

A Swimmer Between Two Worlds
Francesca Woodman's Maps of Interior Space

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Throughout her photographic series from the 1970s, Francesca Woodman maps her interior space, revealing the physical dimension of the psychic. Often blurred and seeming to blend into interiors which fail to contain her, Woodman's photographs evoke a haunting, haunted world wherein her own physical self appears to vanish—or emerge—before our eyes. These images suggest that within her own psyche her sense of self was permeable. Yet unlike her predecessor in surrealist photography, Claude Cahun, Woodman's sense of a changeable self was not expressed through playful disguise. Instead, through the blurry images and the captured movements, she reveals an inner cartography that circles around variations on the same evasive persona. Her series are made up of sequences shot mostly in old houses and usually featuring herself, though she rarely shows her face. Their titles, *Providence*, *House*, *Space*², and *On Being an Angel*, come from their locations and from her experiments with the body in space and the limits of everyday reality. Her work could be seen as a personal meditation on the opening question of André Breton's *Nadja*—"Who am I?"—a book Woodman reportedly read attentively.¹ It shows how effectively this young American's practices intersect with Surrealism, simultaneously lending focus to Woodman's work and showing how surrealist principles have persisted past World War Two, particularly in the work of women artists and writers like Woodman.²

Woodman's early life was spent in Boulder, Colorado. Her artist-parents—her mother was a well-known potter and her father a painter—took her on regular trips to Italy, where she returned as a college student. After studying at the Rhode Island School of Design, she spent a summer at the MacDowell Colony in New

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Hampshire, the oldest artists' colony in the United States, and moved to New York City, where she lived until her death by suicide in 1981 at age twenty-two. Most of her photographs were taken when she was an undergraduate. Over 800 remain archived, from her earliest self-portrait shot when she was thirteen in Boulder to photographs taken shortly before her death in New York. Many of these were created as homework assignments, what Rosalind Krauss calls her "problem sets," explaining how Woodman "internalized the problem, subjectivized it, rendered it as personal as possible."³ Chris Townsend has convincingly established Woodman's credentials as an accomplished practitioner of photography within the post-surrealist and post-minimalist traditions, an artist who used technique effectively to disturb the typical parameters of space and time of her medium. Yet her images also tell stories, and it is their narrative function as much as her practice that links her directly to surrealist precedents in ways that extend the movement into the 1970s, despite its fifty-year distance from its development in Paris by a group including Breton, Robert Desnos, and Louis Aragon, together with such artists as the American photographer Man Ray and the German painter Max Ernst.

I will examine Woodman's ties to Surrealism here both in terms of her practice in these photographic series and through her insistent study of alternative worlds or dimensions, with the aid of Michel Foucault's comments on the surrealist movement from an interview conducted shortly after Breton's death in 1966.⁴ Woodman's photographs frequently convey intense moments of a body's experience and thus illustrate visually what Foucault ascribed to Breton's practice of automatic writing: "what we really owe to him alone," notes Foucault, "is the discovery of a space that is not that of philosophy, nor of literature, nor of art, but that of experience." Foucault describes Breton as "a swimmer between two words," who "traverses an imaginary space that had never been discovered before him."⁵ If we substitute "images" or, even more pertinently, "worlds" for "words," we could be considering a description of Woodman's surrealist narrative sequences, in which her images and the shifting positioning of her body function as words and phrases.

Narrative Pictures: The Stories In-Between

Woodman's serial images encourage the viewer to link them together because of the way this technique, as Margaret Sundell notes, "pushes the limits of the photographic frame."⁶ They do this both in series and as individual shots. The photographs in which Woodman shows her own body in movement challenge photography's link to the real as a familiar, knowable entity, in the same way that Breton's theories challenged the representational aspect of words. Just as Breton sought to tease out the uncanny quality of the unconscious through the automatic

process, Woodman used her photographs to defamiliarize her own body within familiar spaces, to make it appear ghostly while still very much alive, since the emphasis tilts towards emergence and creation over disappearance. She used her photographs as a kind of writing, aware of photography's indexical properties, its persistent and tangible reminder of the precise instant in the past when the shutter was depressed, as well as its elegiac quality and capacity to communicate ghostliness—of the possible psychic coincidence of past and future in an intensified present moment.⁷ Photography is inherently more like writing than like painting, particularly in the form known as the photogram—popularized by Man Ray as the “rayograph,” involving the placement of objects directly onto a light-sensitive surface. Literally “light writing,” the photogram comes close to the older term calligram which, Foucault argues, “aspires playfully to efface the oldest oppositions to our alphabetical civilization: to show and to name; to shape and to say; to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to signify; to look and to read.”⁸

Jacques Derrida, who has written on the photogram, poses a similar opposition between speech and words in “Force and Signification,” where he describes poetry as having “the power to arouse speech from its slumber as sign.”⁹ The implication is that poetry allows signs to say more than the words that contain them, partly through the animating quality of their juxtapositions—the in-between spaces that Foucault ascribes to Breton, and that I am ascribing to Woodman's series. Krauss also underscores photography's indexical quality by suggesting that photography shares in the immediacy of the “raw and naked act” of automatic writing because it presents “a photochemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a manner parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables.”¹⁰ Furthermore, Krauss argues that through framing, or through the positioning of the image in space, photography introduces the sign that can move from text to image to body.

