

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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FRANCESCA WOODMAN: WATER SPECIFIED

Paul de Man makes a distinction between interpretation and reading as that which finds meaning in a text versus an analysis of the relationship between a text's rhetorical and grammatical dimensions, respectively. Interpretation, as he defines it, assumes that a text's meaning is largely transparent and that there is no disharmony between how it means and what it means. Reading, on the other hand, makes no such assumptions: it shows how a text's meaning cannot be reduced to grammar and seeks out moments of indeterminacy between its literal and figurative meanings. I propose a "reading" of Francesca Woodman's photographs that demonstrates how the critical, largely feminist, literature on the artist engages in interpretation and thus fails to appreciate the artist's exploration of photography's conditions of representation. In the process, I argue that her photographs function like hypograms, a concept of de Man by way of Saussure, or infra-texts. In short, Woodman's photographs are readings of photography and womanhood and her art defies conventional understandings of artistic identity and agency.

Francesca Woodman's first photograph *Self-Portrait at Thirteen* of 1972 (Figure 1) displays many of the signature formal devices and thematic interests that would preoccupy the child prodigy photographer until her suicide in 1981 at twenty-two: its admixture of modesty and immodesty, geometric lucidity and material aberration, the old and the new, dereliction and inhabitation, activity and passivity. It shows the artist sitting on a long sofa, looking away from the camera as her left hand holds the shutter-release cable that forms a jutting, grey spike of shadow plunging into the photograph's center. The cable's blurred foreshortening is the result of Woodman pulling it directly in front of a camera lens set at a medium focal length. A number of other woman artists have produced self-portraits wherein the shutter-release and the apparatus, more generally, are visible or at least alluded to, among them Lotte Jacobi, Florence Henri, Ilse Bing, Claude Cahun and Imogen Cunningham. The self-reflexivity of these portraits is either meant in the simplest cases to serve as a prop symbolizing the artist's vocation, or as part of a more elaborate meditation on



Fig. 1. Francesca Woodman, *Self-Portrait at Thirteen*, gelatin silver print, 1972. © 2021 Estate of Francesca Woodman/Charles Woodman/Artists Rights Society, New York.

reflexivity and selfhood. Yet all of these examples nevertheless rely on the transparency and reflectivity of the camera's lenses and mirrors. Rather than self-reflexively indicating the mechanics of her medium, Woodman uses the blurry shutter-release cable to obscure the means of her photograph's creation.¹ The cable and its recession diagram the inverted pyramid of one-point linear perspective, with the release button doubling as the picture's ostensible vanishing point. Thus, the photograph collapses its physical cause with its visual effect, its mechanical action with spatial depth, into a single moment, giving new meaning to the phrase Mallarmé once attributed to Manet, "The eye, a hand . . ."² But now, the eye is not the artist's, but the camera's, operated by the artist's hand. What Woodman demonstrates is not a perfect synchrony between what and how the eye sees and what and how the hand paints as Mallarmé intended, but rather a disharmony between these parts and more. *Self-Portrait at Thirteen* dispenses with one of the central conventions of self-portraiture, painted or photographic: namely, to show the artist apprehending her own image as it will appear in the finished work. But not only is there no mirror to return the artist's gaze, Woodman also emphatically turns her head away from the camera, concealing her face with her hair, and leaving only a sliver of *profil perdu*. Such a dramatic forfeiture of control cleaves self-portraiture from self-knowledge, self-mastery from selfhood. Instead of marking a rhetorical equivalence between the person and her representation, Woodman suggests that the camera is less of a prosthesis and more of a partner, separate yet still linked by the shutter-release.

The descriptions I have offered thus far have largely turned on tracing, mapping and diagramming spatial relationships as if the photograph were transparent and its space were analogous to our own. Yet, the abstract swirls of greys, whites and blacks that fill up the photograph's lower third call attention to the photograph's material qualities, the chemical substrate of the contact paper and the negative. This nebulous zone is the result of a number of photographic processes. The negative was probably overexposed in addition to being taken in the middle range, further exaggerating the foreground distortion. The peculiar, fine, vermicular line—like a bacterium (or spermatozoon) as seen through a microscope—that seems to float up towards the artist is probably not the result of anything having to do with the camera, but rather with the negative, most likely a stray hair or fiber which became attached to the film after exposure and which Woodman chose to keep when she developed the photograph. In fact, a closer inspection shows that the negative was quite dirty upon printing. There are fainter fibers and particles covering every inch of the photograph: the most conspicuous one (the bacterium) in the foreground seems to continue, albeit more faintly, diagonally across Woodman's sweater and up past the photograph's top edge. There are a few scratches across the sweater's right cable, and innumerable other flecks, scuffs and spots scattered willy-nilly over the photograph's surface.

Woodman's stress on the printed photograph's materiality draws attention to an oft-neglected aspect of photography, namely the development of the picture.³ For her, the photograph is not finished when the shutter is released, nor is it finished when the film is developed, nor when the artist chooses which negatives to print from a contact sheet. Only when the photograph is finally printed is it a finished product—and the photograph becomes art. While this is true for most photographers, Woodman gives the many stages of the photographic process thematic significance. The long white hair and the scratches could only have been made after the film was exposed. Multiple and mutually exclusive registers of indexicality are condensed into the same photograph: the registration of the artist's presence before the camera and the registration of debris gathered on the film. *Self-Portrait at Thirteen's* shutter-release bridges both of the photograph's indexical registers, suggesting at once spatial recession and abstract tonality, the camera-made image and the camera-less image. Part of what makes the work so disorienting at first glance is the indeterminacy of the release cable, whether it belongs to the photograph's surface incident, as the hair does, or whether, like the oblique angle made by the couch, it belongs to its perspectival structure. Adding to the confusion is the way the hair feints the angle of the shutter-release, as a not-quite-parallel line, making it appear for a moment to extend into depth, and compelling the viewer to imaginatively force it into perspective.

