T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko

ROUTLEDGE

Learning how to Fall

Art and culture after September 11

Learning How to Fall

Beginning with Richard Drew's controversial photograph of a man falling from the North Tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, *Learning How to Fall* investigates the changing relationship between world events and their subsequent documentation, asking:

- Does the mediatization of the event overwhelm the fact of the event itself?
- How does the mode by which information is disseminated alter the way in which we perceive such information?
- How does this impact upon our memory of an event?

T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko posits contemporary art and performance as not only a stylized re-envisioning of daily life but, inversely, as a viable means by which one might experience and process real-world political and social events. This approach combines two concurrent and contradictory trends in aesthetics, narrative, and dramaturgy: the dramatization of real-world events so as to broaden the commercial appeal of those events in both mainstream and alternative media, and the establishment of a more holistic relationship between politically and aesthetically motivated modes of disseminating and processing information.

By presenting engaging and diverse case studies from both the art world and popular culture – including Aliza Shvarts's censored senior thesis at Yale University, Kerry Skarbakka's provocative self-portraits of falling, Didier Morelli's crawl through Toronto, and Aaron Sorkin's *The Newsroom* – *Learning How to Fall* creates a new understanding of the relationship between the event and its documentation, where even the truth of an event might be called into question.

T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko is an Assistant Professor in the Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto.

"An important and excellent contribution to our ongoing need to grapple with the relationship between technology, representation, and reality."

Janelle Reinelt, University of Warwick

Learning How to Fall

Art and culture after September 11

T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko

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To LL

I know a ghost will walk through walls /
Yet I am just a man still learning how to fall.

Blonde Redhead, "Falling Man"

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> *You are the birth of everything new.*
> *You are perfect.*
> *You are you.*

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I often remarked during the writing of this book that, after spending so much time with this particular tragedy, the next book would be about love. It was only late in the process, though, that I realized this was that "next book," that it had always been a book about love in itself. Love, then, is where I conclude my many thank yous, to my partner David Schotzko and to our son Leo Ludwig Cesare Schotzko. *You, Leo, are the birth of everything new. You, my two hearts, are perfect, you are you.*

Preface

Always ever falling

Two days before my deadline for this manuscript, after the flurry of final edits and emails to artists and galleries, I settle in to read, for pleasure not for research. And yet…In the newest issue of *Vanity Fair* I am confronted with photojournalist Robert Capa's image of a man, falling, just as he was shot. It is titled *Falling Soldier* (Figure P.1).

The image is from the Spanish Civil War, and its full, original title is *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936*. It became known as *Falling Soldier*

Figure P.1 Robert Capa, *Death of a Loyalist Militiaman, Córdoba front, Spain, early September 1936*

Source: Robert Capa/International Center of Photography.

some time after *Life* published it on 12 July 1937, and, like the image that grounds this book, Richard Drew's *Falling Man* (AP photograph from September 11, 2001) it is a "single photograph" that "evoke[s] both a discrete moment, and an epoch" (Cosgrove 2013). *Life.com* editor Ben Cosgrove describes the image:

> There, in one frame, in a picture made at the very moment a Loyalist fighter in Spain is shot and killed, one encounters a distillation of the Fascist violence—and the brutally extinguished Republican sense of hope for a new, free, egalitarian society—that ultimately came to define the Spanish Civil War.
>
> (2013)

Capa considered the photograph, taken while holding his camera above his head, "probably the best picture I ever took" (in Brenner 2014), and while it was the photo that made him famous, it, like Drew's photograph, generated controversy—though not over what the image portrayed and not immediately; rather this controversy was about the photograph's veracity, questioned more than 30 years after it was first published:

> In the 1970s a British journalist challenged the authenticity of the photo, saying it was staged, a claim that has been debated. Another theory suggests that in fact Gerda Taro—the woman responsible for his transformation from Endre Friedmann into Robert Capa, mysterious "American photographer"—took the shot, an assertion that Capa scholars strongly dispute.
>
> (Brenner 2014)

"Capa detested the picture," *Life* picture editor John Morris recounted, in some ambiguity with Capa's own opinion of the photograph, to Marie Brenner in the *Vanity Fair* article. "He did not want to have anything to do with an image that exploited death" (in Brenner 2014).