The series that seems most like a repository for Woodman's working ideas during her undergraduate years takes its name, *Providence*, from the city where she went to college. To the extent that this title also reflects a play on the word providence, defined as “being cared for by God,” Woodman shows her sense of humor, since most of the photographs are situated in a house in a state of utter dilapidation. Three of the *Providence* series have captions linking photography with piano playing, establishing a correspondence between one medium and another and highlighting the way in which her series ought to be read linearly like music. Each note, each phrase, interconnects with those surrounding it, the way Woodman's bodies interact with their surroundings, at times almost animating the interiors where she situates them. Two of these captions state: “And I had forgotten how to read music”; and “I

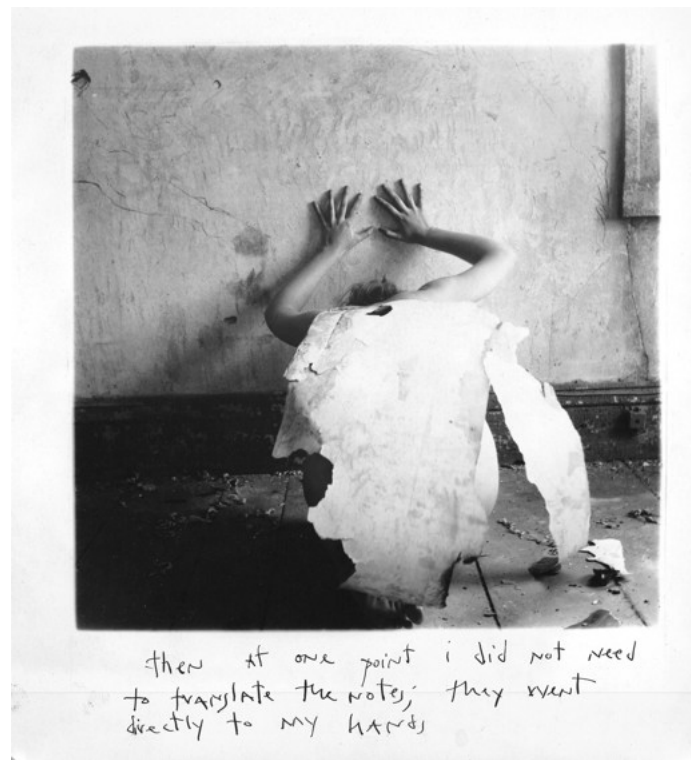


Fig. 1. Francesca Woodman, “then at one point i did not need to translate the notes; they went directly to my hands,” Providence, Rhode Island, 1976. Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman

stopped playing the piano.” One shows a clothed woman with only the lower part of her face visible, holding a dried leaf in an outstretched hand. The other shows a chair beneath a mirror and a heart-shaped pincushion hanging on a peeling wall. These two images, which do not relate visually to music, sustain music nonetheless as the underlying reference in the third, most striking photograph of the three, which is annotated with the handwritten caption: “Then at one point i did not need to translate the notes; they went directly to my hands.” The notes here clearly refer to music yet also refer to written notes, the kind that pass through the body when writing automatically, a practice described by Foucault as “that raw and naked act, [when] the writers’ freedom is fully committed.”¹¹

The passing *directly* to the hands in this third captioned *Providence* photograph devoted to music mimics the process of automatic writing, which Breton defined in the “Manifesto of Surrealism” as “[p]sychic automatism in its pure state, by which ones proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other

manner—the actual functioning of thought.”¹² What Breton leaves out is the body in between the thought and its expression—a body that in Surrealism was usually represented by a woman—as in the anonymous photograph *L'Écriture automatique* which adorned the March 1927 cover of the journal *La Révolution surréaliste*—and to which women gave acknowledgement in their writings and art, as I have argued elsewhere.¹³ In Woodman's image and caption “the actual functioning of thought” and the “psychic automatism in its pure state” are not limited to the mind but work primarily through a body that happens to be female, and specifically through the hands, the parts of the body that make writing, music, and pictures. She confirms a comment made by Breton in 1921 that automatic writing was “a veritable photograph of thought.”¹⁴

With her caption to this third *Providence* photograph about music Woodman enacts another aspect of surrealist automatism that is also inherent to experienced musicianship—the ability to produce music on an instrument with which one is so intimately familiar that no thought or premeditation needs to be involved. Desnos, in his automatic performances in the early “period of sleeps” that inaugurated surrealist automatism in the fall of 1922, was reportedly as fluent with his voice in his spoken, hypnotic trances as any player of the piano. Recalling those meetings in a series of radio interviews in 1952, Breton commented that “[e]veryone who witnessed Desnos' daily plunges into what was truly the *unknown* was swept up into a kind of giddiness; we all hung on what he might say, what he might feverishly scribble on a scrap of paper.”¹⁵ Those who witnessed these public plunges into an altered state or a different world vouch for their authenticity, including Aragon and Man Ray.¹⁶ It is also the case that, like an experienced player of the piano, particularly someone adept at improvisation, Desnos' lifetime of reading and writing and his urgent desire to make art must have informed his seemingly oracular speaking and drawing in Breton's dark apartment that fall. The same was true for the automatic writings of Breton himself, including the automatic text he co-wrote with Paul Eluard in 1930. When they wrote *The Immaculate Conception* each session began with an idea out of which their untrammelled writing stemmed; it was prepared yet this preparation did not detract from the automatic flow of mysterious images that resulted from this practice.¹⁷