Equally dramatic is the play of scales in *Self-Portrait at Thirteen*. Once the hair is seen for what it is, not as an orthogonal in a perspectival construction, but as an aberration, an intruder in the otherwise immaculate inner-workings of the camera and the darkroom; the hair not only registers visually as a flaw to be disavowed, but it also suggests an entirely new and vast pictorial space teeming beneath the photograph's surface—as if we are looking *down* from the enlarger into a Petri dish rather than looking *out* from the camera at a landscape. As the change of scales

coincides with the change in orientation from vertical to horizontal, and from the camera-made to the camera-less image, the hair also doubles another transformation, from the negative-positive process when the film was first exposed to the positive-negative process when the hair was left on the film during printing.

Every effort at transparency and self-reflexivity is thwarted by its own operation, or rather, Woodman cannot seem to decide what should be made transparent, what processes should be registered in the final product, or whether truth to materials or truth to appearances is greater. At its root, Woodman's photography raises questions as much as it is structured by them. This article argues the Woodman's art is aporetic; it takes nothing about photography, artistic agency and identity for granted. At first blush, this approach might seem to rehearse certain ideas about the cultural and institutional dependency of concepts and beliefs taken for nature. But what I want to suggest instead is that Woodman's art goes further than this: she puts the process of critique itself on shaky ground. Woodman disarticulates the conventional art-critical means of interpretation from formal analysis to historical contextualization. This is what I see as the source of her photography's novelty, and how her art differs from concurrent feminist art practices from the 1970s and '80s to which she is so frequently compared.⁴

Among the problems one is confronted with when interpreting Woodman is precisely the question of the "genre" of her works: whether to treat the many photographs she made of herself as an elaborated form of self-portraiture and to see the repeated presence of the artist turning her own body into a medium as an exercise in formalist experimentation—between self-representation and self-presentation, between treating the body as part and parcel of one's individuality and personhood and treating it as a pretense of form, a physical object with a certain shape, suppleness, weight, length, width and depth. Nothing about this discrepancy is ever definite, even when Woodman specifies the genre in the work's title. This ambiguity is further compounded by how Woodman is usually both photographer and subject. Yet implicit in this (in-)distinction between self-representation and self-presentation are deeper questions about the human body as a locus of cultural meaning and physical experience.

Woodman was by no means alone in pursuing these questions. Feminist artists working around the same time as Woodman, including Katharina Sieverding, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, Ana Mendieta, Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneeman, and VALIE EXPORT, among others, used their own, often unclothed, bodies to interrogate socio-cultural conceptions of gender and body image. Abandoning traditional media like painting and sculpture, many artists instead turned to performance, installation, appropriation, collage, text, and photography to achieve their aims.⁵ A crucial difference, however, between Woodman and her peers was that for her the medium of photography was seldom a means to an end, a mere tool for the documentation of transient happenings and performances. Rather, Woodman probed more deeply the conditions of her own visibility at an increasingly phenomenological and ontological level. *Self-Portrait at Thirteen*, for instance, is more ophthalmic than optical. The dark spots clouding the foreground, the white filament now resembling an eye floater, are qualities that evoke the physiological idiosyncrasies of vision, the ghostings one sees after staring into a bright light or abnormalities in the eye's vitreous humor.

Yet, *Self-Portrait at Thirteen* is an exceptional work. The doubled and reversed exposure and the dinged-up negative are effects the artist would not repeat. Once Woodman enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 1975, she would rely instead on her choice of *mise-en-scène*, exposure time, focal length, and lighting to achieve her desired results. And she would continue to allude to her medium vis-à-vis the proliferation of photographic tropes like rooms, windows, panes of glass, mirrors, and peeling paper. Two works from her time in Providence revisit and rework the structure of the earlier self-portrait, *Depth of Field 1 & 2*. The first in the series shows the artist in a chair facing us, cast in darkness, while her head is turned towards the nude Sloan Rankin (the artist's classmate) reclining on the bed in the background (Figure 2). The sequel moves in closer to Rankin (Figure 3), who now sits up on the bed and looks directly out of the photograph, wearing nothing but panties and a pair of lace gloves. Woodman is now presumed to be behind the camera, and the chair she was sitting in is now visible at the lower left. When placed side-by-side, *Depth of Field 1* and *Depth of Field 2* seem to trace a movement into the room, as if we have stepped over the photograph's fourth wall and directly into Woodman's head and are now looking at Rankin through the artist's own eyes. At first glance this is certainly the fiction the pair of photographs impostures, yet the composition is not consistent between the two works, and we can only ever see what the camera sees—and what the camera sees is not necessarily what Woodman sees. Given where the chair is in *Depth of Field 2*, the camera is clearly not quite where Woodman is/was in *Depth of Field 1*, nor is the angle the same. Rankin, who now sits upright on the edge of the



Fig. 2. Francesca Woodman, *Depth of Field 1*, gelatin silver print, 1976. © 2021 Estate of Francesca Woodman/Charles Woodman/Artists Rights Society, New York.



Fig. 3. Francesca Woodman, *Depth of Field 2*, gelatin silver print 1976. © 2021 Estate of Francesca Woodman/Charles Woodman/Artists Rights Society, New York.

bed, looks out at someone or something outside the frame, perhaps the artist—or the artist is in fact looking at her through the camera’s viewfinder. Whatever the case may be, our gaze ricochets from camera to model to artist, from outside to inside and back out again, and between a scopophilic scenario and an exercise in perspective—or rather between two perspectives, one of voyeurism and one about probing spatial depth.

