# SPACE, PLACE AND HYBRIDITY IN FRANCESCA WOODMAN'S PHOTOGRAPHY

ROUTLEDGE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

VANESSA LONGDEN

# Space, Place and Hybridity in Francesca Woodman's Photography

Offering readers a nuanced perception of Francesca Woodman's work while challenging long-held psycho-biographical notions about her identity, this book provides an alternative critical enquiry that foregrounds lived experience, materiality and gender.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, the study examines the complex relationship between the body and place in Woodman's self-representational photography by combining the history of photography, gender studies and spatial studies. The author provides a highly original visual analysis by situating Woodman's practice within her wider cultural network, including Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Gordon Matta-Clark, Carrie Mae Weems and Agnes Denes. Highlighting the artist's visual juxtapositions, the book emphasises the socio-political complexities of placemaking and challenges how readers think about the traditional art-historical canon. The book will be of interest to scholars working in art history and photography, as well as urban, spatial and gender studies.

**Vanessa Longden** obtained her doctorate in the History and Theory of Photography at Durham University. She is the recipient of Leverhulme Trust funding and has published widely on bodies, identities and the notion of place in photography. She works at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, where she specialises in Practice Research. *Space, Place and Hybridity in Francesca Woodman's Photography* is her first academic monograph.

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Vanessa Longden

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Designed cover image: Francesca Woodman, From Space$^2$ or Space$^2$, 1976, from the Space$^2$ series, 5 1/4 x 5 1/4 in. (13.335 x 13.335 cm), gelatin silver print © Woodman Family Foundation/DACS, London.

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# Preface

Many of the ideas in *Space, Place and Hybridity in Francesca Woodman's Photography* developed from my doctoral research, which prompted me to untangle my thoughts and ideas about what we think we know about Woodman and her compelling photographic collection.

I, like so many others, was first drawn to the "haunting" aesthetics the photographer's work and compelled by the romanticised narrative of a talent burning brightly, only to be extinguished so suddenly. Yet the more I read about Woodman, the more I realised how little I actually knew. As we shall see, it is impossible to know the "real" Woodman (whatever that might mean). Instead, her identity shifts and reformulates through the interlayering of narratives, critiques and discourses, in which I am also implicated. This point is not lost on me. Try as we might, we can never get out of place.[1]

I have always been drawn to "messy" interconnections. Focusing on the dust, deterioration and grit in Woodman's photographs enabled me to disrupt the narrative of the tortured, young female artist that once captured my attention. Woodman's work was not neat or orderly: she dragged herself across surfaces, hung from fixtures and curled into compromised positions. She jostled with her architectural surroundings, suggesting that photographing was as much a haptic process as it was a visual one. If anything, the spaces she inhabited—the derelict houses, lofts and entangled natural environments—offer a more compelling insight into the artist's fascinating images than the focus on her (dis)appearing body. But that is what I relish about looking at photographs: the implication of the viewer, the curation of the world, the shared sight, the shrinkage between past(s) and present(s) and the numerous unknowns beyond the photograph's borders. We are always left with more questions than answers, and countless possibilities to see with a fresh perspective.

In order to know more about the rough edges in Woodman's work, we need an approach that can account for the 'mess' and read against the grain. Avery F. Gordon's sublime publication, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, and Jane Blocker's equally inspiring *Where Is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile* were pivotal to this enquiry, enabling me to think critically about the structures of power and influence that shape past perception and leave a mark on the present. In this sense, Woodman's photographs are not traces of disappearance; they allow what is absent to do its work.

This publication focuses on Woodman's image-making in the United States, c. 1970s and early 1980s (with Rome as a minor but meaningful locus) and is structured around notions of space—interior, liminal, exterior—with dust, trace and hybridity serving as interlinking themes and disruptive forces. It should be noted that this is not a traditional

history or biography of the artist. Woven between theoretical texts are close analytical readings of Woodman's photographs, alongside contemporaries—some of whom intersected the same landscapes during her career, others earlier—the visual traces, influences and differences can still be glimpsed within these comparative constellations.

