

# **Icarus: How to Survive the Fall**

by

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## Abstract

In this writing I will explore several films, videos, performances, and photographs from the past century that resist capitalism's tendency to crush hubris, exaltation, and indetermination. But first, I would like to reimagine the Greek myth of Icarus. How has the myth shaped our understanding of escape? Daedalus, Icarus's father, attempts to escape exile from the island of Crete by building his son a pair of wax wings. He warns his son not to fly too close to the sun because the wax will melt, and not to fly too close to the sea because the wings will become waterlogged. Icarus, overcome by the ecstasy of flight, flies too close to the sun and then plummets to his death.

The tale is usually told as a warning about the perils of too-muchness: too-much giddiness, too-much ambition, too-much risk. The myth proposes a kind of bondage to staying in-check. It tells us: you can escape, but only if you keep your emotions, dreams, and desires at bay. But what if Icarus didn't die at the end of the story? What if, gasping for breath and flailing, he surfaced on the sea—a little bruised and winded, sure, but alive. Yes. Alive! I wrote my high-school valedictorian speech about Icarus picking up the pieces, bandaging his wounds, and building a whole new flying machine, because otherwise he would drown. My 18-year-old self was convinced that tumultuous times were coming, and I wanted to prepare and help others prepare for the worst falls that life had in store. So here I am, almost 20 years later, at the bottom of ocean looking for a way to survive in a world where I will always be flying too close to the sun.

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## Icarus: How to Survive the Fall

“There is no rule for when and where I get my ideas – some are survival tactics, some are psychotic tics, some are very well thought over.”<sup>1</sup>

-Pipilotti Rist

Angry, confused, and paralyzed, I want to give up. After almost two years of graduate school at the Rhode Island School of Design, in the home stretch, on the descent, under the looming deadline for my thesis, I want to throw the art-life away because of a critique with a visiting curator. I was completely misread, censored, and silenced. I am embarrassed to admit how sensitive I was to the feedback and how hard it has been to regain my footing. I’ve decided to radically change my thesis because, like Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist says, sometimes her ideas are “survival tactics.” When discussing the impetus for her 1997 video *Ever is Over All*, Rist explains that she made the film as a form of “catharsis,” as a way of channeling her anger and transforming it into joy and empowerment.<sup>2</sup> In the video, a woman skips down a sidewalk and swings a giant metal flower into car windows. The glass explodes and shatters, creating an iconoclastic rupture. The protagonist gleefully destroys these symbols of capitalist freedom. This breach, this vandalism, is usually accompanied by a feeling of vulnerability and fear, but the vibe of this video is boisterous. My thesis is an exorcism, a way of making work that is autonomous, open, and free in a country gripped by conservative policy and oppressive institutional rhetoric.

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<sup>1</sup> “Pipilotti Rist: Color is Dangerous,” Louisiana Channel, accessed April, 24, 2019, <https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/pipilotti-rist-color-dangerous>.

<sup>2</sup> “Pipilotti Rist: Color is Dangerous.”

Crete by building his son a pair of wax wings. He warns his son not to fly too close to the sun because the wax will melt, and not to fly too close to the sea because the wings will become waterlogged. Icarus, overcome by the ecstasy of flight, flies too close to the sun and then plummets to his death.

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Thinking back to Rist's *Ever is Over All*, I am struck by how it bypasses the legal system. The protagonist will not be prosecuted for damaging private property because the criminal activity takes place within a work of art. The American artist Kara Walker says, "The promise of any artwork, is that it can hold us, viewer and maker, in a conflicted or contestable space, without real world injury or loss."<sup>3</sup> This is the space I am looking for, a space where I can burn and smash things without actually hurting someone or something. Without this outlet we live in a dangerous world of denial and suppression, which inevitably leads to real world injury and loss. So how do I find this space of ambiguity and freedom when I am constantly being asked to explain and contextualize myself within a rigid system of contestable boundaries? Art as catharsis is definitely off-trend, but it is a useful tactic for surviving hatred and oppression.