When Woodman invokes tropes of femininity, it is in a manner more exploratory than indicative. *Untitled* (1978) (Figure 4), stages a coy encounter between the artist and a calla lily; the flower seems to anthropomorphically peek around the corner, while Woodman looks in askance at it. On the one hand, the picture could be saying that Woodman, as a female, is thus like a traditional signifier of femininity, the flower; or, on the other hand, the corner could function as a barrier, effectively saying that the woman and the flower are not alike. In either case, the corner acts like a hinge bringing the female and the flower together and swinging them apart, all at once. Even in works with titles that overdetermine their meaning like the series *A woman. A mirror. A woman is a mirror for a man* (1975) (Figure 5), which begs for a discussion of *The Second Sex* or the male gaze, it is difficult to reconcile what is depicted in the composition with what is indicated by the title. In each of the series’ four works, we see the artist nude as she poses in the corner of a room with two mirrors and a pane of glass, but the syllogistic progression suggested by the work’s title is in no way mirrored by the pictures. Woodman’s approach to the issue of



Fig. 4. Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, gelatin silver print, 1978. © 2021 Estate of Francesca Woodman/Charles Woodman/Artists Rights Society, New York.

female subjectivity is, if we take the pictures at face value, much too literal. The mirror is supposed to be a metaphor, not an actual mirror, and a woman does not become a mirror for a man by standing in front of one.

Woodman's literalism is double-edged: it encourages the assignment of meaning, while her ad hoc-ism—some props crudely assembled in the corner of a studio—discourages it. Put another way, Woodman's photographs traffic in analogies, but due to the epistemologically suspect status of analogy as a way of making truth claims about the world—how anything can be compared to anything else on the most arbitrary of bases—the matter of her art's meaning remains open. The question of whether she compares two things to show how they are alike or not alike constitutes one of her pictures' primary aporias. She emphasizes resemblance and contingency, not essence and universality, or rather she redescribes essence and universality as resemblance and contingency. Whether she poses her body next to an eel coiled in a basin, or next to a dilapidated house, or a tree, or a mirror, or between two angel wings, there is always the problem of how much credibility the viewer should grant to the artist's conceit.

The instability of analogical thinking is further compounded by what Roland Barthes would call a photograph's third or obtuse meaning. The soda can at the lower left, the scuffed floor, or the odd knickknacks piled up on the shelves in *A woman*. *A mirror*. *A woman is a mirror for a man*, or the stray marks in *Self-Portrait at Thirteen*, ostensibly exceed the informational and symbolic, the first and second, levels respectively, of meaning. They do not seem to have any bearing on woman, mirror



Fig. 5. Francesca Woodman, *A woman. A mirror. A woman is a mirror for a man #2*, gelatin silver print, 1975. © 2021 Estate of Francesca Woodman/Charles Woodman/Artists Rights Society, New York.

or man, the first informational, denotative level; or the photograph's question about the presumed naturalness of female identity, the second symbolic, connotative level. For Barthes, the third meaning is what potentially distinguishes film and photography from language; it is everything that is visible, identifiable and nameable, but not narratable: "What the obtuse meaning disturbs, sterilizes is metalanguage (criticism)", he writes, "[It] is discontinuous, indifferent to the story and to the obvious [the second symbolic] meaning".⁶ In the original Eisenstein film stills that Barthes analyzes, the third meaning is only perceptible in the film still and only in certain film stills at that. Most of all, the third meaning is subtle: it is that slight excess of visual information that only a camera can capture. The difference, however, between Barthes' original formulation of the concept and its appearance in Woodman's art resides in how she gives the third meaning almost equal prominence to the first two meanings. Too much third meaning and the first two meanings start to lose their coherence.

We can conceptualize this destabilization of denotation and connotation by thinking of Woodman's art functioning like a "hypogram" or "infra-text" of feminist art practices. By exploring conditions of possibility and potential ranges of meaning, her art asks—in a way that is as eloquent as it is inconclusive. Ferdinand de Saussure originally devised the notion of the hypogram as part of a larger project to develop a systematic approach to the study of Latin anagrams. He wanted a formalized way of

thinking about how poetry could express something beyond its literal, grammatical meaning—an extension of his abstract and systematic approach from the study of language to the study of literature.⁷ Saussure argued that the meaning of a non-literary text was essentially linear, referential and contingent on the context of its utterance. The literary text, on the other hand, did not derive its meaning through reference to the world, *per se*, but rather through reference and repetition of its own meaning or through the key idea(s) (the hypogram): in other words, through the overdetermination of its signifying system. The difference between a hypogram and text is akin to that between the map of a subway system without the routes drawn in versus actually riding the subway from point A to point B; the text proper makes connections between images and ideas and arranges them into an order.⁸ One could also analogize the hypogram of a given text to a game of connect-the-dots without the numbers versus a game of connect-the-dots *with* the numbers drawn in. What deserves emphasis is that Woodman's art remains at the level of the hypogram and never leaves it; she does not connect the dots. Meanwhile, for others the hypogram is what underlies and thus determines the true meaning of a text. Her photographs gesture towards meaning without actually *meaning* anything for certain.⁹ They are meaning before it is parceled and ordered into first, second and third meanings.

Woodman's strongest commentators have in fact identified the hypogrammatic (though they never use this term) character of the photographs without realizing it. Here is Abigail Solomon-Godeau:

In Woodman's frequent use of mirrors, when they reflect the woman at all, what is produced is simply another image. Hence, the relationship constructed is not between the real woman and her image, but between the spectator and two equally unreal images. What the mirror reflects, or fails to reflect, is always thrown back on the spectator. *Reading vanity, or narcissism, in the image is revealed as an interpretive—and thus projective—act.* This seems to me to be at once the strength and the limit of Woodman's art.¹⁰

Paul de Man would deem Solomon-Godeau's argument a true instance of reading, for she carefully separates figurative from literal meaning, what the mirror represents from what is represented in the mirror, how the mirror in the photographs is an inert object like any other and how the mirror carries with it a long and storied mythos of desire and identity.¹¹ By "projective act", Solomon-Godeau does not mean interpretation is wholly arbitrary; rather, she means that the photographs themselves do not fix their meanings. But if this is to be taken as an accurate characterization of Woodman's work, then it is also possible to read her work without those connotations, as Rosalind Krauss has done. The remainder of the essay where Solomon-Godeau forwards her now well-known feminist interpretation of Woodman, however, fixes the meanings of various photographs by describing them as "gothic", another as a "Daphne-like metamorphosis", another as a "tabula rasa", and others as "oneiric", "nightmarish", and of course "feminist", connecting the dots between denotation and connotation, the first and second meanings, and providing a text where there otherwise is not one.

