

Self, Identity and Performance: An Analysis of Subjectivity within the Work of Francesca Woodman

Even at a young age of thirteen, Francesca Woodman had a talented focus of making work, particularly centering herself as the subject. Photographing in both America and Italy during and after studying for an art degree, Woodman was largely influenced by Surrealism and Gothicism, aware that she had the ability to transform her psychology and interiority into a physical representation. This essay intends to explore how Francesca Woodman's self evolves into a subject based on time and surrounding. The essay proposes to study how Francesca Woodman places herself in her photographs, choosing to perform using broken, rugged, interior spaces to partially hide her figure. This text endeavours to analyse how her style of autobiographical photography allows her psychological mind to shine through the aesthetics of her imagery. Graham Clarke specifies that a photograph reflects as much the photographer's mind as the vision collected through the camera's lens (Clarke 1997:30). This would assume that Francesca Woodman's psychological state of mind is present within her work via her body performance. Using formal and other theoretical analysis on Woodman's work will prove if Clarke's theory is correct.

The concept of the self is problematic in Francesca Woodman's work. The self is commonly recognised as a fixed subject of coherence. This profound self becomes multiplied and warped when exposed to different environments. A self might be considered a combination of one's personality and the outside world, whereas subjectivity expresses how we are produced

as subjects. Woodman constructed her photographs by choosing her identity and performing a particular subjectivity to her audience, complicating the typical assumption of the self.



Fig. 1. *'House #4' Providence, Rhode Island, 1976*
Francesca Woodman

In Figure 1, we see a prime example of Woodman presenting herself as a temporary being, playing with the audience's mind and toying with her own self. On the surface of the image we question which side of the fireplace she desires to be in, but reading the photograph in depth we could question

what ideology she has of her self and how she perceives her self as a evanescent object in certain environments. In his text 'Scattered in Space and Time', Chris Townsend recognises the consistency of Francesca Woodman's body performance, movement and utility of the border of each image frame as if she was trying to escape her current life. To conduct her performances, Woodman uses her body to physically incorporate herself into empty spaces and found objects within the frame. In this image, she has composed the photograph so that the fireplace produces a separate subsection of the image. Woodman's overexposure of natural daylight makes the low-key fireplace and her figure key focal points. Nothing is quite vertical in the photograph; if the image were rotated ensuring the walls to be upright, the fireplace would still be out of place. This consequently, as Graham Clarke suggests, gives the viewer the option to read Francesca Woodman's state of mind as random and awkward, fashioned by her evocative constructions.

The use of her body in a small segment of the frame rebels against traditional portraiture of the time as typically, people were photographed facing the camera and sitting or standing upright for a portrait. This new, dynamic version of a portrait brings intensity and confidence to Woodman's photographs and demonstrates her positivity about using her own figure in front of a camera and future audience. Therefore, Woodman's work was already a clear concept produced by young aptitude, even though she was learning concurrently. (Townsend, C. 2006:7)

Susan Bright draws attention to the poignancy of the body in performance art. She asserts that performance in photography provides evidentiary documents of experience from the past. Contemporary

performance photography has developed to become more constructive, providing posed narratives within the imagery. Bright's key theory here proposes that this construction is an expressive action to represent the self and one's identity (Bright 2010:181-3). Mark Durant progresses this, noting that performance in a photograph allows a narrative to be generated. An arrangement of intimacy, exposure of the body and experimentation presents a playful document of privacy and space to be assembled for the public eye. Photography has helped the performance in Woodman's work by freezing the short-lived actions into static primary objects, whereas the performance assists the photograph by supplying it with a stage for her to construct a frozen design for others to analyse (Durant 2010:31-7).

Even though Woodman is agile in her performances, they are staged as a fixed construction of the representation of her state of mind. On one side of the fireplace (Fig. 1.) Woodman's foot is quite static, where the other side shows movement. The use of her moving body while the shutter is open expresses her activity, whereas the darker side of the fireplace looks like a mystery world, making her other leg look more ethereal. Using movement questions her own belief of her existence. She is trying to hide but is as equally exposed to her audience; one would question which world she believes is reality, and which is illusion, if there is one. This clever action of constructing herself around objects paused in time assumes the evolving of her self taking place at that moment in time, but when the shutter stops, the audience becomes prevented from ever knowing what temporary Self she was trying to adapt into.

Woodman has successfully placed an essence of distortion between reality and illusion in her work, camouflaging herself into a new self, using the time of the camera to construct an insight into a new Self. This sense of becoming has been largely influenced by Duane Michals, also following the Surrealist movement. She adopted his practices of blurring the human figure to symbolise dreams and reality. (Livingstone, M. 1997:10) The movement she chooses to act in her imagery, similar to Michals' (see Fig. 2.) potentially expresses this unfolding notion of a new Self.

