

Everyman's Actions: The White Male Body in Performance Photographs

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Performance art involves the presence of a performer's body for a duration of time. Whether viewing the performance live or through a documentary record, the performer's body serves a visually coded function. As such, the body can be read for coded signs of identity, including those of race and gender. Though identities are fluid and are themselves performed, categories are employed to discuss the construction of and consequent societal relationships that result from such subject positions.¹ The analysis of white male bodies in performance art is not discussed in ways similar to non-white, non-male bodies. Instead, when the identity of the white male is addressed, it is often labeled as the non-particular, generalized "everyman." Using the contemporary "performance photographs" of Paul M. Smith and Kerry Skarbakka, this paper will raise questions about white male performing bodies and will argue that the white male has yet to be reclaimed as a subject position from which artistic examinations of identity begin. By exploring images that emphasize bodily presence through the use of performance and its resultant photographs, this paper will contribute to discussions of identity surrounding Smith's and Skarbakka's artwork.²

Smith acknowledges gender in his artwork as he attempts to examine masculine stereotypes. For multiple series, he assumes roles that are conventionally masculine such as "soldier," "bar patron," and "action hero." In acknowledgement that identities are not fixed but are multi-faceted,

Smith's process is described as using his body to play varying masculine roles, "suggesting," according to Paul Womble, "that masculinity is fabricated and so can change."³ For his series *Action*, 2000, Smith recreated stereotypes of the roles of male heroes taken from Hollywood action films and comic books. *Action* is displayed as photographic light boxes installed on the ceilings of galleries, which forces viewers to look up in order to add to the illusion of the photographic images.⁴ According to Alistair Haymen, Smith as "archetypal adventure hero becomes defined by symbols, style, and accoutrements; divested of any meaningful plot his actions are commanded by circumstance, his status verified by the genre he inhabits."⁵

To create *Action*, Smith was physically involved in the events depicted and his process included such extremes as hiring stunt pilots to fly helicopters close to his body as he was suspended from a crane. For all of the images in *Action*, Smith codes himself as male. In one image he wears a black suit with a white shirt and black tie, clothing that is conventionally read as male (Figure 1). He gazes down at the viewer, his eyes blocked by dark sunglasses, as he appears to hang from a rope below a hot air balloon. A gun is holstered under his left arm and beneath his suit jacket, yet visible to the viewer below. Because he is depicted in a still photographic image, it is unclear if he is ascending or descending as he hangs from the balloon, holding onto the rope with only his right hand. Either way the image depicts

This paper is part of my dissertation in which I examine the meaning of the human body in contemporary narrative photographs where the reception of the body illustrates notions of subjectivity and identity.

¹ For a discussion of the performance of gender, see Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519-531.

² I first found the description of Skarbakka as a "performance photographer" in the article "A Phony Artist and His Dopey, Insulting Stunt," *The New York Daily News*, June 16, 2003, <http://www.nydailynews.com/front/v-pfriendly/story/319554p-273189c.html> (accessed March 14, 2006). I continue to use the term "performance photography" to describe Skarbakka's and Smith's photographs, which involve both their physical participation and a final aesthetic end product. More than staged photographs the performative aspect of their processes draws attention to their corporeal bodies, yet the meaning of these white male bodies often remains unacknowledged and unexamined.

For their portfolios, see "Kerry Skarbakka: Constructed Visions," <http://skarbakka.com/>; and "Paul M. Smith," <http://www.paulsmith.co.uk/>.

³ Paul Womble, "The Stories of a Young Man," in *Paul M. Smith*, ed. Paul M. Smith and Paul Womble (Frankfurt: Goliath, 2004), 7. See also Harry Brod, "Masculinity as Masquerade," in *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, ed. Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner (Cambridge, MA: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1995), 13-19. This article treats masculinity as masculinities, acknowledging that it is not a homogenous identity category similar to the way that female identities have been treated.

⁴ Alistair Hayman, "Action," in *Paul M. Smith*, ed. Paul M. Smith and Paul Womble (Frankfurt: Goliath, 2004), 45; and Womble, "Stories," 7.

⁵ Hayman, "Action," 45.

a feat of strength as Smith seems to calmly participate in this action without any sign of stress registering in his facial expression.

