the exhibition *Kerry Skarbakka and Marla Rutherford: Re-Presenting the Portrait,* June 30 – August 4, 2007 (Washington: Irvine Contemporary, 2007) <http://irvinecontemporary.com/pub/Thaggert-Skarbakka-Essay-IrvineContemporary.pdf> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

41. Skarbakka's statement for his series *The Struggle to Right Oneself* reads: "Philosopher Martin Heidegger described human existence as a process of perpetual falling, and it is the responsibility of each individual to catch ourselves from our own uncertainty. This unsettling prognosis of life informs my present body of work. I continually return to questions regarding the nature of control and its effects on this perceived responsibility, since beyond the basic laws that govern and maintain our equilibrium, we live in a world that constantly tests our stability in various other forms. War and rumors of war, issues of security, effects of globalization, and the politics of identity are external gravities turned inward, serving to further threaten the precarious balance of self, exaggerating negative feelings of control," <http://www.skarbakka.com/portfolios/struggle_statement.htm> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

42. Corey Dzenko, "Anxiety and Remediation: The Photographic Images of Kerry Skarbakka," *Hemisphere: Visual Cultures of the Americas* Vol. 1. (Spring 2008) 83–91, pp. 85–6.

43. Dzenko, p. 87.

would suggest, but a mediated surface of representation, a series of "Constructed Visions," as the general title to Skarbakka's work on his website also indicates.[44] In Benjamin's terms, as we have seen, the *optical unconscious* constitutes a portal to an instance of reality which remains inaccessible to the human eye but is registered by the camera. If, as Ulrich Baer asserts, "[p]hotographs can capture the shrapnel of traumatic time,"[45] Skarbakka's photographs dramatize that instance by approximating it through multiple layers of mediation.[46] By way of simultaneously constructing and deconstructing the illusion of immediacy, the images expose themselves as palimpsests of re-mediated performatives.

For my purposes here the photograph entitled *Sarajevo* (2003) in the series *The Struggle to Right Oneself* is illustrative of such a palimpsest. The picture is dominated by a massive cantilever structure built out of concrete. What was once a robust superstructure supported by the cantilever is now in ruins. In the foreground a man falls at such a speed that the contours of his arms and legs are blurred, but his white shirt and tie can be clearly discerned. He seems to be screaming in panic and looking straight into the camera. Although the title contextualizes the ruin as an architectural trace of violent destruction from the Bosnian War of 1992–1995, the iconography of the image cannot be reduced to a single historical reference. His shirt and tie, for instance, lend themselves to be recognized as signifiers of the business-related function of the building he is falling from. And even if the deformed chunks of thick ferroconcrete and the gigantic cantilever are architecturally alien to the World Trade Center, the businessman captured in freefall, with the ruin behind him, strongly resonates with the iconography of the images of the 9/11 jumpers. Similarly to pictures like Richard Drew's *Falling Man*, the face of the person remains indiscernible but, unlike in Drew's photograph, the man in *Sarajevo* looks into the camera in a gesture of acknowledging our presence as witnesses and, by doing so, Skarbakka's photograph dramatizes the effect of the returned gaze we have traced in the *Falling Man*. Paradoxically, he is the one who "holds" us in his gaze while we seem to be "falling" short of a narrative to hold onto him.

In the context of the other photographs, *Sarajevo* attests to an entropic repetition of traumatic experience. Because Skarbakka's staged falls are digitally remedi-

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44. <http://www.skarbakka.com/index.htm> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

45. Baer, p. 7.

46. Among the many precursors to Skarbakka's jumps Yves Klein's *Leap Into the Void* from 1960 comes to mind as an obvious parallel to explore. As Klein's original performance remained undocumented, the photographic "document" of his jump is a manipulated image depicting a reenacted performance. See: Rebecca Schneider, "Solo solo solo," in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance,* ed. Gavin Butt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 23–47.

ated to create the illusion of photographic immediacy, his performances can be seen as approximations of the inaccessible, a language that defies, even as it demands, a working through of trauma. For *Sarajevo* is not a reenactment of 9/11 *per se*, not even of the tabooed images of the jumpers, but a palimpsest of potential configurations that, like the ruin itself, operates through voids and hauntings and rejects being read as a logically comprehensible narrative.

