

## Where is the 'Self'? Francesca Woodman's Photography and the Performance of Identity.

The more we try to identify the location of one's 'self', the more it evades us, and the more it slips into a dynamic with exterior, social forces. This essay intends to research and explore issues concerning Francesca Woodman's representation of 'self'. Using theories on the self as both unfolding from environment and through individual agency, I will consider Francesca Woodman's presentation of 'self' in her performative photography. Deconstructing her 'self' through her work will give the opportunity of discovering what has influenced Woodman to produce her specific articulations of 'being'.

Anthony Elliott describes how people explore their characteristics. Elliott claims the 'self' can be analysed through sociological and psychological contexts. There is a divide between the two theories over whether a social or individual construction of the 'self' is primarily seen. Elliott proposes that issues such as gender, sexuality, continuity and difference along with unity and fragmentation can help identify self-construction. (Elliott 2001:1-9) The 'self' is a matter of trial, error and manipulation. He argues that if you are willing to display your intimate life in front of others, you have the ability to adapt your 'self' to become something more than your previous 'self'. Elliott makes a fundamental point: *"the self is linked to role playing, gender, choice, risk and above all, the realm of consumption"*, (Elliott 2001:2) suggesting that material items also allow one's self to explore their identity.

In this essay we shall consider Francesca Woodman's self-representation within the environment of abandoned spaces. Here, she constructs performances to make it seem like she is intertwined with the derelict backgrounds. According to Elliott, we act on what is incorporated from the world and others to contour and fashion our identity; our 'interior' sense of self lies in exterior forces. This paper is a critical response on how Francesca Woodman utilises her figure to remind herself and her viewer of a liminal experience of existence in time and reality.

Woodman explores her gender in a surrealistic manner, using the camera's long exposure to alter her body into fluid, emotive shapes much influenced by Man Ray. Although performing intimately with her body in an alone environment, her photographs respectively link to theories on gender made by art critic Hal Foster, who comments that nudity is used in art as a fetish to protect revealing anxiety, allowing male audiences to observe the body as a tool. Foster considers how the body is often used in contemporary surrealist art to be shaped into a form that removes gender from the body. (Mundy 2001:203-227) By blurring her body, as seen in figure 1, the audience is required to judge Woodman's identity solely on her body position and the environment surrounding her, thus playing a game with the viewer over a coherent self; this body could belong to anyone now. It has no identity.



Fig 1: Francesca Woodman  
'Space2, Providence' Rhode Island  
1975-6

Woodman's agility and movement provides the viewer with knowledge that she has confidence and awareness of her body's capabilities. This is reminiscent of Elliott's assertion regarding the ability to change one's self. We might propose that there is unison of her body as an expressive force of the mind, creating the 'self'. But the locations, objects and abandoned environments she places her self in is suggestive of a potentially disturbed social life and past, as seen in Figure 2.



Fig 2: Francesca Woodman  
*'House No.3, Providence'*  
1975-6

In this image, Woodman uses a photographic strategy to represent an idea of fragmentation and continuity. She demonstrates a blend of delicate and jagged textures that expose her problematic evaluation of a coherent 'self'. Her moving body gives Woodman the ingredient of a playful character, yet her near-static face and leg are suggestive of a distressed self, too. It looks as if she is leaning into the wall to hide from danger, seeking some sort of comfort from her current milieu. Jui-Ch'i Liu talks of the house as a womb to which Woodman wishes to return. (Liu 2004: 26-31)

Erving Goffman argues that the self consists of being aware of the multiple roles one can perform in different situations. During a performance the subject must monitor their own behaviour to review the kind of impression they are giving off to their audience. (Goffman 2001:31-6) We might therefore, in light of Goffman's idea, suggest Woodman understood that her 'performance' might produce a 'self' fit for others to see that might not be her true 'self', making her identity problematic to identify.

Goffman furthers his argument that identity is adopted by social engagement, but the individual has the key to creating a self-identity above the general social being to which we can all adapt. Has Woodman adopted a social role to act like her surroundings in the photograph? Goffman's theory might help combine an understanding and intertwining of sociological and psychological construction. Woodman engages in an opening of herself with her surroundings, but there is contrast between her dynamic fluidity and the static, decayed atmosphere. Although her performances show passion for a link with these expired walls, she is very much alive. Perhaps her reason for moving is to comfort herself and see she is still vivacious.