Skarbakka's discussion of his artwork offers a counter example to Smith's acknowledgement of his exploration of gendered stereotypes. For the series *Fluid*, 2005-present, Skarbakka photographs himself submerged in various sources of water (Figure 2). In the series *The Struggle to Right Oneself*, 2002-present, he performs for the camera by leaping from various sites. For both series, his body is coded through conventional signs of masculinity in his choices of clothing, hairstyles, and the physicality of his actions. In *Trestle*, 2003, from *The Struggle to Right Oneself*, a train trestle extends from the bottom left corner of the photographic frame and leads viewers' eyes to Skarbakka's figure (Figure 3). He wears a black suit and is caught in the moment as he begins to jump from the trestle, arms extended, knees bent and looking down to the unseen ground in a forest of evergreen trees. Again his suit serves as a masculine reference even as it becomes a site of confusion. Why would a man wearing a suit, a sign of the business class in the United States, be in a forest? Furthermore, what caused him to jump off this trestle seemingly to his death?

Part of Skarbakka's process includes altering his appearance through clothing and facial hair, turning away from the camera, or preventing a clear record of his facial features. Doing so is an attempt to move away from depicting his personal identity in order to communicate larger issues through his use of the so-called everyman. The notion of the everyman is based on fifteenth-century morality plays. There are conflicting origins for the concept of everyman, whether this character originates from the English play *Everyman* or from the Flemish play *Elckerlijc (Everyman)* because it remains unclear which play is a translation of the other.⁶ In these plays God sends Death for Everyman who has focused on too many material objects throughout his life. Everyman searches for a companion to accompany him on his journey to Death, but characters such as Fellowship, Kindred, and Cousin will not accompany him. Eventually, Good Deeds is the only figure who will escort Everyman beyond the grave. Everyman has come to represent the commonplace man that many to relate to. He becomes the ordinary figure who at times experiences extraordinary circumstances.⁷

Skarbakka's use of this character is influenced by Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison's use of the everyman in their series *The Architect's Brother*, 2001. Skarbakka's suit in *Trestle* serves as direct reference to ParkeHarrison's use of the ill-fitting suit throughout their series. The ParkeHarrisons created elaborate sets for images that depict Robert as the everyman in the scene, struggling against large obstacles. In *Turning to Spring*, 2001, Robert holds an oversized wrench (Figure 4). The grass splits in a fissure that exposes large gears that lay just beneath the surface of the ground. Alone in the environment, Robert attempts to turn these gears as he bends over and braces his legs slightly apart for leverage. His suit serves as a sign of masculinity and anonymity as the everyman struggles in this physical situation.

Similarly, though not expanded on, Smith has been described as (or accused of) playing the "anonymous everyman" through his various masculine roles.⁸ Such critiques serve to overlook the identity of the artist in a way that causes him to serve as a larger symbol beyond himself, a role conventionally assigned to white males. Amelia Jones recently pointed out the possibility of the white male representing issues beyond himself when she stated, "White men can dream of transcending the body while women (and others) have a harder time doing so."⁹ For example, a sculpture by and of the white, male artist Charles Ray is included in the 1995 exhibition and catalog *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*. The rationale for this sculpture's inclusion is because it is "difficult to ignore the emphasis on American maleness in [Ray's] work. In his utterly banal *Self-Portrait*, 1990, Ray challenges the notions of identity and anonymity in his representation of the artist as a regular guy or 'everyman'" (Figure 5).¹⁰ In a description of Ray's work, Helaine Posner continues to label Ray's representation as an "average Joe" and suggests that as "one begins to scrutinize this replica of Ray in an attempt to elicit some sense of the self, he seems to disappear" because his "persona as the normal male is a form of camouflage."¹¹ This begs the question of what it means to cast the white male as disappeared or camouflaged so that he is, ultimately, difficult to see and to grasp.

The notion of the everyman brings to the fore the problematic issue of trying to represent "every / man." This assumes the white male body represents "every / man,"

⁶ "The Moral Play of Everyman," in *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, ed. A.C. Cawley (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), 195.

⁷ Therese Mulligan, "Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison" (lecture, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, April 19, 2006).

⁸ Alistair Hayman, "Make My Night," in *Paul M. Smith*, ed. Paul M. Smith and Paul Womble (Frankfurt: Goliath, 2004), 29.

⁹ Amelia Jones, *Self / Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (London: Routledge, 2006), 173. Jones pointed to Simone de Beauvoir as the source of this idea.

¹⁰ Helaine Posner, "The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity in Recent

Art," in *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, ed. Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 25. Published in conjunction with the exhibition "The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation" shown at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's List Visual Arts Center.