In Capa's photograph the man is pushed back from the force of the bullet; his arms spread wide and legs apart and slightly akimbo; his short sleeves and khaki pants suggest casual summer days that betray the gravity of the moment, though not the gravity of his fall to the earth. Like Drew's photo, Capa's portrays one man's death, though not—as Peggy Phelan writes of Francesca Woodman's photographs (2002) and as I consider in relation to Drew's *Falling*

Man—its rehearsal. Capa's image portrays no premonition but the moment of death itself. And that moment becomes (part of) a collective cultural memory of the trauma of all war.

Memory lives in the archive, which, as Jacques Derrida writes and which I take up in the Afterword, is "*There*…and *in this place*" (1996: 2). What has resulted from my research through this project has become an archive, a monograph, and a personal account of my own fall through these images and through the events they not only stand in for but hold within them, and hold close to them. Each of the works I consider throughout *Learning How to Fall* creates a certain intimacy that is both aesthetically and politically efficacious, and all the more so for the affective blurring between the two.

This particular issue of *Vanity Fair* that caught me so unawares also features an article by Monica Lewinsky, going public for the first time in sixteen years. Speaking to having been, in 1998, "the most humiliated person in the world," Lewinsky addresses the fact that though the scandal of the blue dress predated the ubiquity of social media by which all news seems to travel now, the Internet still certainly helped stoke vitriol against her:

> Yes, we're all connected now. We can tweet a revolution in the streets or chronicle achievements large and small. But we're also caught in a feedback loop of defame and shame, one in which we have become both perps and victims. We may not have become a crueler society—although it sure feels as if we have—but the Internet has seismically shifted the tone of our interactions.
>
> (2014)

Lewinsky's malicious treatment by the press, and particularly by prominent feminist scholars, and how the event still haunts her as she strives to assert her identity beyond "That Woman," resonates through my consideration in Chapter 3 of the controversy over Aliza Shvarts's senior art thesis that Yale University censored in 2008, and through the case I put into conversation with it, the rape of a sixteen-year-old "girl from West Virginia" in Steubenville, Ohio, in 2012. Each controversy found a life on the Internet, and, in each, we too became implicated as "both perps and victims" in their circulation.

Though we still do not and most likely never will know the name of the person Drew caught in the last moments of that man's life,

we know the name of the soldier in Capa's photograph: in 1996, he was identified as Federico Borrell Garcia, a "24-year-old mill worker from Alcoy" (Whelan 2006). We can find the name of the girl from West Virginia on the Internet if we want to, though I will not name her; and Shvarts's name has become, at least virtually, synonymous with a project that we have never been allowed to see, even as she has gone on to make new, different work.

I did not anticipate citing Monica Lewinsky in this book; I did not anticipate many things that have become important to its completion and that have become increasingly important to me personally. I did not anticipate walking alongside Didier Morelli as he crawled over the streets of Toronto on the morning of 11 November 2011, or thinking of that encounter as something like love. There are other photographs and other memories that I am not including here, some because they did not quite fit, some because I simply have not found them yet. This project, like Aliza's, remains "not yet finished, never yet begun" (Shvarts 2011: 155). It exists in the phenomenological state of the in-between, it exists in the phenomenon of the fall.

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Introduction

The economy of the event

> Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies.
>
> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" ([1944] 1997: 126)

> Coming up next, a candidate asked about his honesty. The candidate responds by telling a lie about how honest he is. I'm hoping this one is performance art.
>
> Rachel Maddow, *The Rachel Maddow Show* (2012)

i.

In his intentionally provocative article "9/11 as Avant-Garde Art?" performance studies paterfamilias Richard Schechner interrogates the history of the aestheticization of real events within a trajectory that leads from the historical avant-garde's repeated call to violence in its early manifestos and performances to his own experience of watching September 11 happen from his balcony in New York City's Greenwich Village. Schechner likens his experience as witness to the terrorist attacks to that of an audience member at a performance or a film: the event becomes "a silent movie in full color."

