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Am I in the picture?

Interpreting the photography of Francesca Woodman

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Abstract

In this talk I give an interpretation of Francesca Woodman's photography. This interpretation is based on Ernst Kapp's philosophy of technology. Therefore, it is a theoretical contribution to the field of visual art as well as a contribution to philosophy.

Francesca Woodman was as artistically active in the years from 1973 to 1981. After her suicide in 1981 she left a numerous photographs, which have only been partly presented to the public. Her photographs show the female body, mainly self-portraits, staged in abandoned places. Her body is shown blurry, fading, hidden under props, and fused with spatial surroundings. With the statement that Woodman exhibits an "obsessive engagement with her own disappearing", cultural and literary scholar Elisabeth Bronfen gives an accurate description of Woodman's photographic oeuvre. Nevertheless the interpretations of Woodman's photography are ambiguous: Interpreters tried to understand her photographs as visual suicide notes, as statement about the female body in visual art as well as a photographic engagement with psychoanalysis etc.

I am interested in exploring the relationship between the disappearing body and the visible props. Woodman's photography suggests that she was very aware in choosing and staging her props and therefore my interpretation refers to more than just the body. In her photo series *A woman. A mirror. A*

woman is a mirror for a man (1975–78), Woodman shows her body jammed in between a mirror, a wooden mirror frame and a glass plate. In *Eel* (1977–78) Woodman curls around a bowl with an eel inside. An untitled photograph (1979–80) shows Woodman holding a big leaf skeleton against her back and the leaf reminds viewers of the human spine. I think that these objects are far more than just visual metaphors, chosen because of their formal or visual similarity. I want to suggest that Woodman interprets her body by using certain props. If her photographs are understood as testimonials of a factual disappearance, the objects would remain and remind of the disappeared body.

The theoretical background for this interpretation is derived from Ernst Kapp's philosophy of technology. In the late 19th century Kapp tried to conceptualise human beings based on a theory of technology. He describes human organs as subconscious archetypes for the production of technical tools. Whenever humans produce tools, they just reproduce themselves. This relation is called organ projection. Using a tool allows to interpret one's own nature. I intend to relate Kapp's concept of tools to Woodman's use of props.

Biography, art & first reception

At a first glance Francesca Woodman's photography does not seem to be very special. Her photos are black and white, blurry and grainy. Taken in the 1970s, they seem to be older than they are and resemble surrealist photography from the 1930s. The pictures of Francesca Woodman mostly show herself in various poses, mainly in the nude. Often movement is captured with long exposure time, so there is no distinct body to recognise, just blurred contours to see. There are pictures of her female friends (who are mostly look-alikes) as well as a few pictures of men (her boyfriend and models). All her photography is staged, that means: the photos are no snapshots but meticulously planned arrangements. Many of them were taken either in her studio, in abandoned places, or outside in nature. Daylight was important to Woodman; she refused to use any artificial lighting. Her photos were developed in square format, most of them have a height and width of about 13 centimetres; sometimes Woodman wrote text on the photo paper. Most of her photographs are untitled, although many of them are single images within a series of images that are collected under the same title (cf. Phelan, 2002, p. 987). Her oeuvre consists of more than 800 photographs as well as a few videos (cf. Townsend, 2006, p. 6). It has not been completely presented to the public yet (cf. Cooke, 2014).

Being born in 1958 to parents who were both artists themselves, Francesca Woodman became interested in photography as a teenager and studied Photography from 1975 to 1979 at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence. During her study she spent a year in Italy (1977/78) and when she came back to the United States, she graduated at RISD in 1979 and moved to New York. There she became interested in Fashion Photography. (cf. Veysey, 2014; Pedicini, 2012, p. 25ff.)