¹¹ Posner, "Masculine Masquerade," 25. Lisa Phillips similarly described Ray's work as "self-portraits of a sort, but they are also oddly impersonal and emotionally detached. Although they bear his likeness, his self-portraits stand for everyman—singular, yet utterly commonplace, devoid of expression." See Lisa Phillips, "Charles Ray: Castaway," in *Charles Ray*, ed. Charles Ray, Paul Schimmel, and Lisa Phillips (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 97.

continuing the notion of the white male as the norm against which everyone else is compared as "other." As John Bowles explains:

Unquestioned, whiteness provides the models by which the Western subject judges culture. As the norm, whiteness passes unmarked, perpetuating the canonical conventions and traditions that sustain its privilege; whiteness is assumed, while only otherness is pronounced....All other identities become particular—made *too* particular to be applied universally....The situation of whiteness is that of a body historicized and racialized to the point where its material particularity is obscured. Otherness is violently suppressed in order to promote the idea of a universal figure of disembodied, metaphysical transcendence.¹²

While Smith's and Skarbakka's performances should not be reduced to Bowles' formulaic discourse on whiteness, Skarbakka's artwork is discussed in terms of the broader ideas it attempts to communicate beyond the artist's particular identity. The *Struggle to Right Oneself* represents a larger idea of anxiety and control versus loss of control, in part as a response to those who fell from the Twin Towers in the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. Discussions surrounding *Fluid* draw attention to the environment and reference issues of nature's power, specifically through water. Skarbakka began *Fluid* in 2005 after being evacuated from Prague due to the flood of 2002 and following a bout of decompression illness caused from diving in the Adriatic Sea off the coast of Croatia. He created *Fluid* in order to examine humans' relationships with water and explains:

From famine caused by drought, to tsunamis, and the very question of global warming itself. These are the issues. Not intending to seek out gratification from the difficult content, the photographs will describe the need for more awareness and ... stand as a reminder that nature, in its truest sense of the sublime, does not care who we are.¹³

Skarbakka's need to use the everyman to open up the content of his images is due to the way photographs point to specific subjects. Roland Barthes described the photographic relationship between image and referent in which the image serves as a "weightless, transparent envelope," and Barthes stated, "Show your photographs to someone—he will immediately show you his: 'Look, this is my brother; this is me as a child,' etc."¹⁴ As such, Smith's series *Action* and Skarbakka's photographs could be taken as portraits of these artists in physical tasks, as if to say "look what I did," but the series are about larger issues.

While the use of the everyman steps away from the specific identity of Smith and Skarbakka, it also serves to preclude discussions of their race and gender. Neither the artists nor scholars have identified Smith and Skarbakka in terms of white maleness serving as a subject position for the artists. By contrast, at the recent Institute of American Indian Arts panel discussion for the 2009 exhibition *Bad Land: Rebecca Belmore, Lori Blondeau, Bonnie Devine, and Erica Lord*, the three performance artists on the panel used the terms "Native American woman" or "Aboriginal female" to identify themselves and stated that they used their bodies from this vantage point. Doing so, according to the artists, serves to reclaim their bodies that have been politicized, historicized, and eroticized.¹⁵

When "identity" is allowed for Smith and Skarbakka, it is through their actions of doing rather than being. For example, Smith's five years of army service as a Combat Engineer in England's Royal Engineers gives him insight and led to the series *Artists Rifles*, 1997 (Figure 6). This experience also allowed for his representation of group nights out, similar to those he participated in with his military peers, for the series *Make My Night*, 1998 (Figure 7). He explains that he "fully embraced lads' culture in the army" and if he had not participated in social interactions represented in *Make My Night*, he would have been ostracized.¹⁶ Even when discussing the role of masculinity in his series, it is defined through activity, not being. Examining masculinity in *Artists Rifles* involves performing as multiple soldiers. *Make My Night* depicts multiple versions of Smith participating in homosocial activities that revolve around drinking alcohol in the bar. *Action* addresses masculinity through performing physical stunts.

¹² John P. Bowles, "Blinded by the White: Art and History at the Limits of Whiteness," *Art Journal* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 39. Bowles cites Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), 17-18; Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 70, 72; and Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 14-26, 38-40.

¹³ Kerry Skarbakka, "Fluid," <http://skarbakka.com/menuframe.html> (accessed March 1, 2009).

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Noonday, 1981), 5.

¹⁵ This panel discussion was held February 17, 2009, as an introduction to the exhibit that was held June 26, 2009, through October 11, 2009. Even the description of *Bad Land* references the identity of the artists involved. It states, "The four artists have differing backgrounds and life experiences, yet their work investigates common themes: land, identity, memory, history, and the recovery and reclamation of a decolonized self." See Institute of American Indian Arts Museum, "Exhibitions," http://www.iaia.edu/museum/exhibit_382.php (accessed March 1, 2009).

