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# FRANCESCA WOODMAN

MARIT PAASCHE, OSLO, 2019  
TRANSLATED BY KATIA STIEGLITZ



All images courtesy Charles Woodman.

*Untitled, Rome, May 1977-August 1978.*

In this photograph a woman takes a deep stride into the picture, her right foot planted on the floor as she pushes off the left. She is nude, and her right hand holds a sheaf of papers draped over her back. Her tilted, forward-leaning posture creates a diagonal movement in the direction of the image's upper-right corner. The woman's face is turned towards the camera (and therefore, towards us). Her body and face are diffuse, probably due to the movement. A framed map lies over a portion of her face, and a spiral-shaped wrought-iron structure is visible through the right shoulder and upper arm. The body appears translucent where it displays layer upon layer of time. It is carrying history, and the map overlapping the face is of Rome – the Eternal City.

## I.

Art history is accustomed to looking at and analyzing the body as form, the body as everything from simple two-dimensional symbolic forms to active figures in complex religious or historical motifs. Throughout the ages, the body has been given three-dimensional form via sculpture; it has been placed on pedestals and posed in postures with culturally historical significance. But men and women have been ascribed different roles. Not infrequently, the female body has been represented as the quintessence of beauty, as for example, the Venus de Milo, the just over two-meter-high statue of the goddess of love now housed at the Louvre. Woodman takes the body down from the pedestal and uses it actively in her photographs to raise formal, medium-specific issues associated with transferring a three-dimensional space to a two-dimensional one, as we see in the series *Self-Deceit*. She also utilizes the body to revisit questions regarding art history and gender.

The presence of the body in the analytical still-life-like compositions is an interesting move, inasmuch as it is impossible to create a still life that includes a living body. The body is alive, and when something living is used for compositional effect, the entire composition becomes suffused with movement. Additionally, Woodman as a rule used her own naked body, and usually avoided showing the face. But a headless female body is in and of itself difficult to regard and read as *anybody*. It is quickly defined, both specifically (as the one belonging to Francesca Woodman) and as a *gender*. Consequentially, many writers have interpreted Woodman's photographs as *self-portraiture*.

Woodman commented on this in a rather witty way herself in an iconic photograph from Rhode Island from 1976. On the far-left side in this image, a little black-and-white photograph of Woodman's face hangs on the wall. Beside it, she has gathered three nude women who all hold a reproduction of the same photo in front of their own faces.

A more serious retort can be found in two other photographs, both *Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island*, taken between 1975-78. In the first, a nude woman is seated with her feet wide apart. The image is framed such that her head is cropped out, and she presses a rectangular, transparent, letter-sized pane of glass against her body. One corner of the glass pane is squeezed against the woman's right breast. The corner, diagonally across the nipple, makes a deformed depression where the soft tissue is pressed flat against the glass. The opposite corner points down at her sex. Her hands grip tightly around the piece of glass.

In the second photograph, the subject is shot from a slightly greater distance. The entire body, all but the feet, is included, but we do not see the face, only the hair draped over it and the breasts, falling all the way down to the sex. Here the pane of glass is placed in front of the sex and the hair, the tip of one corner resting on the cushion the woman is sitting on. Another sheet of glass leaning against the wall behind her chair reflects the light, and we can make out the contours of a window as well. In front of this glass sheet, Woodman has placed a piece of white paper that corresponds in a curious way with the reflection in the glass pane held in front of the torso.



*Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-78.*

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The small rectangle of transparent glass makes it simple. It is pressed violently up against the two attributes that indicate female gender: the breasts and the genitalia. Look at what you are choosing to look at, these photographs say; look at what is always framed and emphasized whenever the female body is on display. Look at what we never escape.<sup>1</sup>

## II.

Francesca Woodman was born in 1958 and committed suicide in January 1981, just 22 years old. The first retrospective exhibition of her work, "Francesca Woodman: Photographic Works", was mounted in 1986, curated by Ann Gabhart at Wellesley College Museum in collaboration with Rosalind Krauss at Hunter College Art Gallery. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue with texts by Gabhart, Krauss and Abigail Solomon-Godeau. Solomon-Godeau's text, "Just Like a Woman", has especially gained renown for its explicit and Lacan-inspired psychoanalyt-

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<sup>1</sup> There is also a third and even more somber version of this motif where the hands are resting on the stomach and a white death mask is placed over the sex.

ic, feminist reading, and for drawing parallels between Woodman, Cindy Sherman and Barbra Kruger. Critics felt it was problematic to connect Woodman, who was primarily active during the 70s, too closely with artistic strategies of the 80s.

