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## Francesca Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time

**F**rancesca Woodman's photography provides an opportunity to return to the central insights about photography and death articulated in different ways by Walter Benjamin ([1935] 1969) and Roland Barthes (1981). Woodman's triple perspective as a photographer, a model, and a viewer of photography exposes some of the implications for young white women trying to contend with the age of the spectacle presaged by Benjamin and the age of the spectator presaged by Barthes. Taken together, the works of Benjamin, Barthes, and Woodman suggest that photography might be the best medium we have for responding to the ongoing temporality of the work of mourning. It has often been observed that the twentieth century has witnessed more death and loss than any other century; photography has been a crucial art in that it both serves as a witness to life and as a rehearsal for death.

### Mourning and photography

For Benjamin, the reproducibility of the photographic image dims the aura traditionally associated with artistic masterpieces. The collapse of this tradition creates the possibility for a new, more democratic art. In recent years, Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" has been hailed as a politically astute harbinger of postmodernism. But one should not overlook the fact that the essay is alive to its own moment. In the age of mechanical reproduction, not only art but experience itself became vulnerable to the effects of the copy. Written in

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the period before the catastrophe that showed us the benumbing effects of mass death, Benjamin's essay can be seen as both an optimistic welcoming of a less elite art and as an act of mourning for the lost aura of the singular event, the lost value accorded the unique individual subject, and the degradation of the once-in-a-lifetime event more generally. Prior to the age of mechanical reproduction, the once-in-a-lifetime event par excellence was one's own death. But the historical juxtaposition of that technological achievement and the catastrophe of the Second World War has meant that photography has also transformed our understanding of death as both act and image in ways that Benjamin could not have fully foreseen.

Writing almost fifty years after Benjamin, Barthes was inspired to write *Camera Lucida* after the death of his mother. Channeling his mourning into a search for the ontology of the photograph, Barthes suggests that portrait photography creates a rehearsal for death. By stilling a model in time, portrait photography takes on a posthumous relation to both the model and the moment. As a record of a moment and model that no longer are, portrait photography provides the viewer access to the ongoing psychic work of mourning loss. Barthes infuses his theory of photography with his grief over his mother's death. More remarkably, he also demonstrates the compassionate response a viewer might find in an encounter with inanimate images. Depressed and slightly removed from life's animating energy when he begins writing, through handling and looking at still images he begins to feel some of the oscillating temporality at the core of both portrait photography and death, an oscillation whose rhythmic to and fro between past and present inspires him to leave off the paralysis of grief and to move again. "Photography," Barthes observes, "may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print" (1981, 92). After his mother's death, Barthes wants to find a final print, an image that corresponds to his memory of her. But to do so, he needs to confront his own relation to her image etched within death's final click.

Death forces the living to revise understandings of the past. Within psychoanalysis, the radical revision of the past within the present is conveyed by Freud's use of the term *Nachträglichkeit*. There is much debate about the precise meaning and, therefore, the best translation of Freud's concept. The *Standard Edition* gives it to English speakers as "deferred action" (Freud 1953–74b). Jean Laplanche suggests the term *afterwardness*; I think this concept comes closest to addressing the psychic charge

produced by looking at great portrait photography (Laplanche 1992). Afterwardness, as Laplanche understands it, is illustrated by the experience of an adult who comes upon the scene of a child sucking the breast of a mother. This encounter prompts the adult to remember his or her own infant experience; in that recollection, the adult discovers, for the first time, the erotic charge of the “original” scene.<sup>1</sup> The adult can interpret the erotic dimension of the remembered scene both because he or she has conscious access to the oral drive and, more important for Laplanche, because the original scene was itself invested with the mother’s erotic response to the child sucking. In the original scene, the child was not concerned at all with the mother’s response (nor, indeed, has psychoanalysis been much concerned with it). But the mother, in Laplanche’s view, nevertheless “implanted an enigmatic message” in the exchange, a message that can only be deciphered much later (Laplanche 1992, 222). Belated interpretation is the hallmark of afterwardness. Not as charged as a flashback, which overwhelms awareness of the present tense, and more charged than “regular” memories, afterwardness allows us access to the copresence of the past and the present in the same moment (Laplanche 1992).

Our encounter with the photographic portrait duplicates a previous encounter between the photographer and model. Thus the encounter with the portrait is always a reencounter; it is an experience of repetition. Photographic repetition has two dimensions: the repetition that derives from the capacity to make an endless number of prints from the same negative and the repetition of the literal moments (the uniform measure of time’s own beat) that pass between the moment in which the photograph is taken and the moment of the spectator’s (re)encounter with it. Photography schools the viewer in the mutative force of temporality itself. “The photograph possesses an evidential force, and . . . its testimony bears not on the object but on time” (Barthes 1981, 89). A photograph inserts the past within the present; the copresence of the past and the present staged by photography links it with theater. Photography’s theatricality stems from the possibility that one can address and be addressed by the dead.<sup>2</sup> Invoking terms such as *magic* and *alchemy* throughout his work, Barthes comes close to suggesting that photography is a

<sup>1</sup> For Laplanche the emphasis falls on the scene—and not, as might be assumed, on the sucking. See Laplanche and Pontalis (1964) 1968 for a fuller account of the importance of the erotic scene in psychic life.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the relationship between theater and death see Blau 1982; Fuchs 1996; Roach 1996; and Phelan 1997. See also anything and everything written by Samuel Beckett.

medium, not only in the sense of an art form but also in the sense that it consorts with spirits.