How to approach this book: close readings are interwoven with contextual sections; images are considered non-chronologically so that motifs (dust, trace, threshold, hybridity) can be visualised as a continuum across sites rather than confined to dates or locations. Chapter 1 focuses on dust and domesticity; Chapter 2 on trace and (sub)urban images; Chapter 3 on hybridity within natural imaginaries; while the Conclusion returns to touch as a method and ethic. A brief note on terminology: I use '(sub)urban' to signal that, in the 1970s, city and suburb were at once separate and intertwined; 'trace' (after Barthes, Sontag and others) as index and residue and 'haunting' (after Gordon) to name the felt return of disavowed relations. Posthumanism appears where relevant (defined in Chapter 3) to mark Woodman's human–nonhuman entanglements. I am interested in more-than-human interconnections and the camera as part of a broader material ecology, not in celebrating technology for its own sake.

Primary images are reproduced courtesy of the Woodman Family Foundation, the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark, the studios of Judy Chicago and Carrie Mae Weems, respectively. Additional materials derive from exhibition catalogues, artists' writings, criticism and interviews. I am particularly grateful for my early conversation with George Woodman in 2016, which offered valuable insight into his daughter's work and life.

It is strange to think how Woodman and her work have been such a constant in my life up to this point; despite her fleetingness. I cannot help but feel 'attached' to her images in some way, although I never knew her and never will. While I think her images are captivating, disruptive and extraordinary, I do not want to isolate her further through notions of eminence. While much has been written about Woodman, there is simultaneously not enough. I hope readers will gain new insights and perspectives into her photography, and reflect on how these intertextual, materially dense images create space and teach us to read disorder not as lack but as a site of relation, possibility and radical empathy.

I am indebted to my parents, with whom I have shared my thoughts and authorial space. Thank you for your unwavering encouragement, understanding and love. Words are not enough. I also wish to thank David Hamilton, Sarah Wittams Howarth and Jayne Lockwood, for instilling in me a deep curiosity for art and a passion for literary theory.

I have also been extremely fortunate to have inspiring mentors and friends during my time at Lancaster University and Durham University. These discussions were seminal to the formulation of my thoughts on photography, space, place and hybridity. I am grateful to those who listened, offered insightful feedback and provided reassurance—particularly Patrizia Di Bello and Marie-Claire Barnet, who saw the book's early potential, and Rosemary Deller, for attentively copy-editing and proofreading the initial draft.

My sincerest thanks and appreciation go to all those who have helped the book become a reality. Special thanks go to the late George Woodman, who was so generous with his time and insights, and to the Woodman Family Foundation for kindly granting me permission to reproduce Woodman's work. Celia Lê and Rehan Miskci, your diligent support is truly appreciated. Thank you also to Judy Chicago, Megan Schultz and Michael Apolo Gomez for the use of *Womanhouse* in Chapter 1; Jessamyn Fiore and the Canadian Centre for Architecture, for the use of Gordon Matta-Clark's images; Carrie Mae Weems and Jeffrey Hoone for the use of *Family Pictures and Stories* in Chapter 2; and Violet Saxon at White Columns, New York, for making connections happen.

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I am also fortunate to know and work alongside wonderful colleagues at the School of Arts and Imagination at Lancaster University, whose research continually inspires and makes an integral difference to others. Heartfelt thanks also go to Kate Bailey, Richard Brook, Kirsty Drew, Nick Dunn, Maryam Ghorbankarimi, Gill Harrison, Jane Quinn and Nelli Stavropoulou, who have been so generous with their time, support and friendship over the years. Lastly, to Rachel: our enduring spark.

We have a lot of ground to cover in the following pages, let's take our place.

## Note

1 As an author, I write from a situated perspective. I use 'we' as a readerly and scholarly 'we' that names a shared labour of looking rather than a universal claim.

# Introduction

## Where Is Francesca Woodman?

Refusal is her first gesture. At 13, Francesca Woodman (1958–1981) picked up a camera, the Yashica Mat-124G was a gift from her father, and staged a self-portrait that withholds the very thing a self-portrait promises: her face. Taken in Boulder, Colorado, in 1972, *Self-Portrait at Thirteen* (1972) depicts the artist seated to the left-hand of the frame (Fig. 0.1). It is rare to see the artist fully clothed and so well-defined, as Woodman is renowned for capturing blurred images of her predominantly nude form.