I am thinking about women artists and representations of women in art that resist preconceptions about femininity. I am thinking about portraits of women that are emotive,

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<sup>3</sup> Lucy McKeon, "The Controversies of Kara Walker," *Hyperallergic*, March 19, 2013, <https://hyperallergic.com/67125/the-controversies-of-kara-walker/>.

transgressive, and mythic, and how these visions might heal our collective sense of isolation and loss. The pieces I have chosen to examine mostly happen to be from the 1970s, a time in art history when catharsis was intrinsic to many feminist art practices.

In German artist Rebecca Horn's 1970-72 performance piece, *Einhorn* (Unicorn), a woman walks through a field for 12 hours with a giant unicorn horn extending from her head. The piece was made by Horn after she spent a year in a sanitarium for treatment of chemical overexposure obtained from working with toxic art materials. She made the piece for a classmate of hers and also documented the performance in a video.<sup>4</sup> The piece and its inception suggest that in order to heal we might need more than medical treatment—we might also need radiant and magical reconfigurations of the self. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the unicorn's horn was said to purify and heal the sick. The unicorn was also said to embody a fantastical amalgamation of heaven and earth, two seemingly contrary expressions of grace and wildness.<sup>5</sup> The piece's 12-hour duration suggests that it is important to go on a rigorous journey in order to treat and expel poison. The horn, as sculptural appendage, transforms the performer from human into a mythical beast, and the construction of Horn's horn demands that the body be upright, lifted, poised, and mighty. Given this example, body extensions are a vital way to free aspects of ourselves that are shut down, silenced, and subjugated.

American multi-media artist Carolee Schneemann's 1975 performance piece, *Interior Scroll* also uses a kind of appendage, in this case, to amplify and visualize the power of the vulva. First performed in East Hampton, New York in August 1975, the piece features a nude Schneeman, caked in mud, reciting from a scroll she is pulling out of her vagina. According to Schneemann, the piece arose not out of desire, but out of necessity, "I didn't want to pull a scroll out of my vagina and read it in public, but the culture's terror of my making overt what it wished

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<sup>4</sup> Lucy Watling, "Rebeca Horn, Unicorn, 1970-2," *Tate*, August 2012, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/horn-unicorn-t07842>.

<sup>5</sup> "Exhibits: The Unicorn Found", Brown University Library, accessed May 20, 2019, <https://library.brown.edu/create/unicornfound/the-medieval/>.

to suppress fueled the image.”<sup>6</sup> Schneeman responds to a collective terror, where the only way out is to perform the taboo. Here is the exit strategy, the escape hatch, the survival mechanism; by pulling a scroll out of her vagina Schneemann opens up a deeper and more nuanced space for humanity. Her piece is bodily and spiritual, as it summons up the complexity, power, and uncontrollable aspects of menstruation, sex, and birthing.

Cuban American performance artist Ana Mendieta’s 1973 photograph *Imagen de Yagul*, from the series *Siluetas Works in Mexico 1973-1977*, depicts her lying in a Zapotec tomb in Yagul, Mexico. Her naked body is almost completely covered with tiny white blossoms and long green stems. These flowers act like appendages, extending the body’s singularity into a landscape. She becomes a meadow, released as it were from a kind of individuality into a multiplicity, thousands of tiny white petals and glassy green stalks seem to burst from her skin. She is becoming... Furthermore she is becoming the earth in a way that is both natural and supernatural. She is not decomposing into a clump of flowers. She is composing; her skin glistens—her muscles are firm. She is alive, sprouting, transforming the natural cycle of life and death, into life and life. This tapestry of flora and fauna causes catharsis because it releases the human from classification, allowing it to become seed, soil, effigy. Mendieta transformed the trauma of transience into an optimistic vision of abundance, growth, and rootedness.

In an untitled photograph from her *Angel Series*, Rome, Italy, 1977, American photographer Francesca Woodman also examines ideas of transience. The photograph depicts a dilapidated industrial space flooded with light. Two angel wings made from bedsheets hang from the ceiling. In the right foreground a blurry Woodman is caught mid-jump. The piece is filled with a sense of longing, fissures, and gaps. She misses the mark, in a heartbreaking and funny way, as we see her, hovering off-center, unable to align herself with the wings, unable to present a convincing illusion of flight. We are offered an aspirational image that is grounded in its own limitations, its own humanness. The gap between the wings and Woodman’s body is profound: instead of discrediting faith, it affirms faith by showing Woodman failing to become an angel but

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<sup>6</sup> Quinn Moreland, “Forty Years of Carolee Schneemann’s ‘Interior Scroll,’” *Hyperallergic*, August 29, 2015, <https://hyperallergic.com/232342/forty-years-of-carolee-schneemanns-interior-scroll/>.

trying nevertheless. Woodman seems to be enacting a kind of spiritual mending, a belief in becoming, a belief in playing the unplayable.

Moving forward in time, the opening image in German choreographer Pina Bausch's 1989 film, *Die Klage Der Kaiserin*, (The Complaint of the Empress) also conjures a sense of vulnerability and longing. The film opens with Bausch in a dress and heels attempting to control an industrial-sized leaf-blower in a woodland knoll. Autumn leaves billow and fly through the air, partially blurring and obscuring Bausch as she drags the machine up a steep hill. She trips, falls, gets stuck in a rut, runs and returns again and again to this seemingly futile and absurd action. However, she is so desperate and possessed that the pitiful action becomes dramatic, urgent, a fight to the death. Because Bausch, wearing a voluminous black frock, is not dressed for the job, we are immediately transported into an enchanted realm, where the mundane—leaf-blowing—becomes sensual, glamorous, and wild. Suddenly, the leaf-blower feels like the personification of a man, a raging bull, locked in a passionate duet with Bausch. The image brims with emotion, a kind of cathartic conflict unfolds, raw and seemingly spontaneous, Bausch and the leaf-blower whirl. Whereas the previous examples of work by Rist, Horn, Schneemann, and Mendieta were solo performances, this piece is about a couple, the femme in concert with the macho. The choreography of this piece feels more volatile and unpredictable, as Bausch's body strains and flails, in contrast to the poise of the previous examples.

Serbian and German performance artists Marina Abramovic's and Ulay's 1980 performance, *Rest Energy* also deals with dueling forces, but with the utmost restraint. Abramovic and Ulay use their own body weight to draw a bow and arrow into tension for four minutes. If either of them were to release or falter, the arrow would pierce Abramovic's heart. The stakes are so high that if either of them breaks focus, Abramovic will die. This piece pushes Walker's assertion that art is a space of conflict, "without real world injury or loss," to its limit. No one died in *Rest Energy*, but the possibility existed. Because this performance sits as close as possible to real inexplicable loss, the audience is launched into a cathartic state. The piece maintains a safe space on the edge of actual loss. This combination of security coupled with the possibility of devastating pain releases us, the audience, from our own repressed suffering. We

identify and empathize with the duo. But was Abramovic and Ulay's performance too risky, too stupid?

In the 2019 documentary film *Free Solo*, American rock climber and free soloist Alex Honnold discusses the difference between risk and consequence. He ascends big walls without ropes or aids of any kind. "When I am doing these hard free solos, I like to think that the risk, the chance of me falling off, is quite low, even though the consequence is extremely high, that's one of the appeals of free soloing, to take something that seems difficult and dangerous and to make it feel safe."<sup>7</sup> That is exactly what Abramovic and Ulay are doing, taking art that seems horrifying and making it feel safe. It comes down to trust, trusting oneself, one's partner, or, in Honnold's case, himself and the rock wall. Because, on the other side of trust is fear: an infectious and negative force. In order to build trust, we must prepare, which often involves a strenuous and repetitive regimen. But it's worth it in the end because art that uses trust to initiate form and concept is art that helps ease human anguish and dispel fear.

While my newest video, *Icarus*, is a solo performance, I can't do it without the watchful eyes of my partner, American sculptor John Bisbee. In the video, I walk through the ocean, wearing a pair of flaming wax wings. Because of the wide-angle of my arms, I can't see if the flame gets dangerously close to my skin. I rely on my own sensitivity and John's lightning fast impulses to keep me from harm's way. John's incredible mental and physical presence helps fuel my sense of freedom and security. In this way, the piece is about trust, about trusting myself, my partner, and the world—trusting, that at the right time, I can and will extinguish the fire.

The piece is set in Harpswell, Maine, where I've been living with John for the past 7 years. I am returning to a place I feel the most connected to in order to rekindle my *joue de vivre*, which is a necessary component of surviving the pitfalls of this world. The video seems to start within a cloud. We can barely make-out the ocean, sky and a few fishing boats shrouded in mist. The camera hovers just above the lapping water. In slow-motion, I rise up out of the water, naked except for a pair of giant, burning wax wings. The film is played in reverse to accomplish this feat. I slowly walk through the ocean, ablaze. I will survive the fall because I believe in

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<sup>7</sup> Honnold, Alex, *Free Solo*, streaming. Directed by Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi, Los Angeles: National Geographic Documentary Films, 2019.

transfiguration, in art's ability to deliver us from ourselves, to reconnect us to the elemental states of the planet and the cosmos. I am part bird, part woman, part fire, part ocean.

Reconnecting with oneself and the universe is a balancing act, which, given the previously mentioned artworks, often requires: rigorous activities and camera work, costumes or props, radical destruction and joyous renewal.

Rigor is an integral ingredient in art as exorcism. I am thinking specifically about how Horn's *Einhorn* requires an immense amount of exertion. The duration of the piece and the precarious nature of the costume test the body's physical and mental capacities. How does stamina expel toxic energy from the body? Endurance, in and of itself, wears out the opponent. It is a kind of long-form resistance. Withstanding extreme physical conditions is a way of conditioning the body and the psyche to withstand verbal and physical attacks and illness. How does the costume aid this opposition? In order for the costume to transcend itself, the performer must embody it fully. One way to ensure that this is the case, is to make the costume restrictive and/or dangerous. The performer is forced into a state of hyperawareness, extreme focus, a kind of heightened sense of aliveness, in order to ensure safety.

In *Icarus*, I am working with two threats: the environment and the costume. The action is performed in the freezing ocean. I must overcome the icy-water because the video isn't about being cold or suffering from hypothermia, it is about exaltation and tenacity. Furthermore, in order to avoid being scorched by the burning wings, I must maintain a high-degree of focus and nimbleness.

The camera's point of view, movement, and editing can also contribute to the piece's ability to expel negative energy. I've been talking with painter, video artist, and professor Angela Dufresne about the cut versus the long take in cinema. I've always been drawn to the cut and montage, as a form of rapid fire abstraction or surrealism. I love establishing a rhythm and a kind of spontaneous and playful succession of images. But more and more, thanks to Dufresne, I am seeing how this mode of working can create fictions that are easily deconstructed.

The long take, on the other hand, demands a certain level of reality. It is unbreakable, a single instance that is documented from start to finish without tricky edits or enchanting camera angles. In the long take, the camera is a reliable witness as opposed to a questionable inventor. A

still shot, in which the action unfolds across the image, is a more open and generous way of presenting the performance. Whereas a moving camera starts to call attention to itself as a subjective interrogator, the still POV is a more objective storyteller.

And what is the story? A woman rises out of the sea with burning wings. Icarus is reborn as a mythical phoenix, flying up from endless water. Like the artists mentioned above, I am thinking about the transformation of terror into beauty and trauma into bliss. In art we are given a space to destroy, to struggle, to burn without inflicting actual damage. Healing happens in a sacred space. Art is sacred if it allows us to examine, visualize, and wear-out our worst fears. And so, wings aflame, I plummet into the ocean, only to sleep, wake, and do it all over again.

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