Faced with the apparent limitlessness of photographic repetition, the viewer imagines an end to that endlessness by seeking to find *the* image that will convey something utterly singular about the uniqueness of the model's life. His more pressing interest in finding a single photograph that captures something essential about his dead mother defeats Barthes's aspiration to assess the ontology of the photograph.<sup>3</sup> The that-has-been aspect of portrait photography reflects the heightened emotional recognition of the that-has-been that death produces in the mourner. Death and portrait photography, in other words, force us to confront the mortal limit of the human moment as such.

This aspect of the photographic address beckons the viewer's afterwardness; the image addresses a viewer who will survive the moment in which the photographer creates the image. Portrait photography and self-portrait photography address a future viewer, either the photographer's own future gaze or the future gaze of another viewer. In this sense, photographic self-portraits might be understood as rehearsals for the photographer's own death, because they allow the photographer to pose an image of her own still life, to develop an image of herself as dead.

When Benjamin wrote his celebrated essay, he could not have anticipated the larger transformation of cultural communication in the postwar period. I cannot delineate these complex transformations here, but suffice it to say that at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, performance has become a central concept for understanding our times (McKenzie 2001).<sup>4</sup> From engineering achievements ("the performance of this stereo") to the everyday language of assessment across fields as diverse as stocks' values, employees' productivity, politicians' speeches, and sports stars' feats, performance focuses our understanding of the current order of things. The postwar period ushered in a transformation from the fixed power of spectacle to the increasing power of spectators to transform the meaning enfolded within the original (spectacular) transmission. One crucial difference in the theories of photography proposed by Benjamin and Barthes is that for Benjamin the pho-

<sup>3</sup> "At the moment of reaching the essence of Photography in general, I branched off; instead of following the path of a formal ontology (of a Logic), I stopped, keeping with me, like a treasure, my desire or my grief; the anticipated essence of the Photograph could not, in my mind, be separated from the 'pathos' of which, from the first glance, it consists" (Barthes 1981, 21).

<sup>4</sup> For detailed examination of these transformations see Debord (1971) 1983; Phelan 1999, 2000; and McKenzie 2001.

tograph exists in the world as a text independent of its viewer, while for Barthes the photograph must be interpreted, indeed developed, by the viewer. Thus, we can say that we have moved from the age of the spectacle as such to the age of the spectator's response to that spectacle; the spectator's response has become its own performance.

Restlessly searching for the photographic image of his mother that will capture his memory of her, Barthes finds it in a photograph of her taken before his birth. He calls it the "Winter Garden Photograph." This photograph gives him access to the memory of an image he himself never saw; it functions as photographic, as opposed to empirical, memory. The photograph retrospectively confirms his later perceptions of her and gives him renewed access to the affective force of his image repertoire. Thus, the click Barthes encounters while looking at this photograph beckons him because the structure of his encounter with it mirrors the psychic position in which he finds himself as a grieving son. The "Winter Garden Photograph" consoles Barthes because it exposes the difficult but necessary evidence that they each can, indeed must, live lives that extend beyond the life of one another. His encounter with the "Winter Garden Photograph" inspires Barthes to find a way to develop an image of himself as a survivor of her death precisely because it makes explicit the image of her life beyond the one they shared. This inspiration enables him to take up that part of his life that extends beyond her death.

### **To come closer**

Francesca Woodman's work pursues many of the insights offered by Benjamin and Barthes, inflecting them with the vantage point of a young woman artist from the United States rather than with the perspective of a mature European intellectual male. Born in 1959, Woodman began taking photographs when she was thirteen. Her extant archive is composed of some five hundred works, all of which were made between 1972 and 1980. In January 1981, her first book, *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* (Woodman 1981), was published. A few weeks later, on January 19, 1981, Woodman killed herself by jumping from her apartment window on the Lower East Side of New York City. She was twenty-two.

Her work had appeared in a few small group shows in New York and in Italy before her death. She had approached various New York dealers who were encouraging but noncommittal about representing her. According to her friend and occasional collaborator Sloan Rankin, the influential New York dealer Holly Solomon told Woodman that her work was immature but promising and asked Woodman to come back in a few

years (Rankin 1998, 35). It was not until 1986, five years after her death, that Woodman had her first solo show. For most of us, then, her work operates in the pivot of the structure of afterwardness that all portrait photography inhabits, but the explicit force of that afterwardness is heightened by knowledge of her suicide.

Organized by Ann Gabhart, who was then the director of the Wellesley College Museum, the 1986 exhibition of Woodman's photographs traveled to Hunter College Art Gallery in New York, the University of Colorado Fine Arts Gallery, the Fine Arts Gallery at the University of California, Irvine, and the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois. A catalog of the show, *Francesca Woodman: Photographic Work*, with essays by Rosalind Krauss and Abigail Solomon-Godeau and a short biography of Woodman written by Gabhart, provided the first sustained critical assessment of her work (Gabhart 1986). All involved made a conscious decision not to discuss Woodman's suicide in detail. Krauss does not mention it at all. Solomon-Godeau refers to it only at the very end of her essay when she writes, "the tragedy of Woodman's death is a fact and a given, but the work she produced is a living testimonial, a valuable bequest to other women" (Solomon-Godeau 1986a, 35).

This redemptive move is common enough, particularly in regard to the suicides of young women artists, but it risks betraying something vitally important in Woodman's work and in her life and death. Are we certain that her suicide is a tragedy? What might we gain if we considered it, however tentatively, as a kind of an achievement, even, as I will suggest shortly, as a kind of gift? I know this proposition is delicate. Let me say it this way: I think Solomon-Godeau thinks she understands something that I am not so sure can be understood. What she takes to be "a fact and a given" is an act that I believe leads us beyond the logic of the factual.