*Figure 0.1* Francesca Woodman. *Self-Portrait at Thirteen*, c. 1972, 6 3/4 × 6 11/16 in. (17.145 × 16.988 cm). Gelatin silver print © Woodman Family Foundation/DACS, London.

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She wears a cable-knit jumper and dark, loose-fitting trousers. Aside from her clothing, another compelling element in this image is how Woodman shields her face from the camera. It is unclear which way she turns her head due to the long locks of hair obscuring her features. The deliberate concealment of her face creates an air of uncertainty. How can viewers be sure that this is the artist if they cannot see her facial features? Masking the face also obstructs the viewer's gaze, creating a sense of distance between the subject and the spectator.

Moreover, by covering her face with her hair, Woodman subverts the traditional function of a self-portrait. Where is the viewer to look if they cannot see the sitter's face? This aversion to showing her face is a prominent theme throughout Woodman's work and contributes to the uncanny atmosphere of many of her images. But the lack of identifying features also raises issues relating to notions of 'clarity' and 'artistic authenticity'. As I argued in a previous article, the issue of locating identity in self-portraiture resides partly in 'viewership expectation' in contrast to 'actuality'. Viewers receive more questions than answers when looking at Woodman's images.

> Spectators want to know more but end up knowing less … and that is unsettling because not only does it suggest that there is no singular or unitary 'truth' to be taken from an image, but it destabilizes the notion of 'reality' itself and what spectators expect from it.[1]

The status of this image is also significant. Woodman printed her own photographs and often scrawled captions in the margins of the frames, like *Self-Portrait at Thirteen*, which later became the photograph's title once exhibited or analysed by critics and scholars. Images with no annotation are referred to as *Untitled*. But the afterlives of photographs are complicated, especially when we consider who selects the images for exhibition following the artist's death. Similarly, to think that the artist is somehow knowable through her photographs is a mistake. The image spectators encounter is not Francesca Woodman, but a single representation of the artist taken in a specific time and place.

If Woodman's identity is ambiguous, then what else can the viewer gain from an image like *Self-Portrait at Thirteen*? Looking closer, spectators notice Woodman's right arm bends at the elbow and drapes over the curved armrest. Her fingers and right sleeve are bathed in light. Meanwhile, a dark shadow, which is possibly the shutter cord, extends from her other hand towards the camera, creating a blurred effect in the foreground of the image. Light and shade culminate to create an air of mystery and self-dramatisation around the artist. The wisps of grey and black in the foreground echo the shafts of light which fall on the sitter from the top-left of the frame.

Similarly, this out-of-focus, smoke-like, effect contrasts with the solidity of her setting, as well as the texture of her cable-knit jumper, emphasising the depth and structured composition of the photograph. The artist's location is a vital component of creating photographic depth. The image can be divided up into geometric segments through the layering of furniture and fixtures, or the cropping of the camera. The glossy wood of the seat runs horizontally across the image, echoing the shaft of light beneath the seat and the floor. A white wooden square, possibly a wooden panel or a canvas, cuts the top segment of the image into three; more geometric shapes—circles within squares—recalls the composition of the square photograph and the borders of the frame. In Woodman's image, space is squared, cut and divided by carefully arranged matter.

Scholars and critics have written a considerable amount on Woodman since her death at the age of 22. Despite Woodman's complex photographs, many commentators continue to speculate on the intent of her images, with the knowledge of the artist's depression and suicide overshadowing her work. But as Claire Raymond correctly notes, 'Woodman's cult status as a prodigy, literally an otherworldly phenomenon, and the dramatic, self-imposed truncation of her career by suicide haunt most critical readings of her work'.[2] Woodman's penchant for black-and-white photography, vintage clothing, decrepit locations and for visually blurring her form—alluding to the notion of disappearance—enhances these notions of 'haunting' and 'otherworldliness'. However, Betty Woodman maintains her daughter's 'life wasn't a series of miseries … It's a basic fallacy that her death is what she was all about, and people read that into the photographs. They psychoanalyse them'.[3] As I will show, psychoanalytical approaches of Woodman's work romanticise the artist's juvenile status and contribute to her isolation and position as an artistic prodigy. The desire to understand the artist's creative intention, or to decipher photographic meaning, will always be a topic of concern. Attempts to know Woodman through the images alone risk reinforcing mythologising readings and foreclosing other lines of enquiry.