Surrealist automatism could be spontaneous, heightened by the experience of giving oneself free reign to create, while at the same time the resultant work tended to reflect the writer's or artist's skill. The beauty of many of Man Ray's early eponymous “rayographs” no doubt had something to do with his artistic skill. Yet while the practice was premeditated, chance played an important part in the images that emerged from this photographic automatism, just as chance was a key element

in Ernst's early collages and in his creation of the technique of *frottage*, which involved rubbing objects like floorboards that happened to be at hand. For a young artist like Woodman, who took her training seriously, setting up the work definitely played a part in its success; and yet the set-up involved a practice that promoted a similar receptivity to chance, as in the textual automatic productions of Surrealists like Desnos and Breton, and the visual automatic practices of Man Ray and Ernst. Woodman might not have known the work of Desnos, since translations of his writings have only recently become available, but she definitely knew Breton and she arguably knew the work of photographers linked to Surrealism, such as Man Ray.¹⁸ As this particular caption indicates, "then at one point i did not need to translate the notes; they went directly to my hands," Woodman meant the practice to dictate its own process and to roll out with the fluency of Desnos' tongue-twisting automatic poems created during the "period of sleeps."¹⁹

The scribbled words at the bottom of this third captioned *Providence* photograph emphasize the hands and what they do. They also identify the nude figure as a maker, someone whose body acts as a vehicle for expression, who gives her body free rein while retaining observant consciousness of the body's process, not unlike Desnos' practices in 1922: "No longer playing by instinct, her body has become an automatic producer of images," comments David Levi Strauss.²⁰ She embraced the tie of the body in the automatic process to a woman's body—in other words, while claiming the right to psychic creativity and production predominantly exercised by men in Surrealism's early years.

As a movement Surrealism emphasized collaborative activity, beginning with the co-writing of the first surrealist automatic text in 1918, *The Magnetic Fields*, by Breton and Philippe Soupault, and continuing with the early experiments of the group in Breton's Paris apartment. This emphasis on collaboration also involved the reader-viewer, as Breton's recipe for how to create automatic writing in the "Manifesto" indicates, since it calls on readers to participate in this new activity. Others besides Breton wrote their own versions of the "Manifesto," presenting personalized definitions of the movement's terms, including automatism, from Louis Aragon's *Une vague de rêves* and *Challenge to Painting* to Max Ernst's "What is Surrealism." Desnos, through his automatic performances, arguably contributed the most to the understanding we have of the movement founded on a practice involving mind and body making or speaking and thinking; this helped to establish the group's work as open and inclusive, according to what I have called the "surrealist conversation."²¹

Woodman enters the surrealist conversation through her implicit redefinitions of automatic exploration as occurring in photography as well as in

musical or textual improvisation; she takes a turn examining the prominent surrealist metaphor of the two-way mirror or windowpane, introduced first by Breton and Soupault as the title of the first section of *The Magnetic Fields*, “The Unsilvered Glass,” and then consolidated in the “Manifesto” with the first automatic sentence ever to occur to Breton as he was falling asleep, “a phrase, if I may be so bold,” he writes, “*which was knocking at the window.*”²² The phrase itself, “There is a man cut in two by the window,” clearly emblemizes the double awareness of the waking and dreaming mind that the Surrealists sought to capture at its liminal moment, poised between consciousness and the unconscious.²³ For Woodman, photographs could function like windows onto the psychic process, expressed in a corporeal language linked to the speaker who, in this case, performed both in front of the camera and behind it. The “notes” of this musical body-ballet “went directly,” as though via automatism—both prepared and free, in the style of her surrealist predecessors—into her hands.

Of Woodman’s three captioned *Providence* shots connecting the creative processes to one another—music, writing, photography—the last one tells the

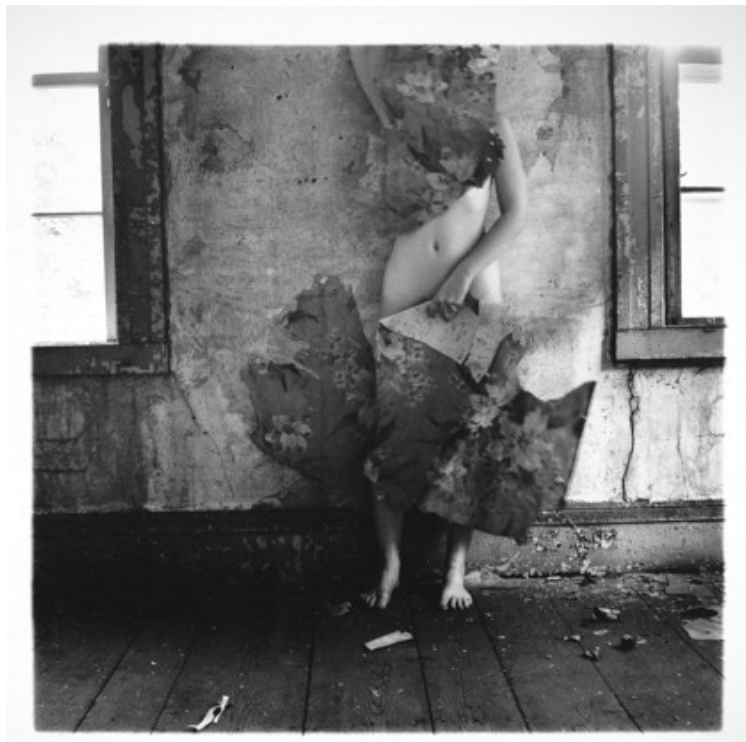


Fig. 2. Francesca Woodman, from *Space²*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976. Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman

most coherent story. “Then at one point i did not need to translate the notes; they went directly to my hands” fills in the loss evoked in the notes on the preceding photographs—the forgetting (of reading music) and the stopping (of piano playing)—and substitutes the direct transmission of creativity for loss. Despite the forgetting and stopping, music can still transfuse this body because she has maintained its surrealistic receptivity, its openness to the music of what Breton called the surrealist voice in the “Manifesto,” comparing the first Surrealists to so many “modest *recording instruments*” attuned to the capture of automatic sounds, words, and images.²⁴ Woodman’s phrase transposes the written note into a visual image that figures a kind of birth—as though she had been born whole and adult into this abandoned space. The photograph portrays the artist as a reversed Botticelli Venus protected by her shell, except that her back is to the viewer and only the beauty of her hands shows. Woodman overwrites the viewer’s knowledge of art to show how she has revised past figurations of woman in a work of art, transforming her from passive model to active creator. One way in which she does this consistently in her work is through the hiding of the model’s face, thus connecting the viewer more directly with the body and with that body’s experience, with its acts.

The central figure crouches in front of a decaying wall, her hands outstretched, her naked back covered by a piece of fallen wallpaper. This Venus is not a perfect blonde, she is a disheveled brunette; she has emerged not from the sea but from a moldy old house situated not on the Mediterranean but in New England, and her shell is manmade, not natural. The Italy that inspired Botticelli also gave Francesca her name; she spent time there as a child and again a year after this photograph was taken, during a junior year abroad, where it became another setting for her work. Botticelli’s Renaissance Italy serves as a recognizable cultural geography that Woodman overwrites with her vision of Venus as a figure defined by culture rather than nature; she portrays Venus as a modern artist whose birth is self-generated even if, like Botticelli’s modest beauty, she remains self-protective.

Despite the decay, the architectural features that anchor the image—the baseboard, an old telephone outlet and the edge of a window frame—suggest that this neglected house is surviving and remains capable of containing this human creature, head bent, hair tousled, and whose shadow shows she is real, even if the setting lends her a mythological air. If we read this image as we would a map, the location we attempt to reach lies in the indentation between the figure’s shoulder blades—at the site of a circular tear in the wallpaper shell—which draws the eye upwards to the head, a rhyming dark space but one that is full, sharing only with the torn paper the implication of receptivity. Then, from the lowered head the eye travels upwards to the hands, spread outwards, supporting the body against the

stained wall. The wall's ridges, gouges made to hold wallpaper glue, rhyme with the fingers because, like this body within its shell, they were intended to remain hidden, as underpinnings holding up the façade.

The companion piece to this third *Providence* image comes from a different series, *Space²*. It dates from 1977 yet seems to belong together with the third captioned *Providence* photograph from 1976 because it appears to have been shot in the same room and again features a nude woman and wallpaper. This time, however, the woman stands against the wall facing the viewer and holds the wallpaper over her lower and upper torso in place of Botticelli's Venus's hand and hair. Two windows symmetrically flank the figure; uneven floorboards lead the eye to her bare feet; the baseboard buttresses the crumbling wall. Even though the wallpaper appears to be attached to the wall at first, it becomes evident upon closer examination that it just looks that way, it just seems that the woman is emerging from the wall like a ghostly figure from ancient myths about transformation or from seventeenth-century fairy tales or the eighteenth-century gothic. The house's decrepit state reminds the viewer of gothic precedents in which the supernatural was normalized and houses seemed alive; at the same time this house has been stripped of the patriarchal menace sometimes linked to the gothic—the body that blends into and emerges from it at will is far from its prisoner-victim.²⁵ The viewer is invited to consider the inner geography that this house-body reveals: what is it like to inhabit such a body, capable of emerging fully formed into this ruin? These questions stem from the narrative function of her images in series, which tell stories: of young girls at play in ramshackle houses, for example, laying claim to spaces from which, paradoxically, all signs of domesticity have vanished, leaving them free.

Experience

“We are now in a time when experience—and the thought that is inseparable from it—are developing with an extraordinary richness,” explained Foucault about intellectual life after Breton, “in both a unity and a dispersion that wipe out the boundaries of provinces that were once well established.”²⁶ Indeed, through the manner in which the *Providence* photographs and those in Woodman's *Space²* series map her interior space through the marker of her own body, they manage to meet Breton's premise for automatism as writing “in any other manner.” This sort of immediate physical articulation as a kind of automatic writing was also well described by Foucault when he characterized Breton's defining activity of automatism as plunging directly into innovative imaginative space: “The ethic of writing no longer comes from what one has to say, from the ideas that one expresses, but from the very act of writing.”²⁷ Woodman works at the edges of boundary distinctions in a

surrealistic style and allows chance to guide her in the act of making photographic images.