I am not suggesting that suicide has no logic, no data. On the contrary, as Kay Redfield Jamison has shown, "we know a mastodonic amount about suicide" (Jamison 1999, 19). The facts are stark, assuredly: the suicide rate among people under forty has tripled in the past forty-five years; it is the third leading cause of death of young people in the United States and is now the second leading cause of death among U.S. college students. In the United States alone, nearly 500,000 people make suicide attempts that are serious enough to require emergency room treatment each year; 30,000 succeed (Jamison 1999, 24). Worldwide, suicide is the second leading cause of death in women between the ages of 15 and 44 and the fourth leading cause of death among men of the same age (Jamison 1999,

46–51).<sup>5</sup> While there are many possible reasons for the increase in international suicide rates—Jamison lists increased access to firearms, greater accuracy in assessments of the cause of death by coroners and medical examiners, increasing rates of depression, and earlier experiments with drugs and alcohol as among these factors (Jamison 1999, 24, 47–51, *passim*)—our inability to discuss the motivations for and consequences of suicide surely must play a part. Ignoring suicide or downplaying it in the critical literature devoted to a gifted artist can obscure what may well be a central achievement of the artist’s work and life. Perhaps if we begin to consider the urge toward suicide as a subject of artwork we might begin to transform its possible meanings. A more expansive consideration of suicide might help make an intervention into the usual story of shame, failure, and anguish that all too frequently dominates the relationship of the living with those who kill themselves.

#### **Working things out, in light**

Central to Woodman’s photographic self-portraits is a refusal to be still. Woodman’s insistence on exposing this resistance within a medium dedicated to arresting stillness lends her photographs a dramatic force that spills over the frame of the image. For example, one of her earliest extant works (see fig. 1), taken in Boulder, Colorado, sometime between 1972 and 1975, when she was fourteen to seventeen years old, condenses the main themes of her mature work (if one can use that phrase when discussing someone who died so young). Woodman’s characteristic blur makes it difficult to know for sure if it is a self-portrait, although to me it feels as if it is one. Crawling through a headstone, the model’s lower body, literally on one side of the gravestone, is subject to a long exposure that gives the body the appearance of a ghostly crawling. There are at least three distinct feet on this side of the stone, while the upper body, posed on the other side of the gravestone, is more securely anchored by two arms. The hole in the lower headstone is reflected again near the top, above the inscription “To Die.” The life crawling through the lower hole works to render the upper one especially open, vacant, lifeless. The photographic blurry shadow transforms a solid stone into a porous aperture.

<sup>5</sup> Jamison notes that although women “are more prone to depressive illness than men and are more likely to attempt suicide, [they] do not actually kill themselves nearly as often” (1999, 202–3). She also has an excellent summary of the research regarding the effects of menstruation and pregnancy on depression.





**Figure 1** Untitled photograph by Francesca Woodman, Boulder, Colorado, 1972–75. Courtesy of Betty and George Woodman.

The blur at once registers the animating force of Woodman's art—it refuses to accede to photography's resolute stillness—and additionally registers the deep affinity between that stillness and the heavy stones that fill graveyards. With this image, Woodman enters the medium of photography as its most supple ghost.

Woodman's work exposes two philosophical and psychic relations to the temporality of death. Refusing the well-known conviction that death occurs always in the future tense, Woodman's photographs suggest that our anticipation of death is necessarily based on images, indeed on memories, of death as an event in the past. In the age of the spectacle, one confronts thousands upon thousands of such images; in the age of performance, one attempts to insert oneself into that cultural image reper-

toire. Many of Woodman's photographs are single images within a series of images collected under the same title. Each print copies the moment that is both behind her and still waiting to be (re)developed as the series forces new interpretations of past images as additional images are added.

The repetitive quality of Woodman's work might be usefully considered in relation to Freud's remarkable 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1953–74a). He argues that the compulsion to repeat overrides the pleasure principle and that repetitive acts such as his grandson Ernst's game in which he repeatedly throws a spool across the curtained cot of his mother's bed and then retrieves it, while saying *fort/da* (gone, here), serve to allay the anxiety and panic Ernst feels in response to his mother's absence. Insofar as the game may be seen as a creative act, as Cathy Caruth has recently suggested (2001), it might be viewed as a disciplined approach to the repeated psychic encounter with appearance and disappearance (Phelan 2001a). The psychic work accomplished by the game derives from a substitution: the physical object of the spool affords Ernst a way to grasp the enigmatic character of his relationship with his mother who comes and goes. Freud reads the child's game as a rehearsal for his mother's death and sees in it the psyche's desire to survive traumatic loss. Woodman's photographic games can be seen in this light as well, except that rather than throwing a spool away from her gaze and reeling it back in as Ernst does, she plays *fort/da* with her own image. Rather than seeking to rehearse for an anticipated loss of another, Woodman's artistic practice might be understood as a way to rehearse her own death. Woodman throws photographic self-portraits across the "curtained cot" that limits all vision and especially veils the image of oneself as dead. For Woodman, sometimes the drama of self-seeing at the core of her photographic enterprise produces images that are close to her, something she can grasp; other times, and perhaps especially in those brief moments when the negative floats in its chemical bath, photography seems to offer her access to an image of her own imagelessness. Her work makes vivid the fragile psychic space between one's own inner image and one's attempt to be joined with it in the external world, even to the point of being enjoined by it.<sup>6</sup> Freud believed that Ernst was able to use the spool as a way to grasp the enigma of his sometimes present and sometimes absent mother; I'd like to think that Woodman was able to use her photography as a way to explore the enigma of her relationship with her own developing and vanishing image.