Woodman committed suicide with 22 years in January 1981. Soon after her death the public attention for her photos arose quite extraordinary, so that she is labelled as cult



Figure 1: Untitled (1975–76, Providence)

Figure 2: *space*² (1975–78, Providence)

figure on book covers and exhibition reviews (cf. Veysey, 2014; Solomon-Godeau, 2014, p. 73). There are various reasons to be found for this phenomenon: public interest for Woodman's photographs can of course be explained due to her enigmatic photography but also her early death and probably due to her physical appearance that corresponds to western beauty standards have an impact as well. It is not surprising that the very early reception of Woodman in the late eighties (she had her first solo exhibition in 1986, five years after her death) tried anxiously to avoid a discussion of her suicide. Later on in the 90s and early 2000s, she was conceived as a tragic artist, who did not only make art but lived her art in an uncompromising way that includes the act of killing herself. (cf. Phelan, 2002, p. 984)

Peggy Phelan, professor of Theatre & Performance Studies at Stanford University, writes in an article from 2002: "Woodman's artistic practice might be understood as a way to rehearse her own death. [...] Not all of Woodman's work concerns death, but I believe her preoccupation with it permeates her understanding of photography. Indeed, it is my contention that her interest in death allows us to glimpse an unusual view of what death and art, together and separately, might mean" (Phelan, 2002, p. 987f.).

Phelan understands Woodman's art as an anticipation of her death and suggests that it can be read as a photographic suicide letter. Death and decay are present throughout Woodman's work: We see the blurred contours of a body, of her body, placed in sites that have been abandoned. Her body is about to disappear, to be abandoned as well. It is not difficult to find photographs that match this interpretation.

The untitled photograph taken in 1975–76 in Providence (fig. 1) looks like Woodman enters her own, self-dug grave. The photo from the series *space*² (fig. 2) in which Woodman hides behind wallpaper evokes the process of passing out of life. There is a

quotation from one of Woodman¹ which says: “Am I in the picture? Am I getting in or out of it? I could be a ghost, an animal or a dead body, not just this girl standing on the corner.” This quotation might suggest that Woodman wants to show herself becoming a ghost, an animal or a dead body through her photography.

There is a first interesting thing to notice: Photography is the medium that – as it is said in common language – catches a moment. In Woodman’s photography a very particular movement it caught: the vague moment of disappearing. But due to the medium of photography the disappearing will never finalise, because photography preserves the moment in the same way that photography catches it. One could follow along this thought with the Roland Barthes’ linking of death and photography in *La Chambre Claire*. Woodman may or may not have intended to comment on the medium of photography in this way, but her art can lead to these thoughts. This is a first hint that Woodman’s photography can be used to tell something about photography.

New receptions

Christopher Townsend, professor of the history of avant-garde film at Royal Holloway University of London, gives a comprehensive investigation on Woodman in his 2006 monograph on her. He writes about the several roles that Woodman can play in the traditions of American photography, surrealism, gothic, feminism etc. One of the feminist aspects of her photography is that she appropriates fetishizing strategies (cf. Townsend, 2006, p. 42). In her pictures she plays with these strategies. The important point in the feminist interpretation – as well as in others – is, that Woodman’s repetitive and obsessive engagement with her own disappearing is not seen an anticipation of suicide. Of course, fading is one of Woodman’s preferred topoi. But in the same way it can be understood as fading-out, it can be understood as fading-in. The untitled photo, taken between 1975 and 1978 in Providence (fig. 3), can legitimately be interpreted as coming in as well as leaving. For Elisabeth Bronfen, German scholar of culture and literature, Woodman’s photographs “stage the body as picture and the picture’s creator at the same time” (Bronfen, 2014, p. 16, translation TH). Therefore her photography is not only about fading but also about showing; about showing the body of the artist that she is – as well as it is about using her body as a tool to show something different than an expression of her own identity.

A brief look at art history can illuminate the double role of the body in self-portraits as picture object on the one hand and as representation of the picture’s creator on the other hand: Since Albrecht Dürer started creating self-portraits in the late medieval (or early Renaissance) self-portraits became the preferred way of self-expression. But,

¹ The authenticity of this quotation is unverified. It can be found on numerous websites, sometimes with the reference “personal journal”. Woodman wrote journals and notebooks but the quotation cannot be found in the published journal extracts in Townsend (2006). It is possible that the original quote is Italian and that it originates from a personal invitation of Woodman to her Rome exhibition in Libreria Maldoror 1978. The Italian quotation can be found online as well: “Sono io nella foto? Sto entrando o uscendo? Potrei essere un fantasma, un animale o un corpo morto, non solo la ragazza in piedi nell’angolo”. I thank Chris Townsend for this suggestion.