Before his scandalous performance in Chicago in 2005, Skarbakka had been quite open about identifying the traumatic sight of people jumping to their deaths on September 11 as an inspiration behind his work. In an interview made shortly before his performance in Chicago, he said: "I wanted to be able to respond intelligently, conceptually, responsibly to what was going on. . . . They had released themselves completely. They left the constructs of society, they left their family, they left their bills they had to pay. They left everything but the choice of what they were going to do in their final moments."[47] After the Chicago-event though, such references would completely vanish from Skarbakka's statements.

Now let me return to the series of photographs entitled *Life Goes On*, taken at the Museum of Modern Art in Chicago. Unlike in Skarbakka's earlier work, public spectatorship plays a major role in the series. The last two pictures of the seven-frame sequence do not show the artist at all but merely the crowd watching and photographing his performance. Entitled *Ratings*, these photographs generate rather ambiguous meanings. On the one hand, the wide-eyed onlookers staring at something we do not see but know from context (*studium*) serve as evidence for the event as a public spectacle. On the other hand, in the context of the other photographs, which show Skarbakka falling from the top of the museum with the safety harnesses digitally erased from the images, the gaze of the onlookers in *Ratings* is similarly manipulated insofar as they are "made" to witness a horrific sight (even if we know from the *studium* that Skarbakka survived the performance). In this sense these photographs also evoke the journalistic method of making the spectators' facial expressions euphemistically stand in for the shocking experience that *they* see but the viewer of the photograph cannot.[48]

Similarly to the role of the ruin in *Sarajevo*, the museum's façade in each photograph of *Life Goes On* defines the background texture of Skarbakka's performance. On the one hand, as part of the *studium*, the museum "houses" his

47. Tori Marlan, "To Leap Without Faith," *Chicago Reader* (June 10, 2005) 28–29, p. 29.

48. The inclusion of these photographs evokes a journalistic method of implying the presence of horror by euphemistically showing the facial expressions of the spectators. Barbie Zelizer describes this technique in connection with media representations of 9/11. Barbie Zelizer, "Photography, Journalism and Trauma," in *Journalism after 9/11,* ed., Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 48–68, pp. 62–3.

performance as art – both physically and metaphorically. But the negative press he received after his performance suggests that his jumps at the museum created a virtual screen for the 9/11 jumpers to emerge as a *spectral punctum*. Although charges against Skarbakka's "disgraceful" performance had been raised before he finished work on the photographs, I would suggest that the photographs' iconographies constitute ciphers for further reverberations of 9/11's falling bodies.

In *Onlookers* and *Con-emporary*, the camera's gaze gives us the illusion that we see what everybody else does but, because Skarbakka digitally retouches the photographs, the viewer of the photograph sees the "horror" (the absence of the safety harness) that the onlookers cannot. The *différance* that the artist exerts by retouching the photographs is in fact symptomatic of his compulsion to project himself into a *different* fall, one that irreversibly leads to death, with which the photographs are never "contemporary," so to speak. The rigging that suspends his fall thus serves as an uncanny simulation of the shutter of the camera like that of Richard Drew, whose unconscious optics "caught" the falling man in a freeze frame. The application and the subsequent erasure of the safety harness in the photographs attests to a layer of mediation which simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the illusion of reality. Even if the body positions he assumes in *Onlookers*, *Freefall*, and *Office* seem perfectly plausible by dint of giving the illusion of photographic immediacy, in the context of the *studium* they reveal themselves as hypermediated images.

Similar instances of hypermediacy can be traced in *Office*, in which the cross-shaped mullions of a window divide the picture into four squares of equal size. An office-worker typing on her computer in the lower left quarter looks completely unaware of the man falling outside her window, occupying the upper right quarter of the image. Obviously staged, the picture operates with clearly identifiable visual emblems. Rather than belonging to the museum, the transparent office space is projected into the skyline of soaring skyscrapers visible in a distance. This gesture, in turn, anchors Skarbakka's fall into an environment imbued with signifiers of corporate capitalism. Situated in a hypermediated context, the modern skyscraper, the office equipped with computers and telephones constitute synecdochic signs of the experience of modernity, a *studium* punctured by the obtrusive presence of the falling man as an uncanny other of the indefatigable progress with which he is rendered contemporary. The four equal squares defining the background of *Office* constitute metonyms of the Cartesian grid of the American city and at once rationalize the fall as isolatable to a single "block." The imposition of the grid is similarly palpable in *Freefall*, where the artist's body is "wedged" between two buildings, photographed from underneath. Even more significantly, however, the unremitting logic of the grid also resonates with the title of the series *Life Goes On*. Similarly to the

cliché "so it goes," which accompanies every death in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter-house 5*,[49] the platitudinous *Life Goes On* signifies death by rendering it unmarked. This gesture implies a critique of modernity which invites the recognition of 9/11's falling bodies not so much in the context of terrorism but rather as an "intertext" dovetailing with the falling bodies of such earlier events as the Stock Market Crash of 1929, and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, which forced dozens of workers to jump to their deaths from the burning building.

This brings me to *Con-emporary*, the lead photograph of the series. In this image, unlike in the others, Skarbakka is construed as a businessman levitating above the museum's entrance doors in an upright position. The erasure of the safety harness features Skarbakka in such an improbable pose that it immediately reveals his fingerprint on the image's *optical unconscious*. The artist even gives textual manifestation of this *différance* in the retouched photograph. From the museum's name, written on the overhang, the words "museum" and "art" have been digitally removed, leaving only "contemporary" in place. But even in this word a photographer's head blocks the letter "t" which the artist marks with a hyphen in the picture's title. When viewed in the sequence of the other letters, the absence of the "t" is hardly noticeable but, in a way comparable to William Carlos Williams's incorrect spelling of "unsignificantly" in his poem "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,"[50] a gesture by which Icarus's fall is signified, the absence of the "t" becomes a marked hiatus in the typographical sign of the hyphen. Even if it reads like "contemporary," it is not so, because reading it as such already constitutes an imposition of a semantic grid, in which the "t" is inserted in the performative act of reading. The hyphen, which marks the void of the letter as negative space, also becomes a "structuring absence,"[51] one that self-reflexively exposes the layers of mediation that Skarbakka implements to create the illusion of immediacy.

Through digitally erasing the evidence of harness Skarbakka probes death-by-falling, from which the harness keeps him at a remove. What Benjamin identifies as photography's potential to reveal "image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things,"[52] appears as an uncharted territory which Skarbakka relentlessly constructs and deconstructs in his photo-performances. The act of retouching the photographs thus evinces the structure of traumatic reenactment, a gesture by which he compul-

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49. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse 5 or the Children's Crusade – A Duty-Dance with Death* (London: Vintage, 1991).

50. Cf. "unsignificantly / off the coast / there was // a splash quite unnoticed / this was / Icarus drowning" in *The New Anthology of American Poetry: Modernisms 1900–1950,* Vol. 2., ed. Steven Gould Axelrod et al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 251.

51. I am using the term in Ulrich Baer's sense. Baer, p. 12.

52. Benjamin, "Little History," p. 512.

sively projects his body into the *optical unconscious* of *other* images, images such as Drew's *Falling Man*, where the problem of simultaneously abandoning and exercising control,[53] as we have seen in the earlier section, is most lucidly put to the test. As he writes in his artistic statement, "The captured gesture of the body is designed for plausibility of action which grounds the image in reality. However, it is the ambiguity of the body's position in space that allows and requires the viewer to resolve the full meaning of the photograph. Do we fall? Can we fly? If we fly then loss of control facilitates supreme control."[54]

"Organic Shrapnel": David Janiak

The wreckage of the towers at Ground Zero was still smoldering when Don DeLillo, among many other writers, was asked to respond to the event. "The writer begins in the towers," he writes, "trying to imagine the moment, desperately. Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counter-narrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel."[55] This effort to "imagine the moment," which haunts Skarbakka's alchemy of performance and photography, is palpable in Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* (2007).

At the beginning of *Falling Man* DeLillo's concern to "imagine the moment" manifests itself in his formulation of the body-building continuum. The male protagonist Keith, an ex-husband, stumbles out of the burning towers with his friend's blood on his shirt. "He heard the sound of the second fall, or felt it in the trembling air, the north tower coming down, a soft awe of voices in the distance. That was him coming down, the north tower."[56] Here DeLillo registers a strong sense of corporeal displacement represented linguistically – an ambiguity which pervades the entire novel. The pronoun *him* simultaneously refers to Keith escaping and the personified tower falling; him becoming the tower and the tower becoming him in the form of the ruin (and, more specifically, in its uncanny combination of architectural debris

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53. As Tori Marlan writes in the *Chicago Reader* days before Skarbakka's infamous performance, "The jumpers became a catalyst for a photographic exploration of the idea of control, an important factor in Skarbakka's own life and one he believed both spoke to the human condition and had political resonance" (Marlan, p. 29).

54. Skarbakka's statement for his series *The Struggle to Right Oneself* <http://www .skarbakka.com/portfolios/struggle_statement.htm> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

55. Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future," *Harper's Magazine* (December 2001), 33–40, p. 39.

56. All parenthesized references are to this edition: Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (New York: Scribner, 2007), p. 5.

and human remains). Once in the hospital, he learns about a peculiar phenomenon that takes place in the aftermath of suicide bombings. "In those places where it happens, the survivors, the people nearby who are injured, sometimes, months later, they develop bumps, for lack of a better term, an it turns out this is caused by small fragments, tiny fragments of the suicide bomber's body" (16). Although the doctor assures Keith that he doesn't have any "organic shrapnel" in his skin, the concept gains both physical and metaphorical dimensions in connection with the dynamics of traumatic experience registered as a wound of the body, yet withheld from conscious processing: "The dead were everywhere, in the air, in the rubble, on rooftops nearby, in the breezes that carried from the river. They were settled in ash and drizzled on windows all along the streets, in his hair and on his clothes" (25).

Metaphorically, a manifestation of the organic shrapnel can be traced in the performances of David Janiak, an artist known in the city as the "falling man." With his body harnessed to a rudimentary rigging, he appears at crowded places in New York only to jump and remain hanging upside-down, assuming the pose well-known from Richard Drew's photograph. Upon learning about Janiak's death (apparently of natural causes), Keith's ex-wife, Lianne, googles the performance artist and finds a heated dispute over the bodily position he maintained suspended.

> She did not read further but knew at once which photograph the account referred to. It hit her hard when she first saw it, the day after, in the newspaper. The man headlong, the towers behind him. The mass of the towers filled the frame of the picture. The man falling, the towers contiguous, she thought, behind him. The enormous soaring lines, the vertical column stripes. The man with blood on his shirt, she thought, or burn marks, and the effect of the columns behind him, the composition, she thought, darker stripes for the nearer tower, the north, lighter for the other, and the mass, the immensity of it, and the man set almost precisely between the rows of darker and lighter stripes. Headlong, free fall, she thought, and his picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific. (221–222)

Janiak's performance slides from freefall to a standstill, with his fall suspended by a harness, in a way similar to Skarbakka's harness and the unconscious optics of Drew's camera "catching" the Falling Man. His public performance is like a flash; an uncanny reenactment, the sight of which does not provide an easy exit. His repeated appearances also subscribe to a compulsion to repeat, symptomatic of the post-traumatic phase, as he renders his performance and the place that it transforms (like Skarbakka's constructed visions) a virtual site of memory.

On one occasion Janiak performs at the subway station at 125th Street. Lianne sees him standing still and begins to understand his purpose:

> She thought of the passengers. The train would bust out of the tunnel south of here and then begin to slow down, approaching the station at 125th Street, three-quarters of a mile ahead. It would pass and he would jump. There would be those aboard who see him standing and those who see him jump, all jarred out of their reveries or their newspapers or muttering stunned into their cell phones. These people had not seen him attach the safety harness. They would only see him fall out of sight. Then, she thought, the ones already speaking into phones, the others groping for phones, all would try to describe what they've seen or what others nearby have seen and are now trying to describe to them.
>
> There was one thing for them to say, essentially. Someone falling. Falling man. She wondered if this was his intention, to spread the word this way, by cell phone, intimately, as in the towers and in the hijacked planes.
>
> (164–165)

In line with the dazzling texture of Drew's photograph in which the Falling Man paradoxically constitutes a fixed point of reference, here Janiak's performance renders the fall a sequence of still images framed by the windows of the subway. By doing so, his performance reenacts the dazzling effect of Drew's sequence suspended at the well-known frame. While his pose is controlled, the passengers catching sight of him continue their ride *irreversibly* to the next stop.

One might be tempted to suggest, as Kristiaan Versluys does, that in DeLillo's novel David Janiak stands in "for the people who had no choice but to submit to their fate."[57] However, Lianne's fixation on the work of the performance artist demonstrates that, on the contrary, he stands in for the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding their choice to take the fall. In Lianne's eyes the "flash" of the performance is punctured by a *spectral punctum* which compels her to reconnect with an experience predating 9/11. For her, Janiak's jump is an embodied yet hollow cipher for the suicide of her own father. By watching Janiak's performance, she is visually confronted with her own silenced trauma. Upon witnessing one of the jumps, Lianne conveys her ponderings in free indirect speech: "Jumps or falls. He keels forward, body rigid, and falls full-length, headfirst, drawing a rustle of awe from the schoolyard with isolated cries of alarm that are only partly smothered by the passing roar of the train" (168). Then she starts running, as if losing control over her body:

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57. Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 23.

> She thought, Died by his own hand.
>
> She stopped running then and stood bent over, breathing heavily. She looked into the pavement. When she ran in the mornings she went long distances and never felt this drained and wasted. She was doubled over, like there were two of her, the one who'd done the running and the one who didn't know why. (169)

In a deferred fashion Janiak's performance activates a repressed memory that surfaces in the form of a fragment "Died by his own hand" (67, 218) – perhaps written in the coroner's report upon her father's death. As a recurring textual trace the sentence becomes a catalyst of traumatic displacement evidenced by her psychosomatic drive to run without a logically comprehensible reason, indicating her body, and not her mind, as the "knower."

It is through the traumatic memory of the suicide of Lianne's father that Janiak's performances retroactively inscribe the taboo of suicide into the context of 9/11. As a haunting void, it resonates not so much with Skarbakka's work *per se*, a parallel that might seem obvious in the first place, but, more specifically, with such pitfalls of interpretation as the marked absence of the letter "t" in *Con-emporary* and the presence of 9/11 as a *spectral punctum* in *Sarajevo* and *Life Goes On*. DeLillo's novel does not offer any resolution. Tom Junod remarks on this as a shortcoming: "It's a portrait of grief, to be sure but it puts grief in the air, as a cultural atmospheric, without giving us anything to mourn."[58] And yet it is precisely by not giving anything to mourn that DeLillo keeps his narrative from becoming a narrative of mourning. Instead, what he offers is a textual performance of Drew's photograph insofar as his fragmented, ruinous prose configures a narrative void that simultaneously defies and demands our act of witnessing.

Man on Wire: Philippe Petit

Let me return to performance art now – one that took place 36 years ago. The towers of the World Trade Center were still under construction when the French tightrope walker Philippe Petit stepped on his wire which he and his associates had strung illegally between the two towers the night before. It was 7:15 am, August 7, 1974. Petit walked the wire for 45 minutes and made 8 crossings to the amazement of the police dispatched to the top floor of the building and the bystanders down in the streets. His breathtaking tightrope walk, which came to be

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58. Tom Junod, "The Man Who Invented 9/11," *Esquire* (May 7, 2007) <http://www.esquire.com/fiction/book-review/delillo> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

known as "the artistic crime of the century,"[59] instantly earned him recognition worldwide.

Two years ago James Marsh's Academy Award-winning documentary entitled *Man on Wire*[60] brought Petit back into the limelight. For all the critical acclaim that the film has received, little has been said about its silence on 9/11 which, as I will show, manifests itself as a telling silence.

The documentary incorporates a lot of original 8mm footage from the early 1970s showing Petit and his little team surreptitiously cooking up plans to sneak into the towers with their equipment and execute the *coup*. These filmic images are interwoven with another set of archival footage of the twin towers' construction. As the buildings' steel skeletons soar higher and higher, so does the team's plan become increasingly intricate and elaborate, so that finally the towers, having reached their planned height at a quarter of a mile, are in a position to offer space for the performance. What is missing from the film, however, is any mention of the fact that the towers no longer exist. Not that it would be mandatory, especially considering the fact that this is a documentary about Philippe Petit's achievement and not about the towers. Still, it is this uncanny silence, this visual ellipsis that evokes imagined memories[61] of the towers' destruction on 9/11.

Such a peculiar interplay of simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar images generates a strange sense of *déja vu* while watching the movie. BBC reporter Neil Smith remarks on this absence in his review but, in his search for an answer, he satisfies himself with Marsh's explanations: "It would be unfair and wrong to infect his [Petit's] story with any mention, discussion or imagery of the Towers being destroyed." And, as he says in the same interview, "I think it is possible to enjoy those buildings for the duration of the film, hopefully without that enjoyment being too infected by an awareness of their destruction."[62] In his review published in the *New York Times*, Bryan Appleyard goes a step further by characterizing *Man on Wire* as the most "poignant" film made on 9/11 to date exactly because "It says nothing and, as a result, says a very great deal."[63] In Petit's description of stepping onto the wire, he senses a resonance with the jumpers:

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59. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1155592/> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

60. James Marsh dir., Discovery Films, 2008.

61. I am using the term in Andreas Huyssen's sense: *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

62. Neil Smith, "Wire-Walk Film Omits 9/11 Tragedy," *BBC News Online* (August 2, 2008) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/7498364.stm> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

63. Bryan Appleyard, "Is Man on Wire the Most Poignant 9/11 Film?" *The Sunday Times* (July 20, 2008) <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film /article4353624.ece?token=null&offset=12&page=2> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

"Death," says Petit of the moment he steps onto the wire, "is very close." But "what a beautiful death" it would be, not the despairing plummet of one of those jumpers from the burning towers. At every step, Marsh draws our attention to the redemptive power of Petit's walk. From the moment he sees the plan for the WTC, Petit sees it as the occasion of a wonderful dream.[64]

His insightful recognition of the film's relevance in the growing series of works on 9/11 notwithstanding, Appleyard reduces the film's poignancy to its ability to evoke nostalgia for a pre-9/11 world by remaining silent about the tower's fate. I would suggest, on the other hand, that this ellipsis needs to be theorized differently. Like the missing "t" in Skarbakka's *Con-emporary*, the absence of 9/11 in the film's narrative becomes not only a catalyst for nostalgia (as undoubtedly most viewers felt about the film) but also an emphatic void for a counter-narrative to emerge. Let me map some of the landmarks of that counter-narrative.

The archival footage showing workers fitting the gigantic steel panels into their place are evocative of those iconic frames in which exactly the same panels (awkwardly replicating the Cartesian grid of Manhattan) define the contours of the towers' ruins. In one particular take the so-called slurry wall, which was meant to withhold the Hudson River from flooding the site, is clearly visible, only to reemerge as a kind of "archeological find" in Joel Meyerowitz's photographic documentations of th0e ruins[65] and as a symbolic sign of perseverance incorporated into Daniel Libeskind's 2002 master plan for the rebuilding of Ground Zero. Evoking land artist Robert Smithson's notion of *ruins in reverse*,[66] here construction and destruction emerge as two sides of the same coin. This allusion is also present in one of the film's posters which shows a view of the dark abyss between the towers from the

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64. Appleyard.