<sup>6</sup> For a provocative analysis of the ways in which the infant is at once sutured into and alienated from self-image, see Lacan (1949) 1977a.

In his analysis of Ernst's *fort/da* game, Freud claims that the child's encounter with repetition signals a desire to return to an inanimate state. Suggesting that stillness is the original condition from which cells depart in order to live, Freud focuses on something in us "that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides" (Freud [1920] 1953–74a, 25). He calls this the death drive. Woodman's photographs illustrate the psychic struggle between the compelling drive for stillness and the vital necessity of animation that Freud believed was fundamental to human life.

Woodman's work asks her viewers to address their own responses both to the animating force of Woodman's creative art itself and to the apparent definiteness of the end point of her life, her suicide. People close to those who have committed suicide often worry that they might have missed a clue, a cry for help, a retrospectively enigmatic message; they often replay conversations to see if they could have done something to prevent the suicide. The art critic similarly returns to the same images, scrutinizing them to see what they might portend about the psychic condition of the artist. This is tricky because it threatens to turn art into nothing more than psychological symptom. Here, I want neither to romanticize death nor to contribute to an essentializing view of "the suicided artist." Not all of Woodman's work concerns death, but I believe her preoccupation with it permeates her understanding of photography. Indeed, it is my contention that her interest in death allows us to glimpse an unusual view of what death and art, together and separately, might mean.

My response then must be placed in relation to the most critically engaged commentary Woodman's work has inspired thus far. Rosalind Krauss, for example, never mentions Woodman's suicide in her catalog essay "Problem Sets." Realizing that most of Woodman's five hundred extant photographs were done in response to classroom assignments, Krauss speculates that the problem set had itself "become a medium in which to think, in which to work" (1986, 51). An illuminating frame for many of Woodman's photographs, the conceit nonetheless risks reducing Woodman's work to an apprenticeship—an especially sharp irony given that Krauss's decision to write a commentary at all lends Woodman's work impressive cultural capital. Krauss suggests that Woodman's series *On Being an Angel*, "could have been a way of answering the problem, 'Is it possible to photograph something that doesn't exist?'" (1986, 43). A little later she returns to the series and repeats her point more emphatically: "Asked no doubt to photograph a non-existent being, she thought, perhaps, of Courbet's Realist remark, 'I'll paint an angel when I see one!'" (Krauss 1986, 48). Not only does one wince at the quick elision between



**Figure 2** *On Being an Angel* by Francesca Woodman, Providence, Rhode Island, Spring 1977. Courtesy of Betty and George Woodman.

“could have been” and “no doubt,” one is also disappointed by Krauss’s quick dismissal of the existence of angels, a dismissal that does not square with Woodman’s own preoccupation with them. The photographs that comprise the *Angel* series, which were planned and begun in Providence, Rhode Island, and completed in Italy after her graduation from the Rhode Island School of Design, seem perplexed not so much about the existence of angels but rather about their (art) historical stillness (see fig. 2). Living in Rome at the time she made most of the series, Woodman might well have been influenced by Italian statuary in which angels conform to the physics of gravity, volume, weight, and suspension. The photographs that make up the *Angel* series might be seen as attempts to investigate the temporal suspensions that photography stages—between a present that will soon be a past whose return photography secures—and the physical suspensions of statues of angels in Italian cathedrals, those liminal figures poised between heaven and earth.<sup>7</sup> If Krauss is correct to suggest that Woodman’s photography was a way to answer the questions posed by class assignments, then we need to be sure that we allow her questions the same complexity as her responses. In *On Being an Angel*, Woodman uses herself once again as her model and this time imagines herself as a

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent account of Woodman’s time and work in Italy, see Janus 1998.

figure poised between two worlds. She asks how the returns and losses exposed by photography might illuminate the allure of angels, those strange figures whose existence can never be secured but who nonetheless persist in the cultural imagination. By extension, Woodman touches on the question of her own departures and returns from a world elsewhere. The photographs in this sense rehearse both herself and her viewer for a future in which she will be something other than Francesca-Woodman-the-living-artist. By categorically stating that angels do not exist, Krauss overlooks Woodman's repeated attempts to photograph them. The denial might register the return of Krauss's own critical repressions. Choosing not to address Woodman's suicide, the artist's own decision to stop existing, perhaps Krauss displaces the need to register this nonexistence onto the *Angels*.<sup>8</sup>

In her review of the 1986 catalog, "Problem Sets: The Canonization of Francesca Woodman," Lorraine Kenny accuses Solomon-Godeau, Krauss, and Gabhart of trying "to resurrect and immortalize" Woodman within the "canon of troubled women artists," by which she means artists who have committed suicide (Kenny 1986, 4). In her letter of defense published in the next issue of *Afterimage*, Solomon-Godeau explains: "Because all of us involved in the exhibition and catalogue were well aware of the ideological grist offered by the circumstances of Woodman's death, we attempted in every way to downplay this fact. Had Woodman died of leukemia, my reading of her photographs would have been no different" (1986b, 2). I am not sure I believe this—knowledge of the specific cause of death affects us in many ways we cannot always consciously control—but let us accept it and ask instead, does critical anxiety about suicide distort the content and force of the artist's work itself? Defending their decision to downplay the "ideological grist offered by the circumstances of Woodman's death" (again one notices the reluctance even to employ the word *suicide*), Solomon-Godeau suggests that the work merits our attention for reasons other than what it might convey about the allure of death (1986b, 2). For her, Woodman's exploration of femininity and the gaze links her work to other feminist artists such as Cindy Sherman and Sherry Levine, who undertook similar and more celebrated feminist art projects. This is undoubtedly true. But what distinguishes Woodman's work from other feminist art projects of the seventies is her preoccupation with disappearance and death within the visible