Similarly, Carol Armstrong has written,

[Woodman] marks almost all of her photographic spaces, whether inside or outside, inhabited by herself or other bodies or not (and they are often both at once), as ‘feminine’: the windowed house, the dark cellar, the gash in the ground, the dryadic tree, often with attendant ghosts. But she begs the question of whether those spaces are essentially or discursively, naturally or culturally, corporeally or only metaphorically ‘feminine.’ And she does so by inhabiting and investigating the zone *between* those two ways of thinking about gender, by constituting herself within a series of fissured, enfolded spaces of fleeting appearance and disappearance, in which she models a series of metaphors.¹²

“Fissured, enfolded spaces” vividly evokes the open-endedness of Woodman’s art. Yet, once the indeterminacy of meaning is announced, it must be denied. By the end of the essay, reading an untitled photograph of Woodman in a bathtub from 1979–1980 (Figure 6), Armstrong describes it not as a scene evoking Ophelia’s suicide, but as,

Picking up the dangling threads of a long tradition—exemplified in one of Bonnard’s several paintings of his wife’s body suspended in the bathtub, blended with the uterine space around her, making a decorative surface pattern, a particularly intimate variation on the topos of woman as artist’s mistress and model.¹³



Fig. 6. Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, gelatin silver print, 1979–80. © 2021 Estate of Francesca Woodman/Charles Woodman/Artists Rights Society, New York.

Here, the fissures are filled in and the folds are ironed out; meaning is fixed and a distinct identity is assigned to the photograph. Ophelia becomes the artist's model. John Everett Millais becomes Pierre Bonnard. The brook becomes a bathtub. Even the artist's name is inscribed into the photograph. All of these descriptions force the figurative and the literal into alignment, and turn the photographs from hypograms into allegories.

The woman in the bathtub, however, is not in fact Woodman, but her friend and frequent doppelgänger, Sloan Rankin, whose straight, platinum blond hair falls over the edge of the tub. It is a fact of the writing on Woodman that many of the models in the artist's photographs, while they usually show Woodman, are still frequently misidentified.¹⁴ The mistake is significant and Woodman would even seem to anticipate it in one of her most well-known photographs, an untitled work from 1975–77, taken in Providence, showing her and two friends, nude, standing in the corner of a shabby room, holding large photographs of the artist's face in front of their own faces. A fourth portrait is tacked at shoulder-height at the far left (Figure 7). Knee-highs and Mary Janes identify Woodman on the right. The work challenges the assumptions of universalism required by feminist interpretations of the artist. The multiplication of self-portraits and the occlusion of the other models' faces suggest, on the one hand, that even though Woodman often represents herself, her work has a broader significance. "We are all alike", she seems to be saying in the photograph. On the other hand, the self-portraits can be read as: "You are all like me", or as a narcissistic *mise-en-abyme*, "Me, me, me", in an unwholesome kind of self-replication.

No other work in the artist's oeuvre speaks so directly and yet so confusedly to the twin problems of autobiography and identity. Paul de Man called the central trope of autobiography "prosopopoeia", meaning to confer a mask upon something, to put a name to a face, to inscribe identity from without.¹⁵ The self-portraits placed over the faces of the models demonstrate prosopopoeia perhaps too literally, with the self-portraits or masks in front of the models redoubling the dyadic structure of signifier and signified. This admittedly facile understanding is taken to an extreme by the lonely self-portrait tacked to the wall, which nonetheless does what all the other self-portraits manage to do, namely conjure Woodman's likeness. One could thus see *Untitled* as a kind of game whereby the viewer is meant to identify the "real" Woodman, but since the artist wears a mask of her face over her *own* face and since there is no material difference between the held photographs and the larger photograph of which they are a part (the room, the bodies contained therein, and so forth), this only further troubles the boundary between art and artist. Woodman suggests that whether her likeness is attached to her actual body, the body of someone else, or not attached to a body at all, her subjectivity will always have to be inscribed, anthropomorphized, given a face, so to speak, in order *to* speak. But the scenario presented in the photograph is not as simple as putting a name to a face. The surfeit of Woodmans ironizes the viewer's impulse to stabilize meaning and assign identity. Instead of fixity, she offers up multiplicity—not a myriad of selves that represent different aspects of the artist's psyche, but distinct selves that represent the same self. *Untitled* confounds qualitative and quantitative distinctions. Different but not distinct;



Fig. 7. Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, gelatin silver print, 1975–78. © 2021 Estate of Francesca Woodman/Charles Woodman/Artists Rights Society, New York.

distinct but not different. Furthermore, the photograph ironizes Woodman's frequent practice of self-concealment: even when she shows herself, she hides herself.