“I am interested in the way people relate to space,” Woodman wrote in her journal. “The best way to do this is to depict their interactions to the boundaries of these spaces. Started doing this with ghost pictures, people fading into a flat plane—becoming the wall under wallpaper or of an extension of the wall onto floor.”²⁸ “She knew how to erase the distinctions between the ordinary and the surreal with remarkable exuberance,” confirms her friend and sometime model Sloan Rankin.²⁹ This helps explain Woodman’s caption to the third *Providence* photograph because of its emphasis on process, which, in Woodman’s case, links her to Surrealism by inviting the viewer into the intimacy of watching her in process.³⁰ This effect is highlighted by the fact that she so often used herself in her photographs, or friends who looked like her. Another photograph from 1976 spoofs this habit by showing three nude young women who closely resemble one another holding prints of a head shot of Woodman in front of their faces. This image also illustrates the extent to which her use of herself was not intended as visual autobiography but as a study of experience. “When asked why she used herself as a model,” Peter Davison reports, “she replied, ‘It’s a convenience—I’m always available’³¹; ‘Francesca was ashamed that she took so many pictures of herself and was irritated by the simplistic self-portrait label attached to her work,” adds Berne, “the reality was she was her own best model because she alone knew what she was after.”³²

Her use of herself as a model without an identifiable face gives her work an at times eerie sameness. The figure becomes at once very familiar while remaining oddly unknown and unknowable. A friend from New York reports that Woodman wanted “to be able to establish a similar relationship between words and her images as those achieved in Breton’s book *Nadja*,” which is punctuated by photographs of people and places that are oddly empty and thus have an eerie quality akin to Woodman’s photographs from fifty years later.³³ The photographs of places in *Nadja* resemble in style the turn-of-the-century work of Eugène Atget who photographed Paris as peculiarly empty. Breton relates the strangeness of these images to the “unbearable discomfort” he felt every time he approached the statue of Etienne Dolet in the Place Maubert, a sensation that “as a discipline psychoanalysis is not qualified to deal with.”³⁴ He makes the familiar strange in order to make us look at the everyday with new eyes, to keep himself and his readers receptive.³⁵

The inexplicable way in which places can seem haunted fascinated the Surrealists, particularly if that haunting could help to explain the self in response to Breton’s opening question, “Who am I?” Woodman responds to this question as a problem to be examined, looking at an idea one way and then another, as though

through a two-way or unsilvered mirror, except that the worlds she explores do not reside in the mysterious aspects of the public spaces she inhabited—the cities of Boulder, Providence, Rome, or New York; they instead resided within herself, much more in the style of the personal poetry of Desnos, whose lyrics evoke emotion more than place, and whose imaginative worlds often take precedence over more mundane realities. Breton, Woodman, and Desnos coincide nevertheless in their shared investigation of what Foucault called the *experience* of their own realities—however public or interior these may have been.

Man Ray was the first Surrealist to explore the slender distinctions between the apparently contradictory worlds of the real and the inexplicable in photography—the most purely surrealist medium according to Krauss, because of its ability to capture the “automatic writing of the world.”³⁶ Man Ray’s timing, framing, and cropping made of straight photography a window onto another world, blending the double reality of everyday consciousness and dream according to the Bretonian notion of *surreality*: “the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality.”³⁷ Woodman works towards a comparable effect when her own body becomes ghostlike, strangely insubstantial and partially disembodied, blurring the boundaries between the human body and her setting, as in her *House* series. She seems to be



Fig. 3. Francesca Woodman, *Space²*, Providence, RI (RISD), 1976. Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman

surrealistically tricking time by concentrating on a suspended present moment, showing the future reality of the human body as a ghost concurrently with the present reality of the body as inhabited by ghosts—of thoughts, musical or textual notes, or images. Her photographs could be read as maps to this inner life; their destination lies at the edge of perception, in between the shots. Townsend describes this phenomenon technically as a practice of “unraveling photography’s structuring dimensions of space and time,” thus placing Woodman squarely in a dissident tradition of American photography, drawing at once from Surrealism and from precursors like Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, Barbara Jo Revelle, Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Duane Michals.³⁸ Far from naïve, her work builds on knowledge without self-consciousness; it connects with an audience that looks through the technique into the worlds she shows and tries to decipher its clues.

Maps of Inner Space

The haptic quality evoked by Krauss in her writings on surrealist photography is captured by Woodman through her use of black and white and the sensual plethora of grays rendering her textures almost three dimensional. “You have to feel the contact of the surfaces and objects photographed with bare skin,” writes Rankin. “I know because I found myself more than once covered in flour or some other substance.”³⁹ This direct physicality comes close to the way Foucault describes automatic writing for Breton. Woodman’s series, what one friend calls her



Fig. 4. Man Ray, *Anatomies*, 1929 © 2008 Man Ray Trust / Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY / ADAGP, Paris

“diary pictures,” certainly seem to tell as much as show—a story that seems familiar, involving fairy-tale or gothic transformations.⁴⁰ She could be asking herself Breton’s follow-up to his opening salvo “Who am I?”: what or “whom [do] I ‘haunt?’” And yet the words with which to complete the narrative seem just beyond reach, comparable to the way Woodman’s body seems to be moving just beyond visibility.



Fig. 5. Francesca Woodman, Providence, RI (RISD), 1975-1978. Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman

Woodman seems to be asking: what is it like to feel invisible some of the time? What is it like to feel oneself disappear into what Foucault called “[t]he space in which we are living, by which we are drawn outside ourselves”?⁴¹ Are not these feelings typical of being alive, of plunging into the process of taking photographs in a manner akin to surrealist automatic writing? As already mentioned, both photography and automatic writing happen spontaneously yet involve careful preparation. “After you have settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the concentration of your mind,” directs Breton in the “Manifesto”: “Put yourself in

as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can.”⁴² The result may depend upon the scratch of a pen on paper as much as the sudden impulse to click the shutter; it is at once a work and the record of a practice, encompassing both conscious and unconscious awareness, like Woodman’s notes that go *directly* to the hands. She responds to Breton’s dictum as an invitation to make it up herself in an extension of Surrealism’s collaborative ethos, a sense consolidated by her experience in Rome of befriending the owners of the Maldoror Gallery and their circle: “As Giuseppe Casetti, one of the owners of the Libreria Maldoror, remarked, ‘For her Surrealism meant Maldoror, even after she’d gone back to New York. . . . [W]e understood each other through pictures. . . . I can’t tell if we influenced her or if it was the other way round.’”⁴³