<sup>8</sup> To be fair, Krauss seems bothered by this dismissal herself and returns to the series in the penultimate line of her essay: "In Rome, she took up anew the series, *On Being an Angel*, pushing it towards a different experience of the real as embodied" (1986, 51).

field. The possibility that suicide might be the result of a well-considered logic and that Woodman's photography was a way to help her, and us, survive her disappearance from the surface of the visible world, seems almost impossible to propose for Solomon-Godeau. And perhaps it was impossible to propose in 1986, when Woodman's suicide was still recent and her work was largely unknown. But now, with some of the benefits of afterwardness, we can return more directly to the insights Woodman offered us about art and death.

Woodman's interest in logic, and especially in the logic of time-space, renders some of her work mathematical. She referred to her photographs as "diary pictures" and, like many artists, used her diary as a workbook (Sundell 1996). When Woodman initially began keeping her diary, she thought of it as a place to respond to her photographic work—that is, she first thought of her diary as a forum for observations and reflections on her completed work. Soon, however, the diary functioned as a rehearsal space, a book for first drafts for her compositions.<sup>9</sup> Although she could not calculate in advance the vagaries of outdoor light, or the relative mess of the architectural ruins that excited her imagination, most of Woodman's photographs were well plotted in advance. Sloan Rankin notes that brief opportunities for public nudity forced Woodman to rush some photos and prevented her from ever taking others. "Unfortunately we will never see the photographs she intended to make in the museum of Natural History in New York City. One of the guards threw her out when he found her disrobing in front of one of the animal exhibits" (Rankin 1998, 36). Some diary entries are like scores for performances that were composed but not developed. The movement from thinking of her diary as a place to reflect on completed work to thinking of it as a place to plan future compositions is a psychically complex one. It is to move from the present as a place to contemplate the past to the present as a way to shape the future. But the latter form of diary keeping allows the accumulating weight of work planned but never made (page after page, word after word, image after image) to become a daunting burden. A diary dedicated to planning work, rather than reflecting on completed work, can turn into a catalog of disappointments, and even a testament to erasure. The diary that plots future work can sometimes work to suggest that there never was a past.

And yet, there she was, here she is, in print after print. When she was asked why she took so many self-portraits, Woodman replied: "It's a matter of convenience, I'm always available" (quoted in Rankin 1998, 34). Think-

<sup>9</sup> The 1998 catalog reproduces a few pages from her diary.



**Figure 3** Untitled photograph by Francesca Woodman, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975–78. Courtesy of Betty and George Woodman.

ing of her own body as always at hand, Woodman often concentrated on hands in her work. Hands haunt her frames; her work hungers for tactility. Skin sometimes brushes against objects that pierce and illuminate—mirrors, glass, display cases—and sometimes skin soaks in things that stain, especially ink and blood. In many of her portraits, hands function as faces, intimately revealing portraits of affective states. The hands she photographed most closely are her own; more often than not, they are wonderfully dirty (see fig. 3). Rankin confesses that she never thought Woodman was well suited to photography because she was “most at home in dust” (1998, 34).

Woodman’s tactile handiwork recalls Merleau-Ponty’s account of the “flesh of the world,” which Amelia Jones has analyzed so provocatively (Jones 2002). “For the first time, through the other body I see that, in its coupling with the flesh of the world, the body contributes more than it receives, adding to the world that I see the treasure necessary for what the other body sees. For the first time, the body no longer couples itself up with the world, it clasps another body, applying [itself to it] carefully with its whole extension” (Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1968, 143–44). This “other body” for Woodman was the body of photography, a body that has multiple histories and futures. Her desire to “clasp” this body to her

own allows us to glimpse something “beyond the pleasure principle.” It allows us to see Woodman’s photography as an attempt to envision “relations between bodies that . . . will not only enlarge, but will pass definitively beyond the circle of the visible” (Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1968, 144).

Such a conception of desire is difficult to sustain for both the artist and the viewer. But a failure to sustain such a possibility should not mitigate the recognition of it as a possibility. Woodman struggled with the different difficulties her project caused for her as both a maker and an observer of photographs. After more than three decades of feminist art theory and practice, this difficulty seems familiar (indeed, perhaps too familiar).<sup>10</sup> Woodman’s photographs make visible the strange seeping away we do from our clearest thoughts, convictions, passions. Woodman’s compositions expose that flicker of resistance, that slight trembling blur, that forces us to be more profound truth tellers of our own conflicts than we are likely to admit. The mirror in Woodman’s work functions as something both more and less than narcissistic reflecting pond. As a figure for the photographic screen, the mirror allows her to gather enough light to develop an image of her own repetitious disappearances from light, from sight. Frequently posed at the edge of the frame, Woodman repeatedly expresses her dual desire to inhabit and to escape the limit of the visible.

Woodman’s Magritte-like photograph taken in Providence of a woman apparently dead at the lip of the ocean, reflected in the mirror of another woman whose own face is displaced by that very mirror, stages the complex drama of death as both biological event and cultural interpretation (see fig. 4). Here the motifs of water and mirror, and love and death, form both a welcoming invitation of the viewer’s gaze into the scene and a sharply aggressive resistance to the voyeurism inherent in it. The photograph’s power comes from the utter flatness of the water behind the models, a flatness set off by the scalloped pattern of the water’s impression on the sand and repeated in the furl of the pleated dress on the seemingly dead woman. The flatness of the sea opens onto a flatness of affect as well. The photograph’s flat surface reduces the singularity of the death it apparently captures. Two lilies, posed in perfect counterpoint to the skirt and sea, suggest the semiotic baggage of images of death and the maiden: the scene is far too beautiful, too poised, for us to ignore the excessive theatricality of the photograph as a staged death. The event of death has always already occurred for photography. Our encounter with the

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller discussion of the intertwined history of feminist theory and the feminist art movement, see Phelan 2001b.





**Figure 4** Untitled photograph by Francesca Woodman, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975–78. Courtesy of Betty and George Woodman.

photograph always occurs after the event recorded within it. The belatedness of photography reminds us of our tendency to arrive too late and perhaps especially to arrive too late to appreciate the unique drama of our mortality.

In his essay for the 1996 catalog, David Levi Strauss writes that “when Woodman is looking in the mirror she is looking for the camera, which is us” (1998, 19). Woodman certainly connects the mirror and the camera, and clearly she aligns the viewer’s gaze with the camera’s gaze. She did not, however, mistake the eye of the camera for human eyes. Part of the power of her work comes from its courageous approach to something that remains beyond the human as such; her pact was with the nonhuman; it was with the physics of time-space, the chemistry of development, and the equations between emotional depth and physical flatness. In this sense, she was not looking for “us,” and that might be the most radical thing about Woodman’s best work. Her leap of faith was that time itself might make it possible to develop the images she herself could compose, if never completely see. And perhaps she wagered too that a future viewer would see what and when she herself had ceased to see.

The four photographs that comprise the series *A Woman, a Mirror, a Woman Is a Mirror for a Man* hint at the paradoxical liberation and trap promised to the woman artist. Since this argument is by now very familiar,<sup>11</sup> I will only emphasize here that the affective force of Woodman’s series comes not only from the concise narrative sequence of a dense political and psychoanalytic insight that resembles a storyboard for a film but also from the youthfulness of the artist who insists on its cruel truth. The image was taken when Woodman was a student at the Rhode Island School of Design between 1975 and 1978, when she was between seventeen and twenty years old. Between 1979 and 1981, Cindy Sherman made her celebrated *Film Stills*, in which she used performance to explore similar issues. Sherman’s references to film narrative also made her images immediately accessible and recognizable, while Woodman’s sometimes more private and encoded symbolism tended at times to create a strange insularity, even claustrophobia, in some works.

For example, in a 1976 photograph entitled *Then at one point I did not need to translate the notes; they went directly to my hands*, Woodman

<sup>11</sup> The literature inspired by Laura Mulvey’s conception of “the male gaze” (Mulvey 1975) is vast. See Pollock 1988 for an influential account of the implications of Mulvey’s work for questions of feminism and art history. Phelan 2001b reprints salient excerpts of the debate from 1975–95. Solomon-Godeau’s catalog essay explains in detail how this theory works in relation to Woodman’s photography (1986a).



**Figure 5** *Then at one point, I did not need to translate the notes; they went directly to my hands* by Francesca Woodman, Providence, Rhode Island, ca. 1976. Courtesy of Betty and George Woodman.

leaves a trail that I cannot quite follow (see fig. 5). Perhaps this is my own limitation, but maybe the problem stems from something common enough in the work of young artists, even ones as gifted and rare as Woodman—a tendency to think everyone already knows what you think. Just above her hands, there are marks on the wall that resemble piano keys. Woodman’s hands seem to press on the wall while no sounds come. Draped in peeled-away wallpaper, Woodman’s back is to the camera. Unable to see her expression, I am thrown back to the Nietzschean *hinterfrage*, the back question that frames the background of this moment. The notes Woodman plays on the surface of the wall, on the surface of the print, sound only in her own ears. Within the mute impression of this silent image, I am unable to translate this image or to find a way to enter it. The photograph marks the limit of my critical commentary, an im-



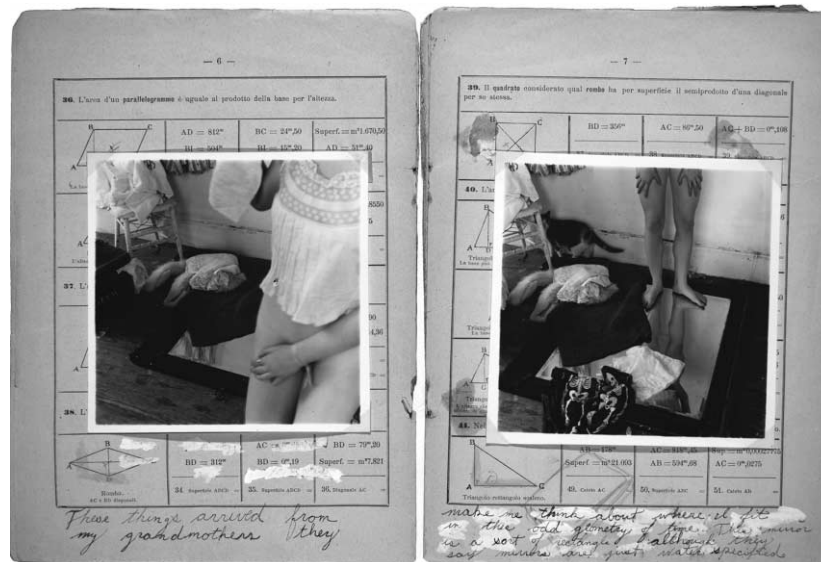
**Figure 6** *Self-portrait at thirteen* by Francesca Woodman, Boulder, Colorado, ca. 1972–75. Courtesy of Betty and George Woodman.

portant limit to observe. Sometimes the instinct not to communicate sensibly is an instinct worth pursuing and an instinct worth respecting.

Woodman's best work moves fluidly between largely recognizable, if forgotten, scenes and an intimate new language of self-presentation. In one of her earliest self-portraits, *Self-portrait at thirteen*, Woodman captures the play between the alienated teenager posing in a mock heroic hair-in-her-face attitude and the compelling luminosity of the vibrating cable of her camera's time-release shutter (see fig. 6). At once animated by the cable and arrested by the moment of exposure, Woodman's self-portrait is posed between the life and death drives.

In late 1980, Woodman assembled some of her photographs for a book entitled *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*.<sup>12</sup> The eponymous photograph is one of her most complicated images (see fig. 7). Two photographs placed on top of an Italian geometry textbook illustrating how to measure parallelograms, squares, rectangles, and triangles are supported by a handwritten text that reads, "These things arrived from my grandmothers. They make me think about where I fit in the odd geometry of time. This mirror is a sort of rectangle, although they say mirrors are just water specified." In the right photograph, Woodman stands on a mirror. In the

<sup>12</sup> Published by Synapse Press of Philadelphia in 1981 and edited by Daniel Tucker, a copy can now be found in the Special Collections of the New York Public Library.



**Figure 7** *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* by Francesca Woodman, 1981, detail. Courtesy of Betty and George Woodman.

left photograph, she stands slightly before it. The mirror is on the floor. In neither image does Woodman's face appear. Her hands are pressed against her thighs in the right photograph; in the left, one hand falls across her genitals. Without giving the viewer her gaze, Woodman looks for an answering gaze that might help her square the unsolved equations on which she stages these images. She insists that the equation's resolution requires "another body," to invoke Merleau-Ponty's argument once more. Naming her grandmother as gift-giver, Woodman stands behind a cloth covered with a pair of skeletons dancing the dance of death in the foreground of the right image. But in the back of the frame, a cat turns and looks back at Woodman's posing. An unplanned gaze cuts across the picture plane, turning her mirrored rectangle into a triangle, turning her viewer into a mathematician charged with measuring the angle of a gaze not yet with us. This unseen gaze forces us to consider once more that which is beyond the visible as such. Cats strolling, angels appearing, picture planes breaking, packages arriving: these are things one cannot calculate in advance. One can only try to remain, as long as possible, open to the possibilities they might bring with them.

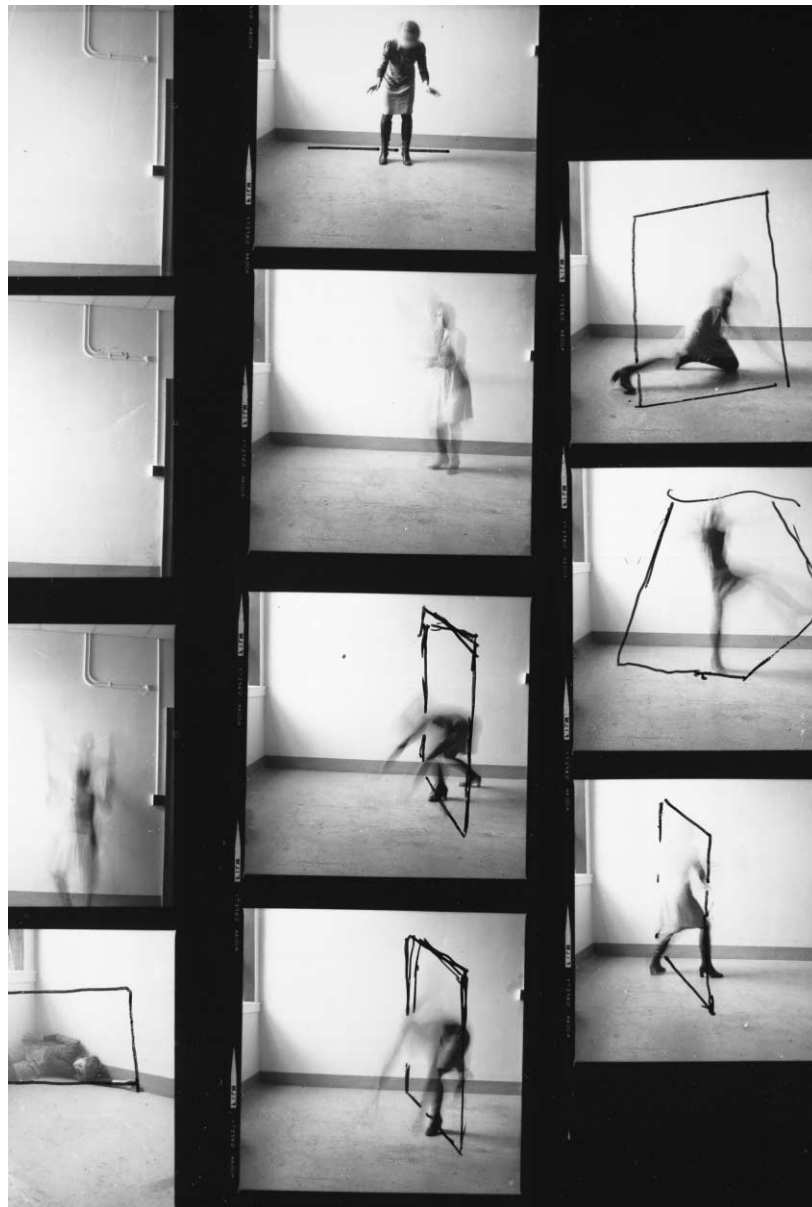
**To return once more**

Let me return once more to Barthes's suggestion that photography "may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print" (Barthes 1981, 92). For Woodman as for Benjamin, the distinction between the initial pose and the final print was difficult to discern. She might have thought of it as a recursive algorithm, one whose structure made her uncannily alert to the force of death within life, the lure and achievement of stillness within her own ongoing creative work. Dancing toward and against the drift toward self-creation and self-cessation, Woodman's photographs stage her encounter with a memory of her own death within the life of her art.

Climbing into walls, into vitrines for the display of inanimate objects, into caves and caverns, Woodman sought to record the affective force of what might be an essential self-fleeing. On the surface of her contact prints, she attempts to slip outside the frame she herself composes (see fig. 8). In her rush across the still life of the photographic composition, Woodman gained access to a kind of gift giving, first to herself, and then to us, of what she did not have. The giving of what one does not have, for Jacques Lacan, constitutes women's love within the phallic economy (Lacan [1958] 1977b, 290). But beyond the horizon of desire and love, what we lack in this life is an image of our own death. Consigned to a life in which we know with certainty that we will die, but prevented from securing an image of how or when the event will occur, we often use photographic images of the dead and dying as a way to help us imagine our own deaths.

Woodman found in her art a type of theater for the oscillating tension between the desire to live and the desire to die. Perhaps on January 19, 1981, she found a composition that suited her, and she developed it into an act of suicide. I do not know. But I cannot shake the sense that in many of her photographs she traces her own disappearance in order to show her viewers that just as they can survive looking at her images when she has left the surface of the print, so too can they survive not looking at her when she leaves life's visible surface.

The traditional understanding of the immortality of art is that after the artist dies the work lives on. But Woodman allows us to see that what is immortal is the history and futurity of death, rather than of art. Her work invites us, with immense fragility and precision, to allow her death to survive her art, rather than the other way around.



**Figure 8** *Study for Space<sup>2</sup>* by Francesca Woodman, 1975–78. Courtesy of Betty and George Woodman.



**Figure 9** *I could no longer play I could not play by instinct* by Francesca Woodman, Providence, Rhode Island, ca. 1977. Courtesy of Betty and George Woodman.

In her 1977 work, *I could no longer play I could not play by instinct*, Woodman shows herself bleeding from a knife wound that she tries to suture with photo-booth strips (see fig. 9). The title turns back to the earlier work, *Then at one point I did not need to translate the notes; they went directly to my hands* (see fig. 5), and announces a breakdown, a cessation in the *fort/da* game. “I could no longer play.” Repeat. “I could not play by instinct.” But in the unpunctuated space of that imperfect repetition two possible meanings surface: she can no longer play by the photographic rules that subordinate instincts to technique, and/or she can no longer find or feel her instinctual responses to things that had previously compelled her desire to photograph at all.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Elizabeth Grainger for discussing these issues with me. Sloan Rankin notes that during their first year in college she took a poetry class and Woodman ghostwrote some of the assignments. Woodman later used some of the phrases in this poem for the titles of some of her photographs: “i am apprehensive.<sup>1</sup> it is like when i / played the piano.<sup>2</sup> first i learned to / read music<sup>3</sup> and then at one point i / no longer needed to translate the notes: / they went directly to my hands. After a / while i stopped playing<sup>5</sup> and when i / started again i found i could not / play. i could not play by / instinct<sup>6</sup> and i had forgotten how / to read music.<sup>7</sup>” (“Poem about 14 hands high,” in Rankin 1998, 39). Among the many



Perhaps the intensity of her careful plotting had begun to rob her work of precisely play, of the spontaneous force of the blur. Rankin recalls that in one of Woodman's last letters to her, she wrote about her struggle in New York trying to find a place to show her work, about her struggle to find a way to value her own achievements in an economy that stretched beyond the often brutal values of career building. "I would rather die young," Woodman wrote, "leaving various accomplishments, i.e. some work, my friendship with you, some other artifacts intact, instead of pell-mell erasing all of these delicate things" (quoted in Rankin 1998, 37).

Within her own terms, it was an accomplishment to solve the equation the way she did: she leapt. In that act, she asked us to see that her death was with her all along. It just had not been developed. To accept that her death survived her work, we need first to see it as something not enveloped entirely by the creative energy of her art. Woodman's use of photography as a way to rehearse her death allows us to consider her art as an apprenticeship in dying, rather than the thing that somehow outlasts or conquers death. Art, like all things human, succumbs to death. But that does not mean we leave no trace of our attempt to live and to create despite our certain vanishing. The photographic print is developed from the negative, and Woodman asks us to see both the negative and the print as something as entwined as life and death. More astonishing still, Woodman invites us to see her suicide, like her art, as a gift. Perhaps not the one we might have wished for, but the one she gave us when she did not have anything to give.

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interesting aspects of this poem, the mathematical punning is remarkable. Seven times two is fourteen. The title calls for hands, but Woodman gives us unwritten footnotes as the counterpoint to her lost piano notes. In the transfer between the poem and the image, the punctuation, like so much else, falls away.

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