The prominent German-American art theorist and critic Benjamin Buchloh also draws in Cindy Sherman in his article "Francesca Woodman: Performing the Photograph, Staging the Subject" from 2004, yet more for the sake of contrast. Sherman had her breakthrough with an exhibition of her series *Untitled. Film Stills* at The Kitchen in New York in 1980. In this series she isolated and recreated female stereotypes that the film industry had produced, showing how limited the register of female roles was ('working woman', 'femme fatale', 'the fallen woman'). In Sherman's series the photograph is used both to comment on another mass medium – film – and to analyze how constricted the space was for visual representations of women.

Buchloh underscores that, as opposed to Sherman, who is considered part of 'the Picture Generation', Woodman does not make use of mass cultural references.<sup>2</sup> He maintains that her concerns are of a more *formal* character: "Woodman's project was an attempt to deliver a photographic anti-aesthetic with photographic means, a counter-articulation, in which the fundamental contradictions of the representational process of photography would become manifest."<sup>3</sup> According to Buchloh, Woodman emphasizes the non-neutral in the essence of photography, its artificiality, the optical tricks and the chemical process. Buchloh's view of Woodman's art aligns somewhat with Rosalind Krauss' text "Francesca Woodman. Problem Sets" from 1986. She also takes her starting point in that Woodman worked with a set of objective, formal issues that always refer to photography's inner laws.

These laws are demonstrated in *Untitled, Rome, May 1977-August 1978*. In this work, a woman is kneeling in what appears to be an empty room. There are hexagonal forms on the tiled floor. We see a portion of the right arm in the process of pouring white paint over the slightly inclined back. Her head is not visible, only a bit of the neck. The bucket of paint (or some such thick white liquid) is present at the uppermost edge of the image, to the left, and the dramatic effect of the white liquid that has run down the figure's back and foot soles is reflected like a brushstroke of light in the photograph. Paint also covers an area around the body and the feet. The back is somewhat blurred, but not the feet; the toes appear distinctly. The white paint on the floor creates an almost luminous area in the lower portion of the picture plane.

Two things interest me in this photograph: Woodman has used the paint in such a way that the white, quite wide stripe creates a 'linear plane' that lies parallel to the erect back and the photograph's surface. The line is broken when it meets the floor, then issues from the feet and extends toward the image's bottom edge, thus forming an angle that creates depth and a spatial push.

<sup>2</sup>The designation 'the Picture Generation' refers to a loose grouping of American artists of the 1980s who were inspired by ideas from conceptual art and pop art, and who pointedly utilized strategies for adapting already familiar motifs and images from popular culture. In addition to Cindy Sherman, John Baldessari, Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger are often considered key artists of the Picture Generation.

<sup>3</sup>Buchloh, "Francesca Woodman: Performing the Photograph, Staging the Subject", 47.



*Untitled, Rome, May 1977-August 1978.*

The formal interplay between light and dark, between surface and depth, is striking. Meanwhile there is no avoiding the female body, its posture and the way the white paint is applied. Nothing seems circumstantial, not even that the back is shot in an s-line pose, a *contraposto*. It draws one's thoughts to the classical Greek marble sculpture Venus de Milo, from 130-100 BC. Maybe that is intentional. Maybe not.