Woodman’s *Space²* series, shot between 1975 and 1977, consists of sequences of photographs which involve blurring. In several of them the blurred body destabilizes the human figure as a familiar entity and replaces it with movement and the kind of pure *experience* Foucault ascribes to Bretonian automatism. Thus the blurred image of a woman shaking her head, and of a nude pressing her body against the glass walls of a vitrine box, direct the viewer *away* from the external shape of the body and towards the experience contained within the body. These images direct us towards an interior world which we may only intuit via the metaphor of Woodman’s blurred body, and which we can only understand if we stop “reading the notes” in her metaphorical parlance and let them come to us directly, and further, if we abandon the attempt to make a literal reading of the images and allow ourselves to swim *between* them. “[T]he best pictures are the ones she didn’t know were there,” writes her friend Betsy Berne, “the ones where her instincts took command—and she knew that too.”⁴⁴

The first *Space²* sequence shows Woodman fully dressed and wearing boots. She steps forward and bends her body towards the camera so that the viewer sees *reaching* more than a body. We respond to the experience in the photograph, the inner feeling generated by it. Woodman explores what Foucault described as “boundaries” in his essay on Breton, and as the limit and its transgression in his study of the work of Georges Bataille, published three years earlier.⁴⁵ Woodman pushes the limit between her body’s visibility and invisibility, between the body and its environs; yet her body also serves as a stand-in for *everybody* more than as a sexualized body. Her blurring highlights the experience of blending into one’s surroundings, of feeling at home in a space. The subjectivity of the human being activates the surrounding decay, becoming universalized through this animating process, and momentarily lifted out of chronological time.

Her blurred-body *Space²* photographs reinforce the notion of practice and



Fig. 6. Francesca Woodman, *Space²*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976. Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman



Fig. 7. Francesca Woodman, *On Being an Angel*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1977. Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman

activity essential to Surrealism. For the Surrealists, automatic experiments and working in groups constituted activities as much about processes as about the end result. Does not Breton in *Nadja* describe beauty as poised between movement and stillness, “neither dynamic nor static. . . . like a train that ceaselessly roars out of the Gare de Lyon and which I know will never leave, which has not left”?⁴⁶ It consists of “jolts and shocks,” and later in *Mad Love*, he adds the term *explosante-fixe*, fixed-explosive, to describe this notion of beauty that can make the hair stand up at the back of one’s neck.⁴⁷ *Explosante-fixe* lent its name to a photograph by Man Ray which illustrated *Mad Love* and which Woodman arguably knew. It could certainly be acknowledged as a precursor to her own experiments with the body in space.

Several critics have pointed out the ways that Woodman shows her awareness of avant-garde photography. Faye Hirsch, for example, commenting on Woodman’s use of black-and-white film and the square shape of her prints, describes Woodman’s work as having a “vintage” nature, “precious and beautifully crafted,” reminiscent of “photographs by Man Ray” which distinguish her from her “more pop-inspired, appropriationist contemporaries” like Cindy Sherman.⁴⁸ Woodman also experiments with the Surrealists’ love of the camera’s capacity to trick the viewer into seeing the ghost of an illusion within another image—a woman’s neck bent



Fig. 8. Francesca Woodman, from *Angel Series*, Italy, 1977. Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman

back so far it could be mistaken for an inanimate shape, like a prow of a ship, for example, in Man Ray’s *Anatomies* (1929), or a woman’s back seen bent from the neck and contained within an image of her back bending from the buttocks in Lee Miller’s *Nude Bent Forward* (1931). Woodman’s version of such surrealistic shape-shifting shows a woman wearing a vintage dress lying on a quilt, her head thrown back and shot from the side. The odd angle of the head and the textured blending of the dress and quilt put into question the nature of what we are seeing—a play in texture?

A mannequin? A human being? “Woodman’s refusal of distinction between the self and the world of objects,” notes Townsend, “subverts the ideological structures of the gaze it uses.”⁴⁹ With Woodman we are never certain of what or whom we are seeing.

This surrealistic slippage between what is alive and what is not, between what we are seeing and what we are only imagining, dominates the second *Space*² sequence, of a nude woman crouched in a glass vitrine. For Woodman, “the idea of the display case as a container to be looked into” functions as a way of showing “the idea of a contained force trying to be freed,” as she explains in her journal.⁵⁰ A woman’s



Fig. 9. Francesca Woodman, from *Angel Series*, Italy, 1977-78. Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman

hands press up against the glass; her head and features are blurred. The image focuses attention on the act of *seeing through*—the glass and also, metaphorically, the body encased within it. The camera is set up to make us peer into the vitrine, as if through a window, to search inside it. This invitation extends the process of seeing from the outside to the inside; the glass vitrine operates as a kind of metaphor for the desire to penetrate interior space, in a manner reminiscent of a powerful image

from an early poem by Desnos evoking his physical experience of observing and examining other worlds, wherein the poet's body, a "nocturnal bottle," captures a shooting star: "He corks it right away and from then on watches the star enclosed in the glass, the constellation born on its walls."⁵¹ The poet's consciousness allows him to see his inner self as though it were in a distant reality seen through a bottle, looking from outside in, viewed to its greatest depth which, in turn, flips into its own reverse image—a space as vast as the universe.