¹⁶ Hayman, "Make My Night," 29.

Skarbakka's background experiences that led to his series are also discussed with regards to what he has done in the past, not his subject position of identity. His training in martial arts and mountain climbing inform his actions for *The Struggle to Right Oneself*, and his experiences as a certified diver allow for his actions in *Fluid*. Skarbakka and Smith are unable—or it remains unnecessary—to claim themselves as white male artists. Along with using whiteness and maleness to maintain this subjectivity in the valued position as cultural norm, the danger of identifying white maleness is that it also can be used to dismiss these artworks. In conversation Skarbakka's art has been dismissed as "testosterone driven stunts."¹⁷ Claims, such as this, dismiss Skarbakka's work and point to the need for examination of the white male body in art in projects such as photographs of performance that visually emphasize the corporeal presence of the artist.

Yet too much emphasis can be placed on labeling the identity of performers' bodies so that it limits or ignores artistic content. Historically, this has happened regarding the artwork of non-white, non-male artists. For example, in Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, 1964, and Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0*, 1974, the artists allowed members of the audience to participate. Audiences of *Cut Piece* were instructed to approach Ono and cut off a piece of her clothing. Similarly for *Rhythm 0* Abramovic placed seventy-two objects on a table and the gallery director instructed the audience to do as they pleased towards Abramovic's body with the objects. Participants decorated, cut, and cleaned Abramovic and held a loaded gun to her head. Because these artists identified as female, scholarship has assigned them roles of passivity in these artworks versus the participatory, and therefore active role of the audience that is overall coded as male. *Rhythm 0* and *Cut Piece* are thus read as interrogations of gendered power relationships. These descriptions include those by Thomas Crow, who described *Cut Piece* by saying, "It is difficult to think of an earlier work of art that so acutely pinpoints...the political question of women's physical vulnerability as medi-

ated by regimes of vision."¹⁸ And Marcia Tanner called *Cut Piece* "fiercely feminist in content" as it addressed "voyeurism, sexual aggression, gender subordination, violation of a woman's personal space, [and] violence against women."¹⁹ In an interview with Abramovic, Thomas McEvelley suggested that *Rhythm 0* contained a traditional idea of female energy because Abramovic made herself passive. The artist responded by stating that *Rhythm 0* exists as the heaviest piece she ever created because the audience maintained control over her, but that she never thought that the piece explored female energy. Instead, she thought of the courage to do the piece as characteristically male.²⁰

More recently Peggy Phelan described feminist interpretations of both *Cut Piece* and *Rhythm 0*. With regards to *Cut Piece*, Phelan begins by describing the work as including "themes of sacrifice, passivity, aggression, intimacy and public ritual."²¹ As Phelan continues, her emphasis on gender increases. She ends her description by stating that because a male figure aggressively approached Ono and cut off her bra strap in the New York City performance, "Ono's work exposes the aggression that marks sexual difference and the laborious efforts women make not to be undone by it."²² Regarding Abramovic's work Phelan states:

Abramovic used live performance to map the fault lines of feminism and art, often jeopardizing her own safety and well-being. While other performance-based artists, perhaps most famously Chris Burden, risked their own bodies to explore the interrelationship between live art and death, Abramovic's work exposed the gendered hierarchies at work in many of these explorations.²³

These descriptions of the feminist role of *Cut Piece* and *Rhythm 0* illustrate how scholars assign non-white, non-male artists specific subject positions that have an impact on the meaning of their artwork. Readings based on artists' subject

¹⁷ In personal conversations other scholars have responded to Skarbakka's art by describing it as masculine as if they expect only males to perform such aggressive or physical actions. Typically, they do not critically engage with the work beyond their dismissive comments. These anecdotal examples further illustrate the lack of critical engagement with the function of the white male body as a subject position that artists claim or scholars use to describe artists.

¹⁸ Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 133, quoted in Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964): A Reconsideration" (master's thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1998), 2.

¹⁹ Marcia Tanner, "Mother Laughed: The 'Bad Girls' Avant-Garde," in *Bad Girls*, (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 61, quoted in Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* From Text to Performance and Back Again," *PAF: A Journal of Art and Performance* 30, no. 3 (September 2008): 85. In various sources, Concannon argues that the feminist role of *Cut Piece* is at times overemphasized. Furthermore, scholarship that applies the earliest feminist labels to *Cut Piece* appear almost three decades after Ono's first performances of the artwork. Concannon found these early feminist descriptions in

Barbara Haskell and John G. Hanhardt, *Yoko Ono: Objects and Arias* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1991); Kathy O'Dell, "Fluxus Feminus," *TDR/The Drama Review* 41, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 43-60; as well as in a 1996 article by Joy Press for the pop music magazine *The Wire*. Also see Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*: Critical Reception," Third Annual Performance Studies Conference, Atlanta, 11 April 1997, available at <http://webcast.gatech.edu/papers/arch/Concannon.html> (accessed December 10, 2007).