Margaret Sundell makes a key point that Woodman is the author of her work giving her a level of respect from viewers, yet she is also an object of desire for others to see. She so easily alternates between the two roles.

(Sundell 1986:435) Although, Solomon-Godeau's point is that this 'seduction' is always frustrated, and therefore a quasi-feminist strategy:

*"Woodman creates a disturbance in the field. The fantasy tableau, the little theatre of the fetish, becomes deranged. Its familiar props, through a deceptively simple additive principle, now become strange and alienating."* (Solomon-Godeau, 1986: 245)

Woodman's work is a possible reaction to certain ideas such as gender and domesticity. Her individual identity has been socially adapted but she uses her body in her performance to convince herself she is more than an ignored object – thus identifying her constructed self.

Victor Tupitsyn denotes that someone of Western upbringing has knowledge that when faced with a camera, one's individual self is exposed for representation of others. Our behaviour in portraits is less natural and expected, as we consciously know a perception of our 'self' will be judged. (Karabelnik, M 2004:21-2) This argument presumes that Woodman is conscious others will see her post-production of her performance, which is a reason to believe her 'self' is complex. In other words, her performance is judged as an act rather than an honest motion. The viewer cannot judge the 'truth' of the situation as they only see Woodman's depiction of the construction of the setting around her through the composition of the camera. Tupitsyn is correct; her behaviour will of course be different with a camera present compared to having no one or nothing in the room with her. As a viewer, do we negotiate accepting Woodman's self with the knowledge that we believe our own self exists? We accept her act; we know she is aware of her self. However, in her aesthetically pleasing performances the performance is mistaken as portraits of 'true' identity and selfhood.

Tupitsyn further proposes that our self-image is 'polluted' by the gaze of others, therefore we aim to please. John Berger also has written on women, that 'watch themselves being looked at'. (Berger 2008: 40) Tupitsyn's argument is that representation is like a mask; essentially nothing is 'true' of its kind – agreeing with Anthony Elliott's theory that we are formed by culture

through our engagement with it. Tupitsyn's argument poses a profound notion: others construct the self, not the subject in question. Indeed, one's own sense of self is, at least in part, a performance for *others*.

The blurring of identity via the body might suggest Woodman's longing to escape, transform into something or someone else. This could be considered as a concept of 'becoming', which is defined as '*any process of change*' or '*any change from the lower level of potentiality to the higher level of actuality*'. (Collins English Dictionary 2003) Genevieve Lloyd writes about the relationship between consciousness and time. She argues that consciousness has a beginning at someone's life and also has an end. Her opinion is that consciousness exists when we refer to ourselves as 'I' and as a self. Even though we are aware we have already had a consciousness and will have one until our end, it's unfamiliar to our current conscience. Future is something that reaches past what we know in our current self-consciousness. What we do know is that future consciousness activates death as time continues. Whether you desire time to forward, stop or rewind, it still carries on, bringing our consciousness to knowledge that death is forthcoming. Lloyd denotes that time shrouds consciousness; as time progresses we become aware of our 'self'. As that self develops, so does the expectation of death, linking back to the definition of 'becoming'. Lloyd's claim in her text is that this subject is one-sided; consciousness depends on time whereas time moves whether we are conscious or not. (Lloyd 1993:43-6)

Applying Lloyd's theory to Woodman's images, I would argue that Woodman's desire is to physically connect her self-consciousness with time through her environment. Her performances attempt to grasp her future using

the awareness of her current self and push the limits of consciousness and its representation within a photograph. This future becoming of 'self' now becomes palpable. Woodman's physical gesture could translate into a notion for speeding up time to further approach her end, similar to one of her influences, Duane Michals. A similar gesture of Michals' movement in figure 3 is also applicable to a futural becoming.