> That morning, I was watching television when I heard shouts from workmen […]. I went onto my terrace, looked south, and about one mile away I saw the blazing north tower. I thought it was a horrible accident but wondered how such an accident could happen on a day when the sky was blue and clear. Moments later, I saw a plane flying low make a sharp turn from

> north to west. "Oh, my!" I said or thought. Something banal and full of shock. Then I saw the plane slice into the south tower as smoothly as a hot knife into butter. Not a sound. A silent movie in full color. A great ball of orange flame and black smoke. It was terrifying; it was horrible; it was sublime. […]
>
> I couldn't stop it and did not feel personally responsible for it. So in my own way I witnessed it in more of a spectatorial than a "This terrible thing is happening to me" kind of way.
>
> (2009: 1827–1828)

In 1949, after World War II and the Nazi holocaust, after the United States dropped the atomic bomb and with the rise of late capitalism, Theodore W. Adorno wrote:

> Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.
>
> ([1949] 2003: 162)

And on 16 September 2001, composer Karlheinz Stockhausen made the following infamous statement after September 11:

> What happened is, of course, the greatest possible work of art which ever existed, that such minds in just one action can accomplish something that we could never dream of in music, that for ten years people practice incessantly and absolutely fanatically for one concert and then they die. That is the greatest work of art one can imagine in the whole of the cosmos. Just imagine what has happened. These are people who are so intent on that one and only performance, and then five thousand people are sent into oblivion in one moment. I could not do that.
>
> (in Scherpe 2002)[1]

Schechner's experience of September 11, in the moment it initially took place, was already distanced by its event-ness. He was witness *of* rather than witness *to*, already moving the event into the past

even as it was occurring in front of him. Before the footage began its twenty-four hour replay on major TV stations in the United States and all over the world, Schechner's experience of the real was already contextualized not by what it was, but rather by what it was like: a movie.

Let me be very clear here: I do not think that Schechner is participating in the cultural barbarism Adorno accuses an aesthetic expression of horror to be; nor do I align Schechner's description of his experience of September 11 with Stockhausen's barely sublimated desire to have accomplished something on the scale of the attacks. Schechner's argument challenges both statements within the context of a particular aesthetics of violence, even as he places the event of September 11 within that violently aesthetic trajectory. However, Stockhausen's characterization of the terrorist attacks as art does participate in such a trajectory—it may even be its end result, retroactively justifying the consideration of any or all historical atrocities as works of art.[2]

Paul Schimmel writes in "Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object" that in all performance art following World War II, "there is always an underlying darkness, informed by the recognition of humanity's seemingly relentless drive toward self-annihilation" (1998: 17). The effects of these annihilating events on art—performed, or otherwise—resonate transdisciplinarily and transculturally, and they retroactively inform the events themselves. Art's taking on of the representation of the event shapes a contemporary perspective on the event itself, and on the broader field of violence and trauma. Rolf Tiedemann, in his introduction to the collection of Adorno's writing, *Can One Live After Auschwitz*, lists Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and Arnold Schoenberg's *Survivor of Warsaw* (1947) as examples of "works brought into existence against a background of their own historico-philosophical impossibility" (Tiedemann 2003: xvii). One might also add, from visual art, Otto Dix's gruesome caricatures from World War I battlefields in his *Der Krieg* (War) cycle from the early 1920s and 1930s; Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series of 1962–1963, incorporating newspaper photographs of motor accidents into his paintings; and Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977*, a 15-painting cycle from 1988, depicting the corpses of the Baader-Meinhof group; and from music, Luigi Nono's *A floresta é jovem cheja de vida* (The Forest is Young and Full of Life, 1965–1966), a chamber setting

of several protest and anti-war texts; George Crumb's response to the Vietnam War, *Black Angels* for amplified string quartet (1970); and Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the End of Time, 1940), written while the composer was a prisoner during World War II and premiered for guards and inmates. Add further decades of Asian, European, Australian, and American performance art, including Carolee Schneemann's show "Corporeal: Photographic Works 1963–2005" at P.P.O.W. in New York City, which included two pieces I consider in detail in Chapter 1, *Terminal Velocity* and *Dark Pond* (both 2001–2005), and Pia Lindman's *New York Times*, in which she sketches and then reenacts "some of the 600 photographs of Afghan, American, Iraqi, Sudanese, Palestinian, Israeli, Balinese bodies in pain collected from the *New York Times* from September 2002 to September 2003 […] and shares this set of drawings with the audience" during public performances at both galleries and monument sites throughout the world (Ravetto-Biagioli 2006: 77). (Pia Lindman, who was Aliza Shvarts's advisor during the controversy over Shvarts's senior thesis project at Yale University, which I engage in Chapter 3.) Each of these works participates to a differing degree in a very particular and particularly aesthetic rendering of reality.[3]