²⁰ Thomas McEvelley, "Stages of Energy: Performance Art Ground Zero?" in *Marina Abramovic: Artist Body: Performances 1969-1998*, Marina Abramovic (Milan: Charta, 1998), 16. McEvelley assumed Abramovic must work from the feminized passive position because she identifies herself as female, yet the artist stated otherwise.

²¹ Peggy Phelan, "The Return of Touch: Feminist Performances, 1960-1980," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 352.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 354.

positions at times overlook artistic intention in favor of emphasizing conventional understandings of gender relations. Ono described *Cut Piece* as an act of giving and the artist attempted to make an artwork without ego; she wore her best suit and gave a piece of it to each participating audience member.²⁴ *Cut Piece* was also part of a larger series of instruction pieces in which viewers were provided simple sets of instructions to perform; *Cut Piece* just added the additional opportunity of performing the action towards the artist's body. Abramovic stated that through *Rhythm 0* and her larger series of *Rhythm* pieces she examined the bodily limits, including those between the performer and audience members. After the performance she stated, "The experience I drew from this piece was that in your own performance you can go very far, but if you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed."²⁵ These meanings are overlooked when the artists' bodies are so heavily emphasized in terms of their non-transcendent subject positions.

Visually represented bodies will be read as coded identities, though discussions of white male bodies are often not discussed or are problematically referenced through the use of the everyman, a designation that hinders examinations of race and gender. When white male bodies are discussed in

terms of an identity, it is through their actions of doing rather than subject position of being. Artists choose whether they work within conventional codes of race and gender, examine identity outright, or challenge the roles of these codes. It is unknown how white male artists would claim such an identity and what these examinations would communicate, yet the white male in performance is a body that could enter into the already existing conversations surrounding identity in art. If these bodies remain unexamined, Maurice Berger warns, "It is precisely this refusal to name whiteness, to assign it meaning, that frees white people from seeing their complicity in the social, cultural, and historical economy of racism."²⁶ Furthermore Berger quoted the sociologist Ruth Frankenberg who suggests that "to speak of whiteness is... to assign *everyone* a place in the relations of racism."²⁷ Similar statements could be made for maleness as masculinities studies continue to grow as an area of scholarship. Allowing the acknowledgment of the identity of white male performance photographers as a named subject position is one way, and only the beginning, to further open the discussion of raced and gendered bodies.

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²⁴ Ono explained, "In the past, artists produced their work and then they showed it to the audience. When I want to give a present to someone, I give them something I really want to. And traditionally, the artist's ego is in the artist's work. In other words, the artist must give the artist's ego to the audience. I had always wanted to produce work without ego in it. I was thinking of this motif more and more, and the result of this was *Cut Piece (Cutting Event)*." Concannon, "Reconsideration," 30.

²⁵ Marina Abramovic, Annaela Daneri, Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, Lorand Heggi, Societas Raffaello Sanzio, and Angela Vettese, *Marina Abramovic* (Milan: Charta, 2002), 30.

²⁶ Maurice Berger, "Picturing Whiteness: Nikki S. Lee's *Yuppie Project*," *Art Journal* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 55.

²⁷ Berger, "Picturing Whiteness," 55.



Figure 1. Paul M. Smith, image from Action series, 2000, exhibited as ceiling-mounted transparencies in light boxes, two sizes 49 1/2 x 61 and 39 3/8 x 49 1/2 inches, courtesy of the Artist.

[below] Figure 2. Kerry Skarbakka, *In The Trees*, 2006, from Fluid, 2005-present, c-print, courtesy of the Artist.





Figure 3. Kerry Skarbakka, *Trestle*, 2003, from *The Struggle to Right Oneself*, 2002-present, c-print, courtesy of the Artist.

Figure 4. Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, *Turning to Spring*, 2001, from *The Architect's Brother*, 2001, photogravure, 26 x 30 inches, courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, New York.



Figure 5. Charles Ray, *Self-Portrait*, 1990, mixed media, 75 x 26 x 20 inches, Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California. © Charles Ray/Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, New York.



Figure 6. Paul M. Smith, image from the series Artists Rifles, 1997, color print, courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 7. Paul M. Smith, image from the series Make My Night, 1998, color print, courtesy of the Artist.