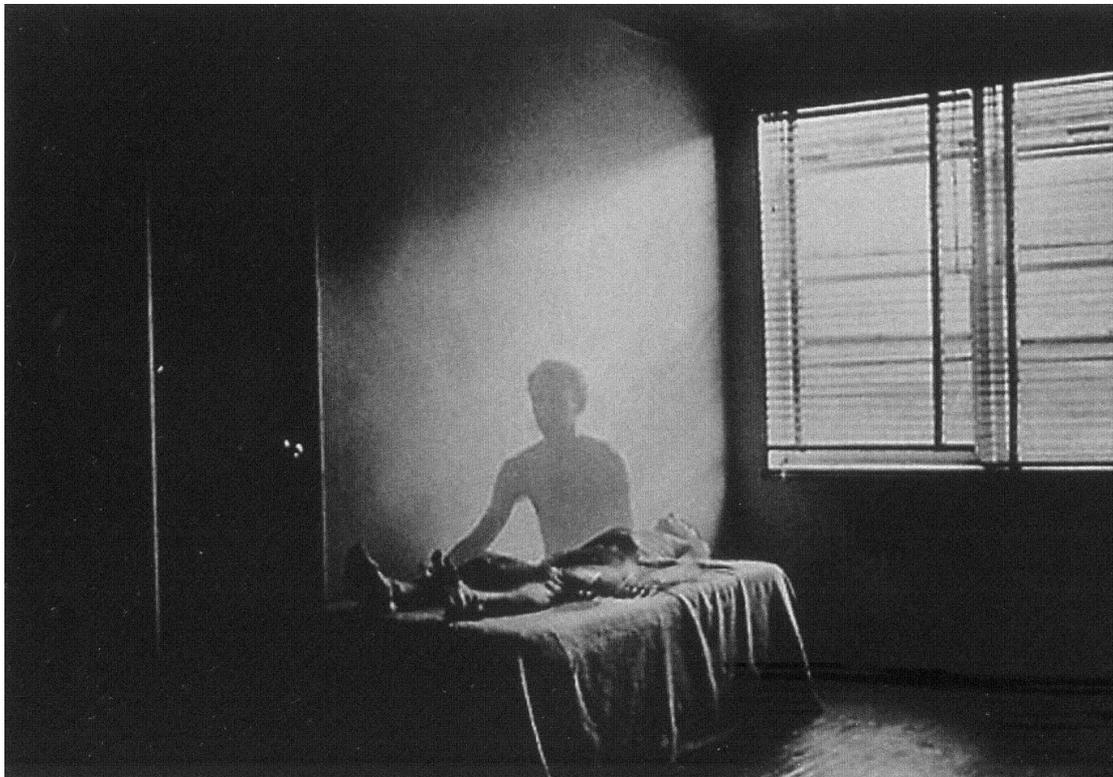


Fig. 2. *'The Spirit Leaves the Body' 1968*
Duane Michals

In Michals' portrait (Fig. 2.), this spectral doubling of the self has a more literary aesthetic suggestion of the space between life and death. On the other hand, Woodman's performances are unresolved, letting the audience

determine whether her psychology is about life and death, fantasy or merely something else via their own subsequent experiences.

'To photograph reality is to photograph nothing'. Duane Michals, 1976
(Townsend, C 2006: 12)

Essentially, Michals is claiming his world isn't a reality; therefore a world of delusions. We might argue that this influences Woodman and in her own photographs tried to find her own fantasy world like Michals. However, unlike Michals, Francesca Woodman utilises abandoned, warehouse-like buildings to intertwine her own body within to camouflage her, suggesting that she observes herself as a person who is seen as pointless and invisible.

Roger Caillois argued in 'The Mask of Medusa' (1964) that all of mankind has a mask that people can use as an accessory; not everyone utilises it, but we are all familiar that one exists within ourselves. It is apparent that Woodman is aware of her mask, but it is the act of performance that stimulates the process of removing her mask to reveal her 'other' or perhaps putting her mask on. Whether her images are a projection of her real identity or one she has created, Caillois' theory is evident in Woodman's work. What is different in her photographs, and again links back to her problematic self, is the clarity of her knowledge of a present mask; she has the ability to control it to distort her identity to her partiality, rather than subconsciously, as Caillois seems to assume in his earlier observations. (Joyce, C. 2009: 61-86)

In every self-portrait, Woodman's playful integrity with pushing both psychological and physical boundaries with her evanescent mask proves Graham Clarke's theory of an author's mind being present in their work to be true in Francesca Woodman's case. To coincide her dreamlike imagery, the

majority of Woodman's works are untitled but specify a location. This could importantly signify that she can always find a space to change her mask, self and identity wherever she is.