Adorno, some twenty years after his initial statement about the barbarous potential of art, yielded the right to expression: "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream" ([1966] 1973: 355). Conversely, Stockhausen's statement does not imply that art has taken on the responsibility or right to express trauma, or even that art after World War II might be inherently informed by the atrocities of war; it is not that generous.[4] Rather, Stockhausen's ill-considered remarks allow for and enable a barbaric, and certainly self-satisfied, consideration of art in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; a consideration that marks the possibility of art itself to be no more than barbaric.[5]

Stockhausen's statement initiated a flurry of responses in the press and academia. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes that, in its "aesthetic gush" Stockhausen's comment, like other remarks about September 11, "put[s] quotation marks around [the event]—to commodify it, relexicalize it for History and Geography, museumize it" (2004: 85).[6] Artist Richard Serra offered a similar critique in the *New York Times*:

> Why is Mr. Stockhausen postulating an equation between an art performance and mass murder, thereby transforming mass murder into an art spectacle? What mindset does it take to completely lose the distinction between art and reality, leading to the preposterous and hypertrophic competition between an art performance and the annihilation of thousands of people? Mr. Stockhausen made us see the extreme of a not uncommon attitude, the aestheticization of reality; in this instance, the aestheticization of terror.
>
> (2001: 2.2)[7]

The aestheticization of reality grounds my readings of the phenomenon that is the event, and, in particular, the event of September 11, and the means and modes by which the event circulates through culture. These modes of circulation, which I consider here to comprise the "economy of the event," are an inherent part of an event becoming not itself but more than the act that happened—or, more clearly, an event becoming more than what it was as it enters into various discursive and representational modes of its re-telling. The aestheticization of September 11 renders that which *is* as signifier of that which *represents*; an undoing of the art-life continuum not through excess but through its opposite: through an inability to express the real, an inability to discern *what* we see from *how* we look.

ii.

In *Practical Aesthetics: Event, Affect, and Art after September 11*, Jill Bennett addresses the question of "what art and imagery *does*—what it *becomes*—in its very particular relationship to events" (2012: 5). "Practical aesthetics," as Bennett explains, encompasses

> a study of (art as a) means of apprehending the world via sense-based and affective processes—processes that touch bodies intimately and directly but that also underpin the emotions, sentiments and passions of public life. It is, then, the study of aesthetic perception at work in a social field.

Considering both the practical and theoretical treatment of the event at the hands of history, Bennett reads through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's understanding of history as a means of affective (re)contextualization of the event—"its effectuation in states of

affairs or in lived experience" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 110; in Bennett 2012: 40)—while also proposing aesthetics as a productive and reflexive alternative to the singular narrative history provides. Aesthetics, for Bennett, compels an affective encounter with the event through its reimagining in or as an art object, one that "generates a means of inhabiting and simultaneously reconfiguring the historical event as a radically different experience" (40).

Bennett cites Doris Salcedo's sculptural installation *Tenebrae: Noviembre 7 1985* and *Noviembre 6 1985* (1999–2000) as an aesthetic response to an historical event, and, particularly, an historical traumatic event, in this case "a terrorist attack on the High Courts in Bogotá on those dates," that engages the acts that happened through an affective rather than representational mode of expression. *Tenebrae* is an architectural structure of thirteen disproportionately long chair legs made of lead and steel. The legs are set horizontally, upended at precise angles that obscure passage through the room in which they are installed. Like much of Salcedo's work, *Tenebrae* creates, as Bennett describes, an "uninhabited event space: a space that bears apparent traces of departed subjects." Even through the traces, though, the piece "resists any such personalisation" (42).

In a 2008 interview in her studio in Bogotá, Colombia, Salcedo speaks about the effects of living in a country perpetually at war wherein war becomes a "totality […] it's like being engulfed in a reality" (art21.com). War as an everyday experience informs Salcedo's work, and her sculptures present an aesthetic mode of addressing the politics of such a reality, even if Salcedo does not lay personal claim to that reality herself.

> [M]y work is based not on my experience but on somebody else's experience. I would like to reflect a little bit on the etymology of the word "experience": it comes from the Latin word *experiri*, which means "to test" or "to prove," and from the Latin word *periri*, which means "peril" and "danger," and also from the Indo-European root *per*, which means "going across." So experience means "going across danger." So my work is about somebody else's experience, literally defined. That's where you get the connection with political violence, that's where you get the connection with war. And that's what really interests me.
>
> (in art21.com 2008)