Fig 3: Duane Michals  
'The Spirit Leaves the Body'  
1968

Lloyd's theory is reminiscent of Descartes' famous quote "*I think therefore I am*". (Descartes, R 1968:3) However, in Woodman's imagery, she looks more like a spirit, a consciousness in time rather than space. There is a lack of fixity or a coherent position from which to announce 'I'. Lloyd reminds readers that in Western culture consciousness is often referred to as something more than our self, such as a mind or spirit. (Lloyd 1993:44-6)

Woodman doesn't appear fully aware of her current self. If she isn't thinking, then she isn't. If we were to change Descartes message to 'I don't think, therefore I'm not', it makes the proposal that we as a viewer are watching Woodman in a perpetual state of 'becoming'. Consequently, there is no fixed position from which has a permanent coherent 'self'.

Woodman's practice of motion within her chosen environmental space has close connections with European Modernism, and specifically Italian Futurism, which Woodman had been influenced by through her time spent in Rome, and through reading the journal 'ArtForum'. (see Townsend: 2003:17) Futurist artists and theorists focused on forms on continuity in space and were profoundly influenced by the philosophy of Henri Bergson. Bergson considered the essence of life through movement and organic time, something he referred to as 'duration' and 'temporal existence'. (Bergson, H 2001:226-7) In this sense, we can trace certain Bergsonian ideas in Woodman's work through her influence of Futurists, and by their influence, Henri Bergson.

Henri Bergson considers consciousness as bound to duration and time. Bergson's fundamental argument is that duration is a moment of quality, that our existence is simultaneous with time. We find duration through multiple events occurring at once. (Bergson, H 2001:226-7) Bergson was therefore deeply suspicious of photography. However, in relation to Woodman's work, Bergson's point is relevant as she has managed to capture this moment of quality whilst transforming her 'self' into another realm through time that has only been captured through technology; no one else could have seen that moment because she has removed her self from that external world that only

includes simultaneity. Bergson stressed the profound importance of time to human experience, unlike Immanuel Kant, for example, who perhaps argued the close relationship of consciousness with time *and* space. Kant evaluated duration spatially rather than with time, whereas Bergson uses 'duration' as a definition for existing in time. (Kant 1996: 375)

Bergson refers to duration as a uniqueness that humans possess. Humans obtain the ability to use time alongside their will to exist as a human being. Woodman is studying time outside of a world of other people. By removing herself from a typical 'sense of world' Woodman focuses on her 'self' as a duration that purely exists in time. Bergson refers to this as "*pure duration*". (Bergson, H 2001:100) When Bergson describes pure duration he considers a being becoming temporary and tries to disassociate this moment of quality from any definition of space or place. Upon realisation of existing in time, that moment becomes full of quality.

Another key argument Bergson created that we may see permeating through Woodman's imagery is his reflection on how humans have managed to master holding the future in the present, referring to movement and motion. He proposed that when someone is encountering duration, it is pleasing to an audience because they can see a direction of where they're going, grasping the future before it's there. Bergson calls this a reflective consciousness: you become the owner of your conscience. Woodman shows her influence of Bergson as she blurs herself into a temporary self using photographic technology. She considers her present by experimenting with her own duration.



Fig 4: Francesca Woodman  
*'House 4, Providence, Rhode Island'*  
1975-6

In figure 4, Woodman has used the camera to capture her moving within a prolonged shutter speed, causing her to be seen as duration. She hasn't actually frozen her body, but the camera makes the viewer believe that she is a character in time, therefore becoming a new 'self'. This links to Bergson's theory as the photograph doesn't consider Woodman's character before or after this image was captured, but in a state of transition.

When Woodman blurs her body via the camera's long exposures, we lose her photographic identity; she exists as a duration in time. Blurring one's

self provokes two outcomes: primarily, the self exists in time, imposing a difference of self – one that is evidently non-existent in a physical reality, therefore temporal, as Bergson denotes. Secondly, blurring takes away the privilege of self by making a fusion of it with the environment. This act suggests Woodman only wants to exist in time. Time is all she is interested in and waiting for to accelerate again. This reflects Genevieve Lloyd's theory of temporal existence, as mentioned previously.

Bergson's theory is perhaps most transparently applied to Marcel Duchamp's '*Nude Descending a Staircase*', shown in figure 5 below.