Desnos' metaphor for the effect of automatism, the looking inward that it produces as the poet gives free rein to the unconscious, suggests an inner geography that is vast and beautiful. Through the configuration of the body as potentially transparent, against which the human being can only push with her hands at the limit between inside and outside, Woodman suggests a parallel curiosity, together with a concurrent anxiety. In her photographic variation on Desnos' poetic image such space presses psychically on the artist from the outside. This pressure is confirmed in a shot involving two models—one blurred and crouching inside the vitrine, the other draped over the top, looking in, yet inert. Here the viewer has the sensation of seeing through a double protective layer of glass and skin. The two together confirm that there is potentially something dangerous about this experiment with space, with the skin, like glass and within glass, that separates the body from outer space as well as inner geographies.

Ghostly Worlds: Woodman's Angels

The *On Being an Angel* series she began in Providence and continued in Rome during her year abroad (1977-78) explores further Woodman's push on the body's limits just as she continues to explore the permeability of time. The first two studies represent a partial female body, only the head and breasts. In one image we see the face; in the other we see only the lower face upside down with the mouth open—an uneasy invitation to look *inside*.⁵² These figures mirror angels in European churches: the seraphim from the mosaics in Saint Mark's Basilica in Venice, for example, whose bodies are limited to heads and wings. Woodman's arms and shoulders and the curve of the breasts show the body in a bird-like posture, as though it could fly. An umbrella propped in the corner of one image suggests that such a modern convenience could help to propel this angel into flight in the manner of Mary Poppins, a more contemporary, domesticated angel.

The Roman versions of the *Angel* series emphasize the association of angels with flying. In one, a gloved hand holds a delicate, diaphanous piece of white fabric and shakes it. Its blur indicates that were the arm to drop it, the fabric might defy gravity and fly. Two other photographs link white fabric with wings and flying. In

what looks like an attic in another old house, suspended white fabric looks like wings. Woodman jumps in front of the wings, dressed in a Victorian-style white petticoat with black tights. Her blurred body—arms outstretched in one version—picks up on the wing-like drapery of the hanging fabric and makes us imagine her flying away. This body is more ethereal than Mary Poppins and less reassuring. The leap does not seem capable of containing the figure within this world. We sense that the attic could disappear yet we know rationally that this body must remain earthbound because we associate it with Woodman, an American college student. Through this transgression of familiar limitations on the body, once again Woodman challenges us to see through the body's blurred contours into the psychic geography within it, an inner space that flips outwards and defies limits. Brunella Antomarini notes that through her images “[w]e are shown . . . how to view a cosmos and recognize ourselves as part of it.”⁵³ The role-playing is part of the appeal of her photographs which attract powerful responses in her viewers.⁵⁴

The invitation to look within physically—as a metaphor for psychic inner exploration, hinted at in the *Angel* photograph taken in Providence, where the figure's mouth was open—is confirmed in another photograph taken in Rome. This one does not align with the attic ghost-angels just described. It is of a nude torso shot bending back from the waist towards the viewer; the model's head is once again upside down, the mouth open.⁵⁵ This shot grounds the others and reminds us that while floating away clearly intrigued Woodman, she remained rooted in the body's present moment of experience. Splattered paint resembling streaks of blood stains the leaning body and spreads out in arcs on the wall behind it. Perhaps positioned at the limit of inside and outside, this body is also at the limit between living and dying, and yet in the moment of the scream, it is most definitely intensely alive in the present. The painted body against the painted wall underscores both the haptic and writerly qualities of photography, and of Woodman's use of the body as the mark inking her images, one to the next. Her body becomes the shifting sign in her visual automatic writing and it invites the viewer to swim with her from one medium to the next. She embraces Antonin Artaud's insistence that life lies in the gesture, the movement of the body, and that these gestures represent the most vital sign system available to us.⁵⁶

One last *Angel Series* photograph from Rome pulls together some of these themes. All we see are two nude, leaping legs. Their strength lends them vitality. The backdrop is another dilapidated wall. Its white edge behind the legs visually doubles the white fabric from the previous photographs. Seen in sequence we could imagine a white wing extending down behind one of the legs. Beneath the feet two gouges extend; they rhyme with the legs above. We could almost be seeing

a partial earthly snow angel, familiar to most of us from childhood, but in reverse. Instead of the body's imprint having been made as a result of lying on one's back and seeing the world as all sky, it would have to have been made with the body lying embedded face forward, with the world looking like nothing but earth. We see the legs as if they were caught springing up over the gouges in the earth, as though they had just sprung up and backwards out of the ground to the position caught in the photographic image. More than any of the other *Angel* photographs, this image shows two realities moving away from one another—neither one of which connects fully with the viewer's sense of a body's limits. None of us could lie face down and leave an imprint only of our legs. Yet this photograph makes it seem possible because of the stories read in childhood, the images seen in medieval and Renaissance art, and the sense that this photographer's inner life makes it possible to see beyond the real into a parallel universe.