Figure 3: Untitled (1975–78, Providence)

self-portraits cannot provide a neutral or objective self-representation. In self-portraits painters chose certain gestures, clothing, items etc. in order to create a certain picture of themselves. In a self-portrait an artist can guide the way she or he wants to be perceived in certain directions. In this sense self-portraits are not plain self-representations but self-stagings. This notion became particularly pronounced in photography – and can be seen in the works of photographers from the early 20th century like Claude Cahun as well as in contemporary artists like Cindy Sherman.

Does this also apply to Francesca Woodman? When she was asked why she herself is the model of her photographs, she answered, “It’s a matter of convenience, I’m always available.” (Rankin, 1998, p. 35). Referring to self-portraits and self-stagings, Bronfen (2014, p. 17, translation TH) writes: “[...] we hardly see the working photographer in her self-portraits. We mostly see staged posing for the camera. Therefore she is only visible to us as portrait composed by her for the viewer”. Giuseppe Giallo, a personal friend of Woodman during her stay in Rome, affirms in an interview that there is a performance aspect to her photography: “Her body became her instrument” (Pedicini, 2012, p. 124).

We can read the Woodman quote from her notebook again; she asked: Am I in the picture? Right now the answer would be: No, Woodman is not in the picture. What the picture shows is the portrait Woodman wants the viewer to see. And this leads to

the next question: What is the purpose of the body when it is used as a tool? – or in general: What does Woodman want the viewer to see?



Figure 4: Untitled (1975–78, Providence)

Maybe this question can be answered by the investigation on an untitled photo that was taken between 1975 and 1978 in Providence (fig. 4). Woodman sits naked on an old-fashioned chair. Above her head on the wall there are a few flowers hanging upside down, the stems are forming a V. Chair and flowers are at the very centre of the image, Woodman sits on the right half of the chair displacing herself from the central vertical axis. Bronfen points to the traditional symbolism of flower representing vulva and investigates Woodman's pose: She crosses her left foot behind her right leg. Her right leg is put angled in the floor, her right foot is slightly turned to the right. Both of her hands are held in the genital area, her left hand on the inside of her left thigh, her right arm is on her right thigh and her hand covers the genital area. Bronfen (2014, p. 17, translation TH) describes her facial expression as "coquettish" (ger. neckisch), it can also be read as sad, bored, teasing, superior, or angry. With her facial expression and the body pose she suggests being aware of the metaphorical meaning of the flower, and she – as Bronfen (2014, p. 17, translation TH) writes – still "ironically participates in this game".

Therefore Bronfen (2014, p. 24, translation TH) calls Woodman “photographer of photography”. I agree that this picture can be viewed as comment on being the female body that is looked at in photography. This can also be said about other photographs, for instance about her artist book *Portrait of Reputation*, created between 1975 and 1976 in Providence.

Bronfen’s point is that Woodman intends to make a statement about the role of photographed women in photography. In her pictures Woodman shows the attempts (which may be successful or not) to appear and disappear – in photography. They show – often, not always – the failed attempts to make something appear, that either evades to process of being the object that is photographed, or that participates in the process of being photographed, but in an ironic way. Thus Woodman’s models are aware that they are being photographed. She allows the viewers to know about what she thinks what happens in this process of being photographed, about being “flattened to fit paper” (Bakker, 2012) as Woodman said. This aspect is – although often implicit – an impulse for the feminist, empowering reading of her art.

I will not investigate this interpretation much further, instead I want to focus on the relationship between the body and the props used in the photographs. There are a few items that reappear in Woodman’s photography: Gloves, mirrors, flowers, food etc. What interests me is that the connection between the body and these items.

The role of props

Understanding the flower as symbol for vulva was the key for Bronfen’s interpretation of the discussed photo. She gave the flower a symbolic meaning. Certain aspects of the body were transferred to the flower and the flower was seen as metaphorical representation of the vulva.