While Buchloh neglects discussing how the body and gender influence the formal compositions, Krauss acknowledges the significance of the body's presence and calls attention to the limitations of a purely formal perspective. "Objectivity is fine", she writes, "but without the subjective, the personal, there simply is no problem" – that is to say, an artistic problem.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the treatment of the body and gender are vague. And perhaps because both make use of modernism as the preferred backdrop for their interpretation, little attention is paid to Woodman's turn *toward art and its history* in her exploration of images. For me, the way Woodman fills her photographs with references to art history itself, and that she primarily activates history through use of the body, as in *Untitled, Rome, May 1977-August 1978*, are extremely interesting features of her work.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> KKrauss, "Francesca Woodman. Problem Sets", 165.

<sup>5</sup>This theme is not touched upon in the roundtable discussion "Francesca Woodman Reconsidered. A Conversation with George Baker, Anne Daly, Nancy Davenport, Laura Larson and Margaret Sundell" in *Art Journal*. They are far more interested in situating Woodman in what they consider a relevant contemporary context, including minimalism.



*Untitled, Rome, May 1977-August 1978.*

Here a narrow and quite high pedestal is placed in the middle of the golden section. Light streams in diagonally from the right and hits the facing surface of the pedestal, illuminating it, while the left side remains in darkness. On the grid-patterned terrazzo floor in the foreground, an abstract three-dimensional form made of tissue paper captures the light in all its angles. The nude woman is not on the pedestal, but rather lying 'disassembled' on the floor between the pedestal and the tissue paper. She is lying on her side, with one leg tucked slightly under the other, her face turned away and hands obscured by her body. The taut geometric interplay of angles and light and dark rectangles is in contrast to the two other clearly defined volumes: the body and the tissue paper.

In the theoretical discourse about Woodman there is much discussion of contemporary artists she may have something in common with, but little mention of prior history. To me, Woodman's gaze is so precise and so well trained in image construction and visual traditions that she must have seen quite a lot of art, her youth notwithstanding. In *From Space<sup>2</sup>, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-76*, Woodman makes use of a large glass museum-quality display case, and places a nude woman squatting inside this vitrine, her contours blurred due to movement. Another nude female figure is draped over the lid as though she were a marble figure resting on top of a baroque tomb from the 1700s. An arm hangs listlessly beside one edge of the vitrine, while this figure's gaze is fixed on what is occurring inside the enclosed space – perhaps previously used to display animals?<sup>6</sup> The display of objects from a specific time, placed in another, the gaze on them. All



*From Space<sup>2</sup>, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-76.*

museums exhibit time and the way we interpret time. Woodman's understanding of photography's treatment of time is not about frozen moments, but about time as a continuum, as history. It is fascinating how this is expressed in compositions that evade narrative, but are just as fully charged with her own presence.

Woodman was fully aware of the implications of using her own naked body. The point is that she builds familiarity with the gaze's history of the female body into the compositions, albeit in very different ways. She also explores the gaze's relation to the body and space in an on the whole tactile way. The body can be covered in dust, flour or other materials, it can function as a surface that reflects light, it can be shaped like a plastic volume with clothespins or tape, it can be drawn or painted on, it can be a caryatid or a 'nude'. It can even comprise a visual analogy to its surroundings, to for example trees, as in the defiant and touching *Untitled, MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire*. Here the figure stands in a forest next to several birch tree trunks. Her head is bowed toward the ground; we do not see her face, just two outstretched arms reaching up to toward the sky. Her sleeves are pushed way up over her elbows, and portions of her hands and forearms are covered with birch bark. She is a 'Wood-man'.

<sup>6</sup>There are several photographs in this series, and taxidermy mounted animals appear in some of them.



Untitled, MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire, Summer 1980.

### III.

Writing definitively about Francesca Woodman's photography is extremely difficult. 'Theory itself blurs around her', is professor and art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson's condensed and concise summary.<sup>7</sup> Those who write about her seldom manage to adopt one perspective. That the works on their own merit constantly exact new readings attests to the caliber of Francesca Woodman's art. The body in the images still puts things in motion.

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<sup>7</sup> Bryan-Wilson: «Blurs: Toward a Provisional Historiography of Francesca Woodman», 195.

#### Litterature

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