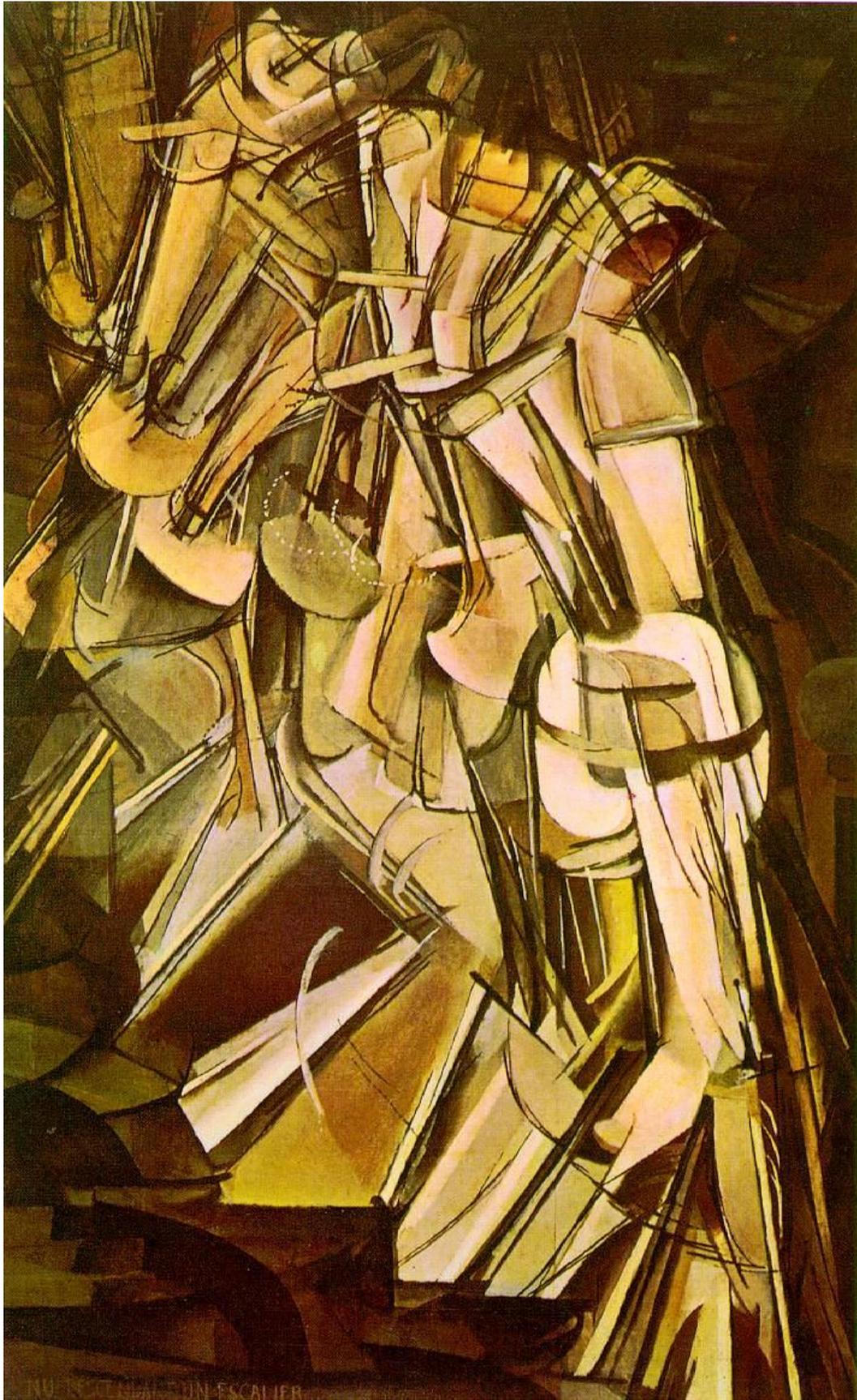


Fig 5: Marcel Duchamp  
*'Nude Descending a Staircase No.2'*  
1912

Italian Futurist painter and sculptor Umberto Boccioni also made work influenced by Bergson that revolved around demonstration of movement and time. His sculpture, as shown in figure 6, is a body exposed as a duration fixed in time through technology.



Fig 6: Umberto Boccioni  
*'Unique Forms of Continuity in Space'*  
1913

Stephen Kern describes abstract movement and speed, analysing Boccioni's sculpture as a continuous movement. Kern argued Boccioni and the Futurists had made a solution to artists' problems: normally forms of art would capture people literally, whereas Boccioni wanted "*to express our whirling life of steel, of pride, of fever and of speed*". (Kern: 1983: 120)

Boccioni challenged Bergson's theories on simultaneous duration and pure duration by producing both in a single form. Essentially, he mastered creating a sensation of movement, giving forms in sculpture and painting dynamism as opposed to a fixed moment.

Kern furthers his argument that beings use the environment to penetrate immediate ideas of past and future during one movement. (Kern 1983:122) Woodman's backgrounds tell the viewer she was stood in the area before the shutter opened, and would have immediately kept moving or falling to the ground once the photograph was taken. Although she has captured a snippet of her performance, the viewer is entitled to engage with her whole experience through the movement.

We might further consider the fusion of self and environment that we see in Woodman's work through the writings of Martin Heidegger. He describes this fundamental bond between self and world as the essence of being: 'dasein' (a German word literally translated as 'being there'). The closest word used in the English language is 'existence'. Dasein is a form of being that is conscious of issues such as mortality, personhood, and the dilemma of being existent with other human beings whilst at the same time feeling alone with one's self. (Clark: 2002, 9-18)

Heidegger describes 'world' as a place where humans share a mode of being. It is a place to build a sense of how to need or want something through time.

*"It means no particular entity (it is not the planet or the globe itself) but is that presupposed and disregarded space of familiarity and recognition within which all the beings around us show themselves, are for us". (Clark 2002:16)*

Being in the world involves knowing human limits of all activities whether outrageous or mundane, for example tiredness, and having a concern for existence; knowledge that life is not infinite. Knowledge of surroundings provides human beings with a background to our conscious of 'a sense of world'.

We might propose that Woodman's representation of self includes elements of 'dasein' in the environment she has placed herself within. Woodman presents a self co-existent with her environment. She has cut off her relationship to other human beings leaving her only relationship with the rundown walls and camera. The camera is the subject she can address; make notes on, perform for, tell her secrets and stories to. It has in some way become an acquaintance of hers. She uses it to confront her self as a dasein and being in time. She has chosen to represent her mortality through technology and becoming a temporal self.

Heidegger discovered that human beings acknowledge a sense of what they are when we gain familiarity with our surroundings. Francesca Woodman is aware of her own existence because she has demonstrated a association with her environment, although, as discussed, her blurring

performances take away her authority as her original self, and awareness of a permanent self; it is only temporary.

Heidegger used a 'sense of a "world"' as a main term for describing human *dasein*. It is not necessarily a physical subject, but rather a space of acknowledgement where other beings show us themselves; where we can share common knowledge of global existence as *daseins*. In Francesca Woodman's photographs, she has decided to articulate a concept of selfhood that is continuous with her environment. By combining her 'self' with the environment, the self infiltrates the walls, and the walls infiltrate the self. The emptiness of surroundings and isolation of her figure create a dynamic and pressured environment; the activity of the photograph solely comes from Woodman's motion. Her sense of 'world' only consists of a familiarity with decay and abandonment, suggesting Woodman's self-existence is, in her head, decaying too. She is attempting to join what she sees as her 'world'.

I have therefore argued that Woodman's constitution of 'self' is fundamentally located in the environment. Her body, through a sort of temporal performance, becomes an expressive mode for representing this concept of selfhood. Through the temporal register, Woodman presented a new self, constructed through the camera's long exposures, blending her identity with time. This produces a temporary 'Bergsonian' self that only exists in time. Viewers are forced to judge her identity as a self via the environment she has placed her self within. Francesca Woodman successfully performed in front of a camera, both being the creator of the image, the subject of the image, and at the same time, producing a radical form of photographic self, simultaneous with time within the frame of photography.

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