Martin Heidegger refers to the self and becoming by reawakening the meaning of 'being'. One can only understand one's being if one knows they are being; essentially to understand yourself, you need to be aware of your existence. Time is the resource Heidegger believes is used to identify one's being and see a developing being (Krell 1994:47-79). Figure 1 visualises Heidegger's analysis of 'being'. Woodman uses photography to practice and develop her incoherent self through time, exploring and understanding her being simultaneously. She uses time to attempt dissolving into the walls, crossing the space of reality. The hidden posture in her narrative pose takes the viewer's mind into a dream state too where the audience can contemplate where she is psychologically heading.

'Woodman is never quite with us, quite with herself' – Chris Townsend, 2006 (Townsend. C 2006: 7)

This quote implies that her performances suppose her identity to be in an uncanny state of nothingness, where even though her body is physically in the photograph as a subject to view, her mind has fled elsewhere, expressing the transition of becoming another self.



Fig. 3 From 'Space 2' Series, Providence, Rhode Island, 1977
Francesca Woodman

Writer and art critic Sally O'Reilly notes that the body in art is a stage of viewing the elements of one's identity, and an easy way of being able to accept the self. By photographing the body without attire, O'Reilly asserts the notion that the artist can convert the human figure into an instrument, objectifying the body into a shape without emotional value. (O'Reilly, S 2009:16-47)

The framing of this photograph (see Fig. 3.) is more upright than Figure 1, with the camera directly facing Woodman's apparently bare body. Looking

at her figure from this intrusive angle makes her use of wallpaper peelings become suggestive that she is disguising herself from a perhaps invasive lifestyle. The overexposed daylight creeps through the windows, giving hints of a reality world outside her abandoned choice of space, bringing the audience back to a state of normality they can relate to. The light is almost heavenly, the flowers on the wallpaper and the soft texture of her skin create a contrast of purity against the used, jagged space she has incorporated herself within, suggesting her thoughts of being vulnerable as a female. This photograph compliments Sally O'Reilly's theory on the use of the body as a tool; Woodman acts incorporating with derelict spaces as if she is covering herself from being stared at like an object and nothing more. Using worn materials tells the audience that she considers her self as a similarly discarded tool, suggesting an interior anxiety.

Woodman uses her stage in figure 3 to dissolve into the walls, segregating herself from a reality the audience is less aware of. Art critic Hal Foster further engages with Sally O'Reilly's theory on the body being used as a tool. Instead, Foster discusses nudity as a surrealist act in photography that results from psychological disorders. Much of Woodman's work includes an essence of Surrealism, which could be using her figure to symbolise her state of mind, growing into something more than a physical surface of representation. Foster's key point is that nudity is used in art as a fetish to protect revealing anxiety, and to allow a male audience to see the body as a tool, even though the artist's intentions might be to release their anxiety. Another key point he makes about Surrealism in photography is that the body is often used in contemporary art to be shaped into a form that removes

gender from the body, presentation ideas on the fear of castration (Mundy, J 2001:203-227). By covering up her face, the audience judge the characteristics of Woodman's identity solely on her body position, playing a game with the viewer over a coherent self; this body could belong to anyone now. It has no identity.

As seen in figure 3, Francesca Woodman folds herself behind her interior props, therefore less of her female body is shown. This results in removing elements of her gender. However, the texture of her smooth, gentle skin against scratchy walls symbolises stereotypical feminine aspects and elegance, making the audience acknowledge that she is a woman. Covering her body could instigate the idea that she desires to temporarily forget about her gender and femininity. Foster's theory matches this photograph; Woodman employs her own body to be a mere surface of her mind. This poses an idea to the audience here that she may desire to be a fragile, dirty, static object; a tool perhaps, to be watched as a fetish. Her moving body reflects her mind like Foster argues. In the photograph, it is like she desires to be an object without soul. There is no coherent self in this piece of work.

Francesca Woodman successfully adopted techniques from the Surrealist movement to make her work a subjectivity of her identity. By placing her own body in front of the camera, she was able to provide viewers with an insight of what she thought was her self. Performing in a playful manner toyed with how the audience judged her; blurring of the body became suggestive of a temporary evolving self that alternated depending on the surroundings she placed herself in, consisting of rundown spaces suffering regular human attention. The blurring of the self in her pictures distracts viewers from seeing

her body shape, making it apparent that Woodman wanted her audience to contemplate her mind more than her figure. Francesca Woodman's self-representative performances reflect elements of her incoherent interiority, and a forever changing self.

Illustration References:

Fig. 1. *House #4' Providence, Rhode Island, 1976 - Francesca Woodman*

TOWNSEND, C., 2006. *Francesca Woodman*. Phaidon: London

Fig. 2. *The Spirit Leaves the Body' 1968 - Duane Michals*

MICHALS, D., 1976. *Real Dreams. Photostories by Duane Michals*. Addison House: U.S.A

Fig. 3. *From 'Space 2' Series, Providence, Rhode Island, 1977 - Francesca Woodman*

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