I want to point out that there is not only a relation from the body to an object but vice versa also a relation from the object to the body. The theoretical background for this idea comes from philosophy of technology, namely Ernst Kapp’s book *Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik* from 1877. In this book Kapp develops the concept of organ projection (ger. Organprojektion). He proposes that all mechanisms are realised following organic examples (cf. Kapp, 2015, p. 3f.). Nevertheless Kapp is opposed to thinkers like Johann Gottfried von Herder, Arnold Gehlen, or André Leroi-Gourhan who share the concept of man as a deficient being (ger. Mängelwesen), that uses tools in order to protect its deficient body. Kapp writes that the human abilities to interact with nature were projected outside of the body. Human abilities were transferred to technological tools and thus became enhanced. This means that we can find the human ability to beat and carve in the hand axe for instance.

Kapp is pushing his notion of organ projection very far. The organ projection is not just limited to archaic tools, Kapps tries to understand complex inventions as organ projections as well: bridge construction is a projection of bone structures (cf. Kapp, 2015, p. 103ff.), railroads are a projection of blood vessels (cf. Kapp, 2015, p. 121ff.), and even the concepts of language and nation can be seen as transferred from the human

body (cf. Kapp, 2015, p. 247ff., 273ff.). Therefore the clue of Kapp is to be found in the subtitle of his book: *Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Kultur aus neuen Gesichtspunkten* – The genesis of culture from new points of view.

The important point in reference to Kapp is that there is an epistemological value assigned to organ projections. The understanding of tools allows to achieve an understanding of ourselves. All artefacts of culture have their origin in the human body. They do not represent a symbolic meaning; they are linked to the body. So, in order to understand the human body in reference to culture, it is necessary to interact: To use tools, to understand their meaning, to be an active participant in human culture.



Figure 5: Untitled (1979, New York)

Let us return to Francesca Woodman and try to try to shift Kapp's focus from philosophy of technology to art. I think the concept of organ projections is helpful to understand Francesca Woodman's photography better and I want to give an interpretation of an untitled photo from 1979, taken in New York (fig. 5). This picture was taken in front of a wall. The plaster has crumbled off the wall, the underlying bricks show a diagonal pattern. Woodman leans against the wall and wears a dress with a leaf pattern printed on it. The dress is halfway open and reveals her naked back. She holds the skeletonised

leaf of a tree² straight against her back. There is a similarity between the human spine with ribs and the leaf structure on a visual as well as on a formal level. There is even the metaphor “skeletonised leaf” that names the inner structure of a leaf and gains its meaning from the inner structure of the human body – the skeleton. Woodman evokes this analogy by holding the big leaf against her back at the position of her spine and by wearing the dress with the leaf pattern. There is a reference to something underneath the surface, hinted at by the wall’s crumbled plaster and the visible brick pattern underneath.

What is expressed with this analogy? I do not intend to suggest that a symbolic relationship between leaf, body (or spine) is the only relationship. I think that a transfer of meaning from the body to the leaf and back again is a plausible interpretation. Despite of the very straight lines in the picture – the tree leaf is held orthogonal to the wall cracks – Woodman’s body leans slightly to the right. So, her spine is not straight. Corresponding to the straight leaf this can be understood as the will to mismatch a geometrical order, or as the failure to do so. At the same time the geometrical structure is fragile and sensitive, the leaf may be destroyed if it is touched in a wrong way or at the wrong spot. Understanding the leaf as organ projection lets the viewer understand the leaf as an expression of the fragility of the body (bones can break, skin can tear etc.).

So, there are meanings that belong to the leaf, like straightness, geometricity, fragility etc. The meaning of the body is determined by how viewers interpret the props and their relationship to the body. We can speak of the body as being flexible or inflexible, for instance. Speaking of its flexibility as well as its inflexibility only makes sense in reference to the geometrical order of wall and leaf. So, body and organ projections unite to a body that transgresses the physical body of Francesca Woodman. Therefore her self-staging involves the body as well as the props, which can lead to a comprehensive interpretation when the props are interpreted as organ projection – and not just as visual metaphors.

I think this interpretation holds. The meaning of the body is influenced and informed by everything that can be seen in the picture: the tree leaf, the dress, the wall, the brick structure of the wall. I do not want to propose this interpretation as *the* interpretation of Woodman, but as *an* interpretation that is plausible.

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² I thought that Woodman holds a fish spine in this picture, but I follow Schor (2014, p. 44) who describes the item as tree leaf.

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