Woodman's self-replication, rather than self-reproduction, points to the problem of how Woodman speaks for women and feminist interpretations of the artist's work more broadly. It should be said that Woodman was attractive, and the artist's beauty permitted certain expressive possibilities and precluded others. Woodman was not only good looking, she also lacked any tattoos or visible birthmarks or scars, she was thin but not too thin, her breasts were neither too big nor too small, all of which is to say that she had a classically beautiful body. It is because of her beauty that Woodman's unclothed person slides so easily between the real and the ideal, why she always seems nude rather than naked, on display rather than exposed, despite the indexical fact that she was unequivocally unclothed before the camera. It is

Woodman's ideality, her hereditary non-specificity that renders her body so transparent, as such a legible sign of nudity and femininity *par excellence*: why when she makes something "as personal as possible", as Krauss says, it's capable of becoming quite general.¹⁶

The feminist interpretations of the artist are, somewhat perversely, proof positive of Woodman's visual pleasure. Her art can be seen to speak universally, or least broadly, to the eternal feminine by dint of its proximity to it. It was in part due to their gender normativity that artists like Hannah Wilke in her *Starification Object Series* (1974) and Cindy Sherman in her *Untitled Film Stills*, are simultaneously able to invoke womanhood and its construction under white patriarchal hegemony, while calling attention to the terms of that construction.¹⁷ If any one of these artists, Woodman included, had been obese, deformed, disabled, or non-white, such sweeping interpretations would not be possible; rather, they would be reoriented to address the eternal feminine by how they deviated from the ideal. (This is to reiterate a longstanding criticism of post-war feminism as being a middle-class white women's movement.) It is the ideality of Woodman's body that renders her photographs transparent. No matter how candid or artless they may appear, it is instinctually difficult to see Woodman as naked, especially when her body jibes so perfectly with certain standards of beauty—a task made all the more difficult by how we are so accustomed to seeing women unclothed.

If and when we do see Woodman as naked, rather than nude, part of what paradoxically anchors her body in reality are its accouterments. The snake ring she wore on her left index finger, her long patterned dresses, her Mary Janes, and her unkempt hair are supplements; they identify Woodman as Woodman rather than Woman. The near ubiquity of the ring in photographs from the beginning to the end of her career and the appearance of the polka-dotted dress in photographs taken in Providence and a few years later in New York, not only underscore the diaristic quality of the artist's oeuvre, in that they ostensibly document a particular life, but they also pull the body back into the realm of the quotidian, emphasizing the habitus of this specific person, in a specific time and place. The recurrence of accouterments (as well as her ad-hocism) counteracts the impulse to idealize Woodman's photography, to treat it as universal rather than personal. It is more difficult to see these items only as props belonging to a self-contained performance of meaning. They were a part of Woodman's wardrobe, part of her presentation of self in everyday life. Yet, it is not as if one of these interpretations is right or wrong, that Woodman's art is biographical, feminist, or conceptual, naked or nude—or that it even matters that Sloan Rankin is not Francesca Woodman. What is extraordinary about her art is the rigor with which Woodman is able to keep these categories in perpetual abeyance—the *différance* between Woodman and Woman.

Woodman's *Some disordered Interior Geometries*, an illustrated book published in 1981, is one of the artist's most sustained and complex engagements with a kind of hypogrammatic art making. It reads like the infra-text to an important scientific or philosophical treatise—the key perhaps to the artist's enigmatic corpus—but whose meaning has been lost to us. The work comprises a used, early twentieth-century Italian exercise book in Euclidian geometry, into which Woodman tipped her own

photographs and added various captions, with many of the original pages unaltered. The text Woodman added, the book's original text, as well as the few bits of writing remaining from the book's previous owner, do not help secure the meaning of the individual photographs included therein or of the work as a whole. But, they do entice the reader/viewer with the possibility of meaning. Some parts of *Some disordered Interior Geometries* recall an artist's treatise like Alberti's *De Pictura*. Woodman even translated some of the Italian on certain pages, writing "Preliminary Definitions" under "*Definizioni Preliminari*" or "Problems to Resolve: Surface Areas of Triangles and Parallelograms" under "*Problemi da risolvere: I. Superficie dei triangoli e dei quadrilateri*", (Figure 8).

Other pages seemingly have little or nothing to do with geometry and are more evocative of a diary instead. Beneath a photograph of Woodman on page six is written, "These things arrived from my grandmothers [*sic*] they", while on the facing page, beneath a photograph of Woodman standing on a mirror, the text continues, "make me think about where I fit in this odd geometry of time. This mirror is a sort of rectangle although they say mirrors are just water specified" (Figure 9). Here geometry is expanded to cosmic and temporal proportions—and an "odd geometry" at that, one presumably lacking the postulates, axioms and theorems of standard mathematics. The sentence about the mirror is jarring for the comparative similes it puts into parallel construction, once again confounding distinctions of quality and quantity. "Water specified", which could be taken as the reflective quality of "mirrors", somehow contradicts 'this mirror's shape, a different kind of quality, but also the *quantity* of angles in "a sort of rectangle". Woodman brings together two different kinds of specificity in the same thought: specificity, as in the specifications of something, its measurements, "a sort of rectangle"; and specificity, as in the nature or quality of something, "water specified".

On another page of the textbook is a photograph of Woodman standing in front of a ragged quilt affixed to the wall behind her with her hands covering her face (Figure 11). "Almost a square" is written in cursive below the photograph. Clearly the photograph itself is not an "almost square", because it is a proper square, and it is most likely the quilt in the photograph that is nearly a square. But one could also surmise that an "almost square" is a rectangle, or that "a sort of rectangle" is a square. The caption could refer to any one of the "almost squares" that make up the rectangular exercises, or only to the trapezoid at the lower left. And then there is the question of what "almost" means in this context.