Woodman often dresses in old or vintage clothes. Fashionable and affordable for college-age women in the 1970s, these outfits add to the vintage look of her prints. They present a young woman out of the past in the present, and underscore the way her visual music works linearly in stories while simultaneously evoking synchronic chords wherein one sense of time and reality harmonizes with another. She plays with the viewer's sense of time in the way that Cahun's self-portraits from the 1920s and '30s do.⁵⁷ Both Woodman and Cahun's work seems oddly contemporary—despite their dated black and white aspect—because of the ways in which they stage female sexuality and they play with expectations about gender and identity. Woodman's work differs from her contemporary Cindy Sherman's and from Cahun's in the way in which the costumes she wears have more to do with staging herself than with performing variable identities. At the same time, that self is also always playing a role, the role of herself as a haunted being trying to co-exist in more than one time, and trying to capture her own growth. Arthur Danto identifies “a recurring motif” in her work as “‘Francesca’ undergoing some sort of metamorphosis, from one state of being to another.”⁵⁸ The viewer observes these transformations and responds by recognizing the universal mutability of identity in a visual variation on the surrealist assertion that we are “recording instruments,” mere receptacles for voices that come into consciousness and pass through us, of dreams that shadow our waking lives. Memory and present reality merge in a continual relay yoked together by experience, distinguished by listening for Breton, and by seeing for artists like Woodman.

Once again, surrealist precedent enhanced by Foucault's reading of it in the 1960s can help us understand how Woodman saw time as persistently liminal. Surrealist descriptions of perception emphasize the desired ability to see both

conscious and dream realities at the same time in a suspended present, in-between moment, partly through emphasis on the in-between moment of waking or falling asleep, when both realities can possibly converge.⁵⁹ This almost lateral perception of a distant reality even as we proceed in a regular, conscious one could be seen as anamorphic. That is, something glimpsed only peripherally and apprehended more than seen, a sense of the ghostly in the everyday and of the slippage between subject and object, and between what is alive and what is inanimate. Surrealism makes it possible to see Woodman's play with space and time as anamorphic—both as a technique and as a theme. In the most famous anamorphic painting, Hans Holbein's *Ambassadors* (1533), two images co-exist, one of which portends human mortality. They cannot be perceived simultaneously and yet, even while knowing this, the viewer persists in trying. Foucault argued that every human being is aware of death unconsciously and seeks to overcome it through language: "A work of language is the body of language crossed by death in order to open this infinite space where doubles reverberate."⁶⁰ This characterization of experience marked by "infinite space where doubles reverberate" could describe the Surrealists' notion of perception as always allowing for occasional glimpses into a double reality; it also works for reading Woodman's work. In 1926 Desnos explained: "I have said that I live a double life. Alone on the street or amongst people I constantly imagine unexpected events, desired encounters. . . . I thus pursue, while awake, my nocturnal dream self."⁶¹ She may not have read Desnos but her work makes a similar statement.

Woodman shows us in her photographs of actual moments in past time how one reality, one world, can suggest another, as the past can anticipate the present. For Woodman, old fairy tales anticipate the twentieth-century presentor even the future in our twenty-first century. In her blurred images and in the ways in which her bodies tend to disappear before our eyes Woodman also suggests that the visible world is only an illusion; there is another world, another reality inside, just beyond the reach of the lens. She succeeds in persuading the viewer that we might glimpse that inner world if we could only squint hard enough and turn our heads, as though looking over our shoulders at an anamorphic painting. This is partly because we rarely see her face and also because her photographs in surrealist narrative sequences tell the story of a contained space that is vast, fully enclosed by skin and simultaneously, vertiginously, accessible on the outside like Desnos' nocturnal bottle. Woodman's photographed self plays roles that follow that self from one state of being to another, in the way all selves metamorphose in time while remaining somewhat the same. A deeper reading of her connections to surrealist practice—at once musical, textual, visual, notational, haptic, physical, and psychic—helps to make her processes clearer.

Seeing Woodman's work through the prism of Surrealism allows us to appreciate her accomplishment as an artist capable of projecting her viewers together with herself into alternate realities because, in keeping with the original surrealist principles outlined in the "Manifesto," she conjures in the viewer the experience she seeks to investigate for herself. This insight also helps clarify the extent to which Surrealism remained vibrant as a way of working well past Breton's death. Through the way she draws in the viewer and makes us see what it feels like to escape the familiar strictures of familiar time-space paradigms, Woodman turns her intensely personal practice into a surrealistically collaborative, almost communal activity. Her photographs map a mysterious interior space that we nonetheless recognize as our own. She invites her viewers to follow her into her imagined inner worlds, simultaneously assuring us with the indexical nature of the photographic process that these inner worlds are as fully real, as fully familiar, as anything we have ever seen.

1 André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 11. See Ann Gabhart, "Francesca Woodman 1958-1981," *Francesca Woodman, Photographic Work* (Wellesley and New York: Wellesley College Museum + Hunter College Art Gallery, 1986), 53-58.

2 I make this argument about the persistence of Surrealist practice in the work of avant-garde women artists and writers in the last chapter of my *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), and in my forthcoming book on "Surrealist Ghostliness" (Nebraska University Press).

3 Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 162.

4 Chris Townsend, *Francesca Woodman* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2006), 59.

5 Michel Foucault, "A Swimmer Between Two Words," trans. Robert Hurley, *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 173. Krzysztof Ziarek makes a similar claim that avant-garde art relies on presenting experience as uncontainable in *The Historicity of Experience* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

6 Margaret Sundell, "Vanishing Points: The Photography of Francesca Woodman," *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th-Century Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 435.

7 See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), and Jacques Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes." trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Hugh Silverman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988), 259-296.

8 Foucault, 190.

9 Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 12.

10 Krauss, 110.

11 Foucault, 173.

12 André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1972), 26.

13 See my *Automatic Woman* and "La Nature double des yeux (regardés/regardants) de la femme dans le surréalisme," *La Femme s'entête: La Part du féminin dans le surréalisme*, eds. Georgiana Colville and Katharine Conