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ANXIETY AND REMEDIATION: THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES OF KERRY SKARBAKKA

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In his recent photographic series, contemporary performance-photographer Kerry Skarbakka has been producing color photographic images that depict the artist frozen in a moment of falling or ascending. He stages these scenes and, after performing the action in front of the camera, Skarbakka then intervenes in the final image, digitally erasing all evidence of the climbing gear and other machinery that he may have used to hold himself aloft. Thus, he mixes the media of photography, digital art and performance throughout his process. Naming his recent series *The Struggle to Right Oneself* (2002-2004), *Constructed Visions--The Struggle Continues...* (2005), and *Life Goes On* (2005), Skarbakka uses his hybrid process to communicate a sense of anxiety and to address unknown outcomes in both his personal history and in contemporary culture.

Somewhat like a movie director, Skarbakka goes *on location*, traveling to specific sites to make his photographic images. He titles images that have been photographed outside of the United States according to their geographical location, in order to emphasize that he has actually traveled to these places.

The images, *Sarajevo* (2002), and *Croatia* (2003), illustrate this practice. Skarbakka names works that he created in the United States according to what he thinks about during the process or after he sees an image. Such titles range from *Trestle* (2003), and *Stairs* (2002), which identify the generic setting of the image, to more referential titles, such as *Plato's Cave* (2002), a work he titled for what he calls the, 'theoretical members of his audience'¹ (Figure 1).



Once on location, Skarbakka performs his falls multiple times to

Figure 1, Kerry Skarbakka, *Stairs* (2002), c-print. Image courtesy of the artist.

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achieve a single image by combining his knowledge of mountain climbing and martial arts so that he lands safely. The height of a specific fall determines the type and amount of climbing gear that he will utilize. For example, in creating *Interstate* (2003), Skarbakka leapt from an overpass, landed on an embankment and rolled to safety without using gear. However, to create *Naked* (2002), he constructed an armature in a bedroom and used lightweight climbing gear to stage his action. To create *Con—mporary* (2005), Skarbakka leapt from the rooftop of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Due to the taller height of the building, Skarbakka hired Chicago Flyhouse, a professional theatrical rigging company that, 'construct[ed] a cantilever atop the museum, strung with two 2,000 lb. wires that controlled his fall.'² Skarbakka's physical involvement in this process requires an assistant to release the shutter of the camera, which Skarbakka has positioned; falls are then repeated many times to have a variety of options from which final images are chosen.

Skarbakka's entire operation is undertaken to produce a still photograph. But his photographs call for a willing suspension of disbelief and rely on our historical understanding of photography as a recorder of reality. Within the mechanical basis of the photographic medium, light reflects off of an object and is recorded onto a light-sensitive surface. In *Studio* (2002), the light is reflected off of such things as Skarbakka's figure, his golden shirt and blue pants, the ladder from which he fell, the wall behind the ladder and the contents of the studio space. These objects are directly related to their representation in the photographic image. Roland Barthes called this objective recording of light the characteristic of, 'that-has-been,' noting that what is seen in the image was in front of the camera and reflected light back to it at the time the shutter was released.³ Because of its mechanical basis, photography provides us with a sense of immediacy in relation to its subject matter. It tends to erase its own mediating presence, and it is this transparency of the photographic medium that allows viewers to look through the medium to the subject and assume that the subject existed in reality just as it appears in the image.

Contrasting photography with painting in a review of the 2003 Tate Modern exhibition, *Cruel and Tender: the Real in the Twentieth-Century Photograph*, Amanda Hopkinson noted that, "The salient characteristic of a photograph is its unbreakable link to the real world: whereas a painting has first to pass through the creative imagination of the artist, a photograph is taken of something essentially beyond the photographer's creative control."⁴ This underlying assumption of photographic transparency, as stated by Barthes and Hopkinson, has been described as naïve, but photography maintains its resistance to let go of its direct connection to the real. Skarbakka capitalizes on our willing acceptance of the immediacy of the photographic document and the impact of his imagery largely depends on it.

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Using digital technology to alter his photographs, Skarbakka erases any evidence of the harness or climbing gear that he used in creating his suspended pose. His alterations involve scanning exposed film and modifying each image to varying degrees. After the digital alterations are complete, a photographic negative is created from the digital file and a final chromogenic print is produced from this negative. Skarbakka's digital alterations are subtle and not immediately apparent, resulting in imagery that, although startling, appears to directly reference actual events that naturally transpired in the physical world.

Through the use of digital technology, Skarbakka's photographs become an example of remediation, a characteristic of new media discussed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, in which newer media evince characteristics of older media. For example, computer graphics remediate the appearance of photorealism just as video games remediate the appearance of cinema, the latter, ultimately functioning as *interactive films*.⁵ Bolter and Grusin assert that the process of remediation, or the way in which, 'new media refashion prior media forms,' involves two strategic aspects: the desire for transparent immediacy and hypermediation.⁶

Immediacy, as noted earlier, is the quality of the medium, in this case photographic, that erases its presence. This transparency allows viewers to look through the medium employed to the subject and to occupy the same space as the original viewer, perceiving the representation as if it was a form of reality. Within the history of Western art, achieving the effect of immediacy has been a goal for various artists and thus a defining characteristic of this tradition. Renaissance paintings, for example, were expected to function as windows through which one could look and view an illusory extension of our world. This objective was accomplished by employing single-point and atmospheric perspectives, and by minimizing the surface appearance of brushstrokes, thus ideally erasing the presence of the artist. Ultimately, later technological developments, such as photography, film, and television automated this effect of immediacy by mechanically and chemically reproducing perspectival space and its subjects.⁷ In contrast to immediacy, hypermediacy calls attention to the medium. Bolter and Grusin point to the technique of photomontage, as an example of hypermediacy, such as Richard Hamilton's, *Just What is it That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (1956). Photomontages are created by combining elements from various photographs into a pastiche, which draws the viewer's attention to the image or work surface. Even when viewers attempt to view this kind of work with a desire for immediacy and attempt to see a cohesive pictorial space, their attention will be directed back to the process or construction of the image.⁸

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Skarbakka's altered images remediate photography and illustrate both immediacy and hypermediacy. In *Naked*, for example, Skarbakka provides viewers with an image of a naked man frozen in midair as he falls or perhaps ascends above a bed. As he struggles against the pull of gravity, a map that is hanging on the wall curls away and also begins to fall, paralleling the man's movement. The improbable positioning of the man and the overall quality of exaggeration, gives clue to the construction of the scene and hypermediates it. But the lack of actual evidence to the scene's construction joins with the viewer's belief in the transparency of the photographic medium, facilitating the reading of the image as imbued with a sense of immediacy.

The fact that Skarbakka performs for each image is an important component of his art. The falling action of Skarbakka's performances developed from the tradition of body projection, a type of performance art that involves the artist's use of his or her own body in different types of physical activity. Examples of this approach include Yves Klein's *Leap Into the Void* (1960), and Peter Land's *The Staircase* (1998), both of which involve body projection and, more specifically, the act of falling. A point of interest is that Skarbakka's work has often been compared to Klein's *Leap Into the Void*. Although he does not credit Klein's work as a direct influence, he admits that Klein's well-known image may have been in his subconscious; however, when talking about the body projection aspect of his work, Skarbakka references Land instead.⁹ Land's *Staircase* is a video projection of the artist falling down a flight of stairs set to Muzak circus music. Land's work frequently refers to the theme of failure and *The Staircase* involves the failure to *negotiate space*, resulting in the fall.¹⁰

Traditionally, photography has been used to document performance art events, given the assumption that the medium's transparent immediacy provides evidence of an action that is otherwise momentary and exists only in its duration. In her essay, *The Ontology of Performance*, Peggy Phelan discusses the relationship of performance art to its documentation. She emphasizes the temporary nature of performance by pointing to the dichotomy between presence and absence. The presence involved in performance art is the body of the performer, and as an art form, she notes, 'performance's only life is in the present.' Documents of performance, such as photography, video and descriptive writing, only bring the memory of the performance into the present, not the performance itself, which remains absent.¹¹

In an analysis of Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void*, Rebecca Schneider has also discussed the relationship of performance to the present versus the relationship of the document of a performance to the past and future. Klein leapt from the roof of a building to illustrate his ability to levitate and fly, a stunt undertaken in order, 'to establish his credibility as the highest initiate and *Messenger of the*

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Age of Levitation.¹² He documented this leap by photographing it. Through the combination printing of two photographic negatives, the evidence of Klein being caught in a tarp held by a dozen members of his judo club is not presented to viewers in the final image. According to Schneider, Klein's performance was, 'not for a present audience but for a photograph that would record an event that had taken place at a prior time for a future audience.'¹³ Skarbakka's images function in a similar way. Except for the Chicago event, the activity of his performance is not ordinarily available to a larger audience. He performs so that a future audience may view and interpret the record of his action.

However, if Skarbakka's interest only involved the final photograph as a staged image, the creation of the document would not require the time, travel, danger, experience and/or body projection involved in his process. Rather than going through the trouble of participating in the physical action and repeating it many times just to arrive at a single image, he could very well have created the illusion of falling by constructing the images completely with digital technology. But Skarbakka's art requires both the performative action and the end product of the altered document. Its impact is directly tied to the authenticity of his physical presence before the lens and the conviction carried by the photograph as a transparent document, which bolsters the viewer's response. Knowing Skarbakka's entire process adds a sense of validity to his work and 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.

Skarbakka's background provides insight into his ongoing work. He was raised in the Bible Belt of Tennessee where he lived with his mother, stepfather and brother, who lived according to Christian fundamentalist beliefs. Skarbakka spoke in tongues by the age of seven, participated in Bible debate teams and traveled to Europe for two summers as a teen missionary. Skarbakka states that his strict Christian upbringing did not provide him with any, 'constructive information about how to deal with life;' instead, he claims that it left him full of fear and anxiety.¹⁴

In contrast, Skarbakka spent many summers with his biological father where his father's parenting style differed greatly from that of his mother and stepfather. Skarbakka's father would promote drinking and *getting laid* to the teenage Skarbakka, which undermined the boy's Christian fundamentalist indoctrination, leading to bouts of depression.¹⁵ He eventually left Tennessee and escaped from his background by joining the United States army; however, he had been forced to enlist by his mother and stepfather who thought it was his duty as an American citizen. His two years in the military resulted in further depressions and drug use, which, he stated, 'led to an expansion of my mind in a very ungodly way,'

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and then to a final breaking away from his years of fundamentalist brainwashing. Skarbakka states that his work, *The Struggle to Right Oneself*, developed partially from a, 'life of anxiety, worry, and tension [that has] contributed to a certain sense of loss of placement and foundation.'¹⁶

Moving beyond the personal, the content of Skarbakka's imagery also responds to a more widespread sense of contemporary crisis and political anxiety, a feeling linked to the loss of cultural stability and the falling global reputation of the United States.¹⁷ He explains it thus:

*[Society is] driven by greed and we have a leader (George W. Bush) who thinks he is ordained by the Western God to bring our ideology to everyone else. This is not right and there is nothing I can really do about it. I am continually stripped of the ability to control what my government does or how the rest of the world views us.*¹⁸

Skarbakka relates his chosen action of falling to the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who, 'described human existence as a process of perpetual falling, and it is the responsibility of each individual to catch ourselves from our own uncertainty.'¹⁹ In the photograph, *Winter Roof (2004)*, Skarbakka appears to slip on a pile of snow on the roof of a house and is in danger of falling to the ground. The image suspends Skarbakka's body in a moment of unknown resolution, and it is left up to the viewers to decide whether or not this figure will catch himself.

The pervasive sense of anxiety in Skarbakka's art is shared by a wide variety of contemporary artists, as could be seen in the 2006 Whitney Biennial. The Biennial's curators, Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne, chose to title the exhibition for the first time in its history. The title, *Day for Night*, was taken from a 1970s François Truffaut film, as a reference to the Hollywood movie technique of filming night scenes in daylight by using a blue filter. This technique is called *La nuit Americaine* in French, which means, 'the American night'—an idea of the darkness overshadowing the world's politics that the Whitney curators hoped to underscore. This choice for the Biennial title, then, metaphorically referenced the, 'sense of foreboding, dread, or anxiety which emerged as a recognizable theme from the hundreds of artist studios, that the curators visited.'²⁰ Vergne noted that the anxiety-based art is, 'not necessarily political art but it's art made politically.' While it does not contain overtly political images, it is art with a *political flavor*.²¹ Although Skarbakka did not participate in this Biennial, his work nevertheless fits Vergne's description of art with political overtones. Skarbakka's images do not contain overtly political messages but instead reflect his personal reaction to the current political situation. The unknown outcome of Skarbakka's interaction with gravity parallels the insecurity of contemporary political events.

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The ambiguity inherent in Skarbakka's images has led to misunderstandings in the news media. *Con—mporary*, is one of the resulting images from the performance titled, *Life Goes On*, which was staged at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art and to which the public was invited to be included in the images (Figure 2). *Con—mporary*, shows a man in a business suit falling, or possibly ascending, in front of the mirrored surface of a tall building. Cameramen and onlookers stand on a large staircase that leads up to the building's entrance. The body of one of the cameramen blocks the 'TE' of the word 'CONTEMPORARY' that hangs above the entrance doors on the overhang. While Skarbakka's falling action and the timeliness of his production of these images was influenced by the scenes of falling men and women during the September 11th attacks on the Twin Towers, Skarbakka's series was not an attempt to recreate this event. Instead, the plight of the victims provided, 'a catalyst for a photographic exploration of the idea of control, an important idea in Skarbakka's own life and one he believed both spoke to the human condition and had political resonance.'²² Skarbakka was struck by the fact that by deciding to jump, the victims took their fate into their own hands—taking control while at the same time abandoning themselves to a final outcome.²³

Media coverage of the event in Chicago, however, led to distortions and a misreading of Skarbakka's intentions. Some members of the public felt the work too closely resembled the World Trade Center's falling victims. New York Governor, George Pataki, described Skarbakka's performance as, 'an utter disgrace.'²⁴ New York City Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, called the work, 'nauseatingly offensive.'²⁵ Due to the negative responses posted in the media, members of the public reacted personally against Skarbakka and sent him death threats, even though he stated that he did not intend to disgrace or mock the victims of 9-11 in any way.²⁶ Editorials called for Skarbakka to apologize for his performance. He responded by saying that he was sorry for all of the misunderstandings of the work, but the resulting headline simply read that Skarbakka said he was sorry, implying that he had apologized for his actions. On his website, Skarbakka wrote, 'The images shown in the news coverage are not my images and the quotes attributed to me are either not my words or placed completely out of context. It's all too sad that these misrepresentations have upset so many; however, I believe my work can speak honestly for itself.'²⁷

Though it is possible that Skarbakka may continue to produce images that deal with control and falling, in 2005, he began to work on another series titled, *Fluid*, in which he photographs himself submerged in water in a variety of locations. This series, funded by a Creative Capital Foundation Grant, participates in a discussion of environmental issues, alluding to human relationships with water, disease, natural disaster and the effects of global warming on the rising oceans. With the help of hired divers, Skarbakka arranges to have his underwater

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Figure 2, Kerry Skarbakka *Con—mporary* (2005), c-print. Image courtesy of the artist.

performance photographed; he then digitally combines multiple photographs into final images.²⁸ As with the images of his falling body seemingly suspended in mid-air, Skarbakka's process creates an atmosphere of crisis by juxtaposing the accepted immediacy of the photographic document with his physical involvement and performance.

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NOTES:

1. Plato's Cave refers to Plato's allegory involving a group of prisoners in a cave who could see only shadows cast on the wall, not real forms. Plato was attempting to illustrate that thinking and speaking about reality can occur without the presence of actual forms. "In Plato's Cave" is also the title Susan Sontag gave to part of her book *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973), 3 - 24, in which she replaced the shadows of Plato's allegory with photography in order to critique our culture's use of photographic images to understand reality.

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2. Jon Yates, "Being a Fall Guy All Day Long; Relax, It's Only Art," Chicago Tribune, 15 June 2005, <http://proquest.umi.com/> (accessed February 9, 2006).
3. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 77.
4. Amanda Hopkinson, review of *Cruel and Tender: The Real in the Twentieth-Century Photograph*, *Tate Modern, Aperture 174* (Spring 2004): 12.
5. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 28, 47.
6. Bolter and Grusin, 273.
7. Bolter and Grusin, 24-25. Photography's mechanical and chemical nature seemed to conceal both the process and the producer so much that supporters of the medium had to argue for its acceptance as art rather than science.
8. Bolter and Grusin, 34-39.
9. Kerry Skarbakka, interview by author, March 21, 2006.
10. Jan Estep, "Why Failure is so Funny, or, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Gallery," *New Art Examiner 26 no. 2* (October 1998): 20-25.
11. Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.
12. Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being, 2nd ed.* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 227.
13. Rebecca Schneider, "Solo solo solo," in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 30.
14. Tori Marian, "Why is this Man Going to Jump off the MCA?" Chicago Reader, 10 June 2005, 28.
15. Marian, 28.
16. Kerry Skarbakka, "Kerry Skarbakka: The Struggle to Right Oneself," interview by Melissa DeWitt. *Hotshoe International 134* (February/March 2005): 31.
17. Wayne Koestenbaum, "Kerry Skarbakka: Falling," *Aperture 179* (Summer 2005): 63.
18. DeWitt, 28.
19. Kerry Skarbakka, "Artist's statement for The Struggle to Right Oneself," <http://www.skarbakka.com/menuframe.html> (accessed April 29, 2006).
20. Charmaine Picard, "The 2006 Whitney Biennial: A Dark Mood in Contemporary Culture," *Art Newspaper 164* (December 2005): 18.
21. Picard, 18.
22. Marian, 29.
23. Marian, 29.
24. Fred Camper, "Is Art Defaming 9/11 Deaths?" Newsday, 10 July 2005, <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed February 9, 2006).
25. Ibid.
26. Due to feeling his life threatened, Skarbakka did not return to his studio for months after the performance. His studio address was the only one available to the public, so this is where most of the threats were delivered. Skarbakka, interview by author; March 21, 2006.
27. Kerry Skarbakka, "Statement about Life Goes On," <http://www.skarbakka.com/menuframe.html> (accessed January 28, 2008).
28. Kerry Skarbakka, "Fluid," <http://www.skarbakka.com/menuframe.html> (accessed January 24, 2008).