

FALLING (ASLEEP)

CARLA BENZAN

Early Thoughts 1918 [...] Did a risky jump for a slow motion camera. Didn't recognize my face on the screen. My thoughts were revealed on my face – irresolution, vacillation, and firmness (a struggle within myself), and, again, the joy of victory.

- Dziga Vertov

We fall asleep. We fall in love (head over heels), and then back out again. Night falls and so do the mighty. But how do we fall with images? Do we fall into them or out of them? Are we standing on terra firma when our bodies face these doubles, or are we thrust into free fall? Are we not, in fact, placed vertiginously between these two states? Whether the impetus is a suicidal leap, revolutionary defenestration, or accidental stumble, falling presupposes vertical orientation and yet the act is both spatially and temporally destabilizing. Plummeting, sliding or tumbling: falling is a state of becoming in which control is relinquished.

A Risky Jump refuses to either invert or revel in the hierarchal spatial metaphors that overdetermine moralizing narratives of bodily descent. Neither celebrating nor denigrating the body's loss of control, Billings disables the human agency that is implicitly maintained in the well-known images of artists falling. In this way, the work excises the heroic male artist from the centre of meaning and relies on the vulnerability of his own body at the centre of the image: the artist's 'jump' does not do quite the same work as Bas Jan Ader's falls, Yves Klein's leap, or Bruce Nauman's failure to levitate. Rather, Billings seems to respond to these gestures by exploring the space between the desire for weightless transcendence and the grounded body's gravitational pull. The subject of *A Risky Jump*, then, is the presence of the body. It is a body subjected.

Billings falls through an elaborately staged trapdoor that opens below him. Before the fall, we wait. The artist lies on his side on a painted grey plywood floor, curled inward with one hand tucked between his knees and the other under his head. He faces the camera but his eyes are closed. Ostensibly asleep, he does not move. A cut in the floor reveals unpainted wooden supports, pulleys, and springs that form the structure and strut of the scene. The camera is located at floor level. We see it all. At first nothing moves but soon we are forced to contend with the uncertain space between motion and stillness when we notice shadows form beneath the artist's body. Movement is first registered as a loss of ground. Time is stretched to an excruciatingly slow pace and for a moment the body miraculously hovers as though levitating. But eventually the trapdoor opens fully. In the midst of uncontrolled descent the artist's eyes open, no longer able to feign sleep. We can only imagine his gaping mouth issuing an involuntary scream as flailing arms reach for something to hold onto. Soon enough, there is impact. In fact, over half of the video registers the artist's landing in thick mats that conceal and reveal his presence, before he seemingly returns to sleep.

The title of the piece makes one wonder what kind of jump this may be, and just what is being risked. No stumble, push, or leap precipitates the artist's descent, or it is at least not shown to us. Billings is both (and neither) actor and director in this drama. Part stuntman and part hanged man, the artist does not so much 'jump' so much as the mechanism beneath him is (somehow) released. In fact, this is another kind of jump that puts human agency at a distant remove. Even before the action begins, theatricality implicates the spectator, yet it is not produced through the conventional trope of the outward facing gaze. This carefully constructed space – and most importantly the camera itself – removes overt signs of intention, placing other mechanisms as the source of meaning. In fact, the refusal of the gaze frustrates our desire for control and forces us to contend with the body itself and everything that surrounds it. The pulleys and springs of the trapdoor tie the spectator back to the mechanism and technology on which the spectacle depends: the camera that so smoothly follows the descent, frame by frame.

This image works quite differently than the photographs of Klein and Nauman that remove and celebrate the impact of the fall, respectively. Here, we are forced to feel its impact acutely through the moving image and, more importantly, through the installation that puts the embodied experience of falling in tension with visual perception. Crucially, there is no sound accompanying the artist's fall. We cannot hear the trapdoor when it begins to open. We can only rely on our sense of sight through which we can perceive the shadows forming beneath the artist's body. And yet, there is sound here. The subtle whirl of the projector fan is conjoined with the unpredictable sounds produced by the mechanical descent along the large metal column installed in the middle of the space. The physical presence of the elaborate rig transforms a space of viewing into a space from which we must reconsider how we move with images and are moved by them. When the video ends and the projector makes its ascent, we are left reeling, faced with a challenge to our bipedal groundedness.

The phantom movements of the cinematic image and the relationship between the beholder and the camera, are central to *Stanley Theatre Box Shot (Sorry, We're *L*S*D)* in which the camera moves smoothly and with control through the performance space along a central axis from the stage. The viewer is presented with a precise visual trajectory that links stage, space of spectatorship, and various places of production. In *Cygnus X-1* the mimetic registration of sound is reconfigured into a sculptural object that suggests other kinds of mysterious movement. Using the magnetic tape from two 8-tracks, Billings produces a double funnel shape that seems to have no beginning, and which 'ends' where it is bracketed by its two album cases. Formed from the Rush albums *A Farewell to Kings* (1977) and *Hemispheres* (1978) the sculpture is named after the two-part song series *Cygnus X-1*, in which the black hole is encountered by an unnamed cosmonaut. Pulled into the black hole, his body is made to move in a way that Hito Steyerl and others have called post-foundational and which is embodied in the lyrics by Rush "All who dare to cross her course / Are swallowed by / A fearsome force [...] Spinning, whirling / Still descending / Like a spiral sea / Unending".

From victory to vulnerability, Billings falls in order to question the certainty of Vertov's Kino-Eye, fundamentally transforming the 1918 experiment by conjoining the manipulation of time with the replication of space. The life-size scale of the projection coupled with the orchestrated movement of the projected image down the gallery wall mimics the spatial relations of the performative event. This moving image makes us think, wonder, and seek out nebulous forms of experience at the site of conjunction between the body and mimetic technologies. When the artist remains in a state of sleep and the image fades to black, we are left to reconcile our relation to the image as the projector slowly ascends to the ceiling of the space. The work is not 'about' the artist's fall as such, but rather it seeks to reinvest in the relation between the body and the moving image. Not unlike Nemo's nocturnal falls from his bed, the protagonist of this adventure is not the artist at all, but each person that encounters his fall.

Carla Benzan is an art historian currently based in London England where she completed her PhD at University College London. Her research is concerned with issues of movement and embodiment in the visual image and she is currently working on a project that reconsiders images of falling in seventeenth-century religious painting in relation to twentieth-century film, philosophy, and literature.





JUMP A RISKY JUMP

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Scott Billings
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