On yet another page the relationship between text and image is reversed. A picture shows someone, possibly Woodman, sitting nude with her back to us between two large, obliquely angled panels, against one of which the segment of a circle may be seen, the shadow cast by the curved plane placed against the rectangular panel (Figure 11). Woodman continued the circular arc by drawing it directly onto the workbook page above and below the photograph. The caption for this page reads "a circle and a parrallelogram [*sic*]". These arcs, drawn and photographed, do not constitute a circle, they are an "almost circle". While the square of the photograph and rectangles of the exercises are technically parallelograms, the term is often used to refer to a quadrilateral with two pairs of parallel sides of

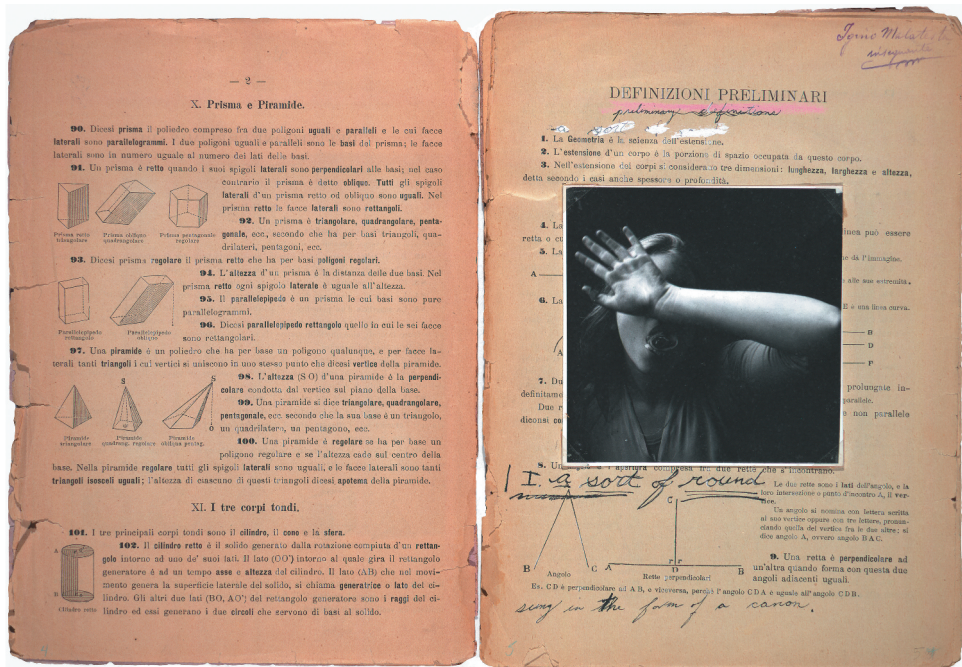


Fig. 8. Francesca Woodman, Pages 2 & 3 of *Some disordered Interior Geometries*, artist's book with sixteen gelatin silver prints, 1980–81. © 2021 Estate of Francesca Woodman/Charles Woodman/Artists Rights Society, New York.

unequal length joined by non-right angles, otherwise known as a rhomboid, which the white panel's shape certainly is not, even when extended. Ignoring the line Woodman added, the white panel is a trapezoid like the one depicted in the box at the lower left, but a trapezoid could be a “sort of parrallegram [sic]”.

Although this would seem like the place to rehearse ideas about contingency of critical description in light of Woodman's ambiguous captions, calling them captions is already a significant act of interpretation. Captions add text where there frequently is none, fix the relationship between text and image. The proliferation of writing and printed text throughout *Some disordered Interior Geometries* quickly dispatches all hope of stabilizing the function of terms like caption, title or marginalia. The cover alone has three distinct titles: first, the title of the original geometry book; second, Woodman's handwritten title in block letters; and, third, the second, more visible title on the white field added by the publisher and written in Woodman's cursive. The inside cover includes the original inscription in Italian, while on the opposite page Woodman wrote her own inscription, also in Italian, to the owner of the Maldoror bookstore in Rome, which exhibited her photographs and was a favorite haunt of the artist during her time there. Beneath Woodman's inscription is *her* publisher's colophon written again in the artist's cursive. At other places in the book the artist alternates between writing and block lettering. In addition to writing, Woodman also makes prolific use of correction fluid. Nearly all of her cursive text is written on top of something that has been whited-out. She also applied fluid to some of the exercises

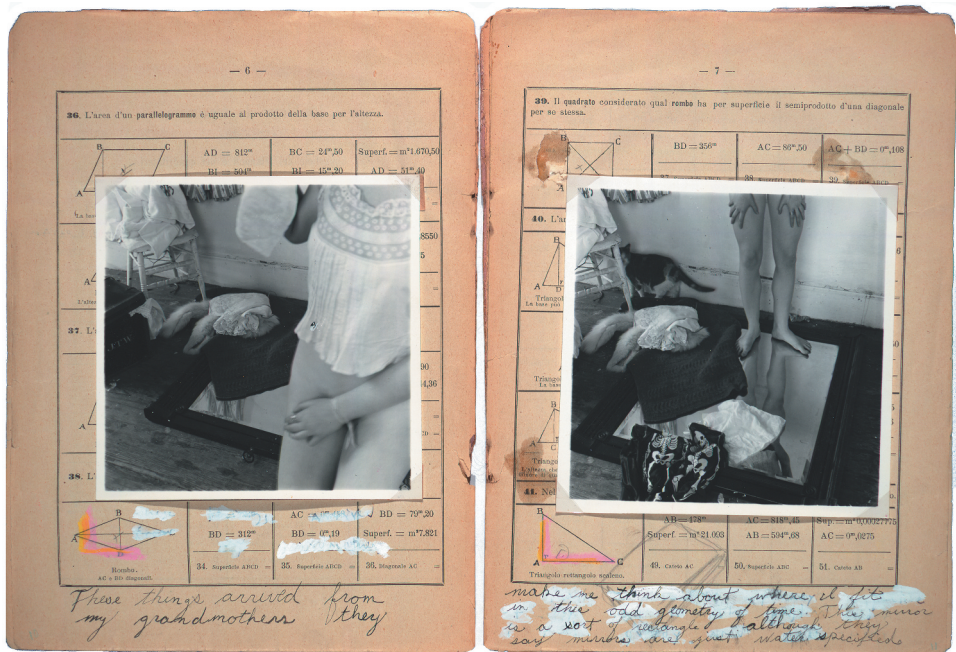


Fig. 9. Francesca Woodman, Pages 6 & 7 of *Some disordered Interior Geometries*, artist's book with sixteen gelatin silver prints, 1980–81. © 2021 Estate of Francesca Woodman/Charles Woodman/Artists Rights Society, New York.

in the workbook, on top of which no writing appears. The correction fluid destabilizes the authority the text(s) may have had, for now erasure becomes a mark as potentially pregnant with meaning and intentionality as any other. Moreover, the fluid dramatizes Woodman's own acts of inscription. The geometry textbook in some sense is the hypogram of Woodman's modification of it. It charts the range of the tropological transformations undergone by the semantic given of geometricity.