65. Joel Meyerowitz was the only photographer to receive permission to take pictures of the rescue operations on site <http://www.joelmeyerowitz.com/photography/after911.html> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

66. In his 1967 essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," Robert Smithson writes: "That zero panorama seemed to contain *ruins in reverse,* that is – all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built" (*Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996], p. 72). A distant reverberation of Smithson's concept can be felt in Don DeLillo's "In the Ruins of the Future": "We may find that the ruin of the towers is implicit in other things. The new PalmPilot at fingertip's reach, the stretch limousine parked outside the hotel, the midtown skyscraper under construction, carrying the name of a major investment bank – all haunted in a way by what has happened, less assured in their authority, in the prerogatives they offer" (DeLillo, "In the Ruins," p. 39).

imagined perspective of Petit's stepping on the wire. What looks like a construction site shrouded in the morning mist also activates allusions to the smoldering ruins of Ground Zero.

In James Marsh's hands Petit's legendary tightrope walk becomes an embodiment of a counter-narrative that emerges uncannily from the air of nostalgia that suffuses the film. The *punctum* of this counter-narrative emerges from the photographs taken from the South Tower by Petit's friend Jean-Louis Blondeau to document his walk.[67] Towards the end of the documentary these photographs appear one after the other, interrupted only by segments from interviews with Petit's friends recollecting their memories of what they saw that morning. Remarks such as "extraordinary," "profound," and, as one policeman said at the press conference after Petit's arrest, "everybody was spellbound in the watching of it," pertain to the performance but, at the same time, sound uncannily reminiscent of descriptions of the "spectacle" of the morning of September 11, 2001. In one photograph in particular we see the Frenchman balancing between the towers from underneath with a captured silhouette of an airplane flying over the buildings. In line with Barthes's illustration of the *punctum* of time in the Lewis Payne photo, this photograph simultaneously informs the viewer of what happened on August 7, 1974 and what *will* happen on September 11, 2001.

The film's rendition of Petit's stepping onto the wire and giving himself to the void between the towers is evocative of those victims of September 11 that leaped to their deaths from the burning towers. And, going one step further, Petit's entering the building by deceit and embarking on a venture that, in the eyes of many, was suicidal at least, evokes the fanaticism of the terrorists that brought down the towers just as much as the unsettling images of those that came to be known as the jumpers.[68]

Insofar as the film evokes the specter of 9/11 through Petit's performance, it also allows its narrative to be haunted by it, not so much in fragments and flashbacks, as in the *spectral punctum* of the archival footage. For in the film it is not 9/11 *per se* that is uncanny, but the absence of 9/11. It is through this absence that 9/11 enters and claims its site in the uncanny "double" of Petit's performance. Similarly to Skarbakka's pose in *Con-emporary* and Lianne's reaction to David Janiak's performance in DeLillo's *Falling Man*, the choreography of Petit's per-

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67. Although the team's preparation for the "cue" is abundantly documented on film, of Petit's performance on the top of the WTC there are only Blondeau's photographs <http://jlblondeau.com/en/detail/159.html> (last accessed: September 3, 2010).

68. As Laura Frost remarks, "Calling the people 'suicides' not only suggests that they willed their death, but it also casts them in the company of the other suicides of that day, the hijackers" (Frost, p. 188).

formance constitutes a text with which Drew's tabooed photograph retroactively converses. While Petit's walk is a performance involving the risk of death, the falling man's impending death in Drew's photograph is kept at a remove from us by the ultimate control that the verticality and symmetry of his pose suggest. The very same element of control that lends this iconic "look" to Drew's picture reenters as a signifier of suicide, which Petit's remark on the beauty of death-by-art amplifies in the context of the film. In this sense, the redemptive beauty of Petit's tightrope walk in the film may not be antithetical to the "despairing plummet of one of those jumpers from the burning towers" at all, as Appleyard suggests. Especially not if the redemption that their jumps epitomized is perhaps their most traumatizing aspect.