Identity-oriented approaches towards Woodman's work are insufficient on their own for the questions I pursue here. First, the notion of identity is difficult to define and its relation to Woodman's artistic biography is equally unclear. Various social, cultural and political factors influence identity but, as I noted previously, it is also intrinsically linked to notions of representation. If identity is a fleeting and everchanging entity, as poststructuralists argue, then attempting to define the artist through her images suggests she is somehow knowable and unchanging.

Second, there is a misunderstanding that Woodman's photographs were diaristic snapshots and that her motives were visually transparent. When faced with Woodman's images, Elizabeth Gumport writes: 'Living is "erasing"; dying a way of ensuring that what was will continue to be, of fixing certain things in place'.[4] Woodman, Gumport continues, reverses the traditional arrangement of life and death by leaving a series of photographs behind. Instead of disappearing, the artist leaves photographic traces of her existence. But Gumport's reading raises concerns over the fatalistic and intentional documentation of Woodman's passing. Equating Woodman's blurred images with a prefiguration of death is ethically fraught and largely speculative. Furthermore, readers may misinterpret such readings, thinking they offer a 'true' depiction of the subject.

Third, the dominant tropes which define the artist are superficial and generalised. In addition to being defined as a 'ghost' who 'haunts' the spectator, Woodman is labelled as a 'schoolgirl' and a 'temptress' throughout critical accounts.[5] These descriptions draw on Woodman's biography but render the artist as a series of reductive stereotypes. By offering so many photographs of herself, Woodman's work undermines any attempt to fix her image according to the spectator's desires. Displaying her nude body through various fleeting gestures suggests that 'identities are temporarily "occupied" and are never fully "owned"'.[6] The problem, Judith Butler argues, is 'the presumed universality and unity of the subject of feminism is effectively undermined by the constraints of the representational discourse in which it functions'.[7] In other words, conventional ideas of representation trap interpretations of Woodman and her work. While I agree with Harriet Riches, who argues the artist plays with the theme of identity and subjectivity, this is just one facet of her photography.[8] Focussing solely on identity-orientated approaches, scholars risk isolating Woodman within a truncated biographical narrative that does little to

develop alternative readings of her photographs and overlooks other compelling themes, such as place, materiality and feeling.

Discussing the wider discursive field surrounding Woodman's work, Claire Raymond notes how, 'we see in different critical responses the use of Woodman as a figure for each decade's dominant trope'.[9] Initially, Raymond notes, Woodman was interpreted as a feminist figure by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, reflecting cultural feminism of the 1980s. Phelan placed the artist in line with 1990s trauma theory. Finally, Chris Townsend reads Woodman as a 'schoolgirl', a twenty-first-century *femme-enfant*, who was not aware of her talent. Readers should not misunderstand Raymond's comment. It is not that these critical 'tropes' are attached to specific 'decades', but that scholars have employed Woodman's work as vehicles for prominent academic trends, as well as convenient methods to categorise the artist. The artist's initial trope for photographing herself is a common, yet implicit, factor in the critical responses Raymond outlined above. As seen in Fig. 0.1, Woodman's tendency to capture herself lends itself to identity-orientated readings. However, photographing herself almost exclusively accentuates her reputation as an 'isolated' artist. Woodman does not appear to fit easily within photographic space, or even into any established critical discourse. She flits to the borders of the frame, covers herself in wallpaper, crouches beneath furniture and darts across deteriorating interiors. It is this notion of 'not fitting in' which interests me the most and which other critical accounts overlook. The issue of placement and fitting in—both within physical locations, between the borders of the photograph and within the photographic canon—is just as problematic for Woodman now as it was when she began her photographic career in 1972.

Turning critical attention to the places she photographed enables scholars to move away from psycho-biographical notions of identity, gain an increasingly nuanced understanding of Woodman's work in conjunction with her contemporaries and produce new alternative readings around the body, place and gender. Additionally, the spaces Woodman photographed must be accounted for as they offer the viewer 'the flexibility to capture *all* the multiple dimensions of subjectivity, while also providing the means of theorising subjective mutability'.[10] Kirby continues, 'we plot ourselves a destination, and inevitably find ourselves caught up in following the very outline we thought delimited ourselves'.[11] But Woodman does not appear to be limited by space or the trajectories she maps. While the boundaries between the artist's body and the places she occupies do not always seem to accommodate one another, they nevertheless shift as the artist wrestles against and merges with her surroundings. As Robyn Longhurst succinctly puts it,

> bodies and spaces construct each other in complex and nuanced ways. It is impossible to talk about bodies without talking about space, and vice versa. Bodies are performed, resisted, disciplined and oppressed not simply in but through space.[12]

The unwelcoming nature of her messy interiors, distorted spaces and entangled natural environments enhance Woodman's 'dislocated' status. But the artist's depiction of space also challenges onlookers' expectations of what it means, and how it feels, to be embodied within a particular time and place.

Taking a broadly chronological approach, I argue there are three further interlinking factors which contribute to Woodman's 'displaced' status in critical discourse: the first is an overreliance on the artist's originary narrative, which underpins critical discourse of her work and binds Woodman's photography to a linear teleology centred around issues of suicide, loss and trauma. The second is the myth of the young 'artistic genius' and her

subsequent canonicity which simultaneously establishes Woodman as a figure worthy of study and isolates the artist through her eminent and romanticised status. Significantly, integrating Woodman into a pre-existing artistic discourse not only attempts to understand and define her, but it is also a method of power and control. Third, it is essential to consider the wider discursive field surrounding Woodman's work, which I categorise into three subsections: the first being psychoanalytical interpretations of Woodman's photography, which typified 1990s trauma theory. The second part considers notions of performativity influenced by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), which dominated the discourse on Woodman in the early 2000s. Finally, I outline Woodman's reception following the onset of the digital age, which resulted in a broader public engagement with her photography, produced less homogenised critical approaches and emphasised the sense of transience in Woodman's work.

When considering Woodman's oeuvre and the problem of placement, I suggest the artist's act of photographing is a method of 'working through' her surroundings—both physically and in an attempt to understand her habitats—which transforms her supposed confining environments into flexible sites of visual exploration. I should note that I am not attempting to 'fix' Woodman in a particular discursive space or emancipate the artist from art history in any way. Instead, I am more concerned with challenging the constructs that shape narratives of belonging. By presenting an alternative dialogue between the artist and unexpected spaces and structures, this, in turn, contests the melancholy psycho-biographical analysis that overshadows her work.

## Biography and Early Reception

Before turning to the broader thematic discourse surrounding Woodman's photography, it is necessary to outline scholars' originary narrative of the artist and the initial critical response to her work. The American photographer was born in April 1958 to George (1932–2017) and Betty Woodman (1930–2018), who were accomplished artists in their own right. Betty was a high-profile ceramicist and teacher. George formally trained as a painter, and later turned to photography after his daughter's death. Francesca and her elder brother, Charles (b. 1955), were raised in Denver, Colorado, and often spent their summers in Florence, Italy. The children learnt about art history through visits to museums and galleries. Woodman spent her last year at college in Rome as part of an honours programme which was aided by her fluency in Italian and family connections with local artists and academics. A highly inquisitive student, she skipped a year of high school to attend Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence (1975–1979) where she majored in Photography at Pilgrim Mills Studios. After graduating, she briefly moved to New York City with her friend, Betsy Berne, to establish her artistic career. Here, Woodman photographed, primarily, in her apartment and made a living as a secretary, a photographer's assistant and a nude model.[13] In January 1981, after a series of failed grant proposals and bouts of depression, Woodman committed suicide by jumping from her apartment window on the Lower East Side of New York City. She left behind over 800 works, made between 1972 and 1980, in addition to her first art pamphlet *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* (SDIG), which was published earlier that same month by Synapse Press. Copies of the publication were handed out at the artist's funeral.[14] This narrative implicitly informs readings of her photographs, particularly within exhibition contexts. For instance, the Tate's 2014 ARTISTS ROOMS exhibition drew extra attention to Woodman's death and