Yet *Some disordered Interior Geometries* is still only a hypogram. There is no message to be decoded here. In fact, decipherment, as should be clear by now, is the wrong way to understand the artist's work. Woodman's art must be read, not interpreted. The artist's brilliance is evidenced by how she consistently holds meaning in tantalizing abeyance. As one critic mentioned above put it (only to retreat from it), "She begs the question of whether those spaces are essentially or discursively, naturally or culturally, corporeally or only metaphorically 'feminine'". Woodman, in other words, pushes contingency to a breaking point. The surfeit of visual "noise" in her photographs, their third meaning, places her practice of posing and performing before the camera somewhat at odds with the highly controlled studio productions of Wilke, Sherman and others, wherein no extraneous visual information is allowed into the picture. Meanwhile, there is always some dissonance between Woodman's photographs' denotative and connotative aspects. We feel we must suppress the obtuse meaning in order to extract an acute meaning, add text to something a-textual. It is Woodman's peculiar and novel combination of philosophical conceit and

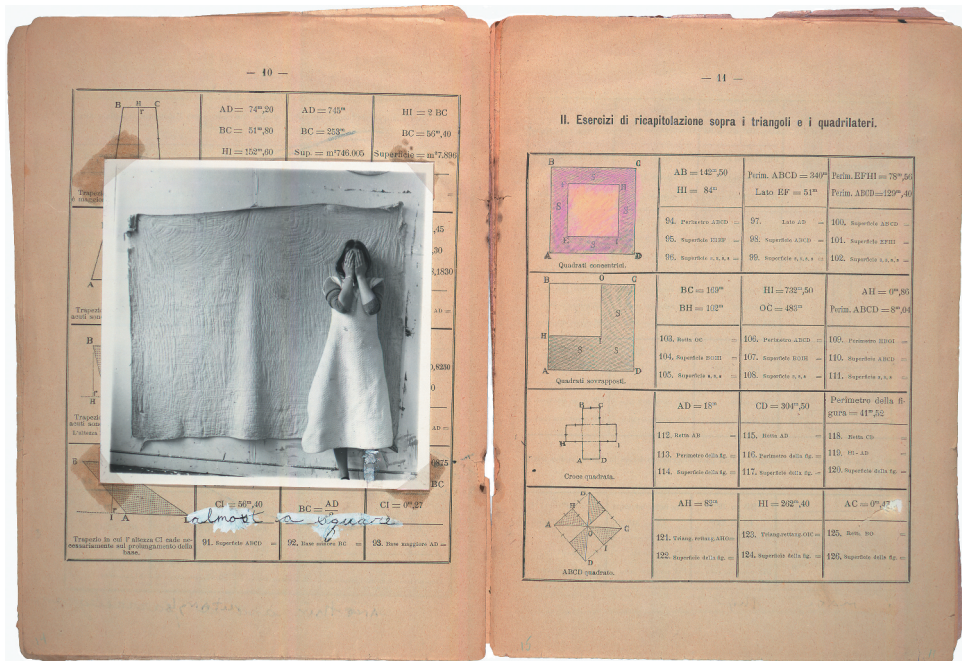


Fig. 10. Francesca Woodman, Pages 10 & 11 of *Some disordered Interior Geometries*, artist's book with sixteen gelatin silver prints, 1980–81. © 2021 Estate of Francesca Woodman/Charles Woodman/Artists Rights Society, New York.

improvisation, artifice and accident, that makes her photographs so resistant to interpretation. The hypogrammatical mode of her art allows for dramatic yet nonetheless plausible shifts in meaning in a single image, all while remaining silent on whatever outcome is reached.

This would all seem to spell certain doom for feminist interpretations of the artist. What little we know about Woodman's political and personal views on feminism largely comes from anecdotes and second-hand accounts. Betsy Berne, one of artist's classmates at RISD, has said of Woodman's views of feminism:

We were at the very beginning of a generation who were feminists as a matter of course; we were ungrateful wretches who took it for granted. If anything, Francesca felt guilty that she wasn't a 'real' feminist, even though of course she was, simply because she was a woman who took herself and her work seriously. There was no need to discuss it or to parade feminist theory in obvious self-conscious visuals. Francesca was simply doing her work, and hopefully it would provoke and tease, raise questions and suggest answers, and reflect ambivalence about being a woman and much more than that. Just as when she used to do her whole femme-fatale routine/performance with men (which was something to behold), it was such a ludicrous, obviously self-conscious act that she assumed everyone would get the joke, because, believe me, the long blonde

hair and the high feminine voice and the red lipstick and the, well, let's say coquettish ensembles covered for one tough customer. I remember Francesca saying to me, 'You have to admit there's something questionable about women with long blonde hair to their waist past the age of seventeen'. ('And who would you be referring to?' I replied—at least I think I did.) I also remember a discussion we had about Eva Hesse. In her classic catalogue, Lucy Lippard had said something along the lines of 'If only Eva Hesse had lived long enough to be a feminist, well then she wouldn't have been depressed'. I remember Francesca shaking her head, saying glumly, 'As if that would have helped'.¹⁸

Berne is saying that Woodman was old enough to be fully cognizant of the political and cultural advances precipitated by post-war feminist activism and their importance, but was also born late enough to not be fully invested in the movement and to see its shortcomings. Berne's recollection is important because it captures the necessary mixture of moral seriousness about feminism, and ambivalence about its foundational assumptions that make Woodman's *reading* of Woman possible. Woodman's art is ultimately neither prescriptive nor proscriptive with respect to feminism, but rather demonstrates the complexity and difficulty of formulating a sense of self under the sign of patriarchy. The open character of her photography is only reinforced by her biography. Notwithstanding that her parents were relatively well-connected artists and that she trained at a major art school, Woodman never had a career in any normative sense of the term. She was never a member of any particular social scene or coterie of artists, and only exhibited once outside of school, at a bookstore in Rome, making any conventional historical contextualization of her work all the more difficult.

While the themes of narcissism and vanity are prominent among the work of woman artists, it seems that a better mythopoeic characterization of Woodman's art would not be Narcissus, but rather Echo, doomed to repeat only the last few words that were spoken to her. Woodman herself suggests an echoic understanding of her art in *Some disordered Interior Geometries*. Under the photograph on the "*Definizioni Preliminari*" page, she wrote, "I. a sort of round", and two inches below it, "sung in the form of a canon". The Roman numeral one that begins the inscription suggests that Woodman might have been offering her own preliminary definitions. A round is in fact a type of musical canon, a "sort of canon" (not the other way around), where at least three voices sing the same melody but at different times, and come together at a given unison, but in a canon these voices are not required to sing in unison. There may be no single beginning and no single ending to the song, only beginnings and endings. The experience of listening to a canon or a round is akin to listening to echoes. Certain lyrics emerge with clarity at various points in the song, only to be overtaken by the same lyrics sung by a different singer a few seconds later. At other moments, it can be difficult to discern the lyrics at all; instead, all one hears is the contrapuntal intertwining of the same melody repeated. Singing a canon can be difficult and disorienting, because other voices singing the same part at different times can make one think one is either singing too quickly or too slowly—an aspect made all the more dizzying when the canon is performed in the religious context of a cathedral, where the natural echo of the space compounds the formal echoes of the

song. For her interpreters, Woodman's art has always echoed their aesthetic ideologies. But echoes are not answers. Even though echoes are composed of speech, they are not a form of speech. Woodman's preliminary definition—that Roman numeral one—is a postulate to a theory that never arrives, as no Roman numerals or any other accouterments of formalized thinking appear anywhere else in the book. The preliminary definition is a kind of philosophical dumbshow, an echo, not an utterance, of meaning.

Notes

1. On the potential significance of the mirrors in the self-portraits of women photographers, see Carol Armstrong, "Florence Henri," 223–229.
2. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Edouard Manet," 63.
3. Benjamin Buchloh is one of the few critics to comment on the materiality of Woodman's photographs: "Francesca Woodman," 45.
4. For a historiographic survey on the artist, see Bryan-Wilson, "Blurs," 187–195. The two most influential accounts of the artist's work are Krauss, "Francesca Woodman: Problem Sets," 161–178; and Solomon-Godeau, "Just Like a Woman," 238–255. Both Krauss and Solomon-Godeau's essays originally appeared in the catalog to the artist's first retrospective held at the Wellesley College Museum of Art in 1986.
5. Solomon-Godeau, "The Woman Who Never Was," 345.
6. Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 61.
7. Starobinski, *Les Mots sous les mots*, 30–33 & passim. In the original notebooks, a hypogram is simply a name that is repeated and hidden in lines of a given text, whereas an anagram is a word or phrase that can be rearranged into a completely new word or phrase.
8. I have adapted the metaphor of transportation from Paul de Man's essay on Baudelaire's "*Correspondances*" which proved formative to my thinking on Woodman. My use of hypogram stems from his adaptation of the concept rather than from Saussure's original idea. See his "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric," 247–248. Also it should be said that the way de Man used the hypogram is considerably less scientific and "rigorous" than the Tel Quel Group, who believed that a truly systematic approach to literary texts could be extrapolated from Saussure's theories. Barthes also makes passing reference to Saussure's work on anagrams in "The Third Meaning": he writes, "The obtuse meaning is not situated structurally, a semantologist would not agree to its objective existence (but then what is an objective reading?); and if to me it is clear (to me), that is *still* perhaps (for the moment) by the same 'aberration' which compelled the lone and unhappy Saussure to hear in ancient poetry the enigmatic voice of anagram, unoriginated and obsessive" (emphasis in original, 60–61). I speculate that what Barthes is referring to here is not the obtuse meaning, but the fact that meaning proper in the anagrams "is not situated structurally", which is why Saussure's project failed.
9. Kristeva, "Towards a Semiology of Paragraphs," 25–49. For an account of how the appropriation of Saussure by the Tel Quel Group differed from the linguist's original ideas, see Wunderli, "Saussure's Anagrams and the Analysis of Literary

- Texts,” 174–185. I think the hypogram has a greater applicability to photography more generally. It could be used to explain how Eugène Atget’s photographs, for example, are able to occupy multiple discursive spaces.
10. Solomon-Godeau, “Just Like a Woman,” 255. Emphasis added.
 11. Paul de Man, “Semiotics and Rhetoric,” 3–19. Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” 3–21.
 12. Armstrong, “Francesca Woodman,” 347–66.
 13. Armstrong, “Francesca Woodman,” 366.
 14. Solomon-Godeau, “Body Double,” 74.
 15. Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” 75–76.
 16. Krauss, “Francesca Woodman: Problem Sets,” 162.
 17. Of course there was nothing gender normative about their politics or their respective choices to become artists.
 18. Berne, “To Tell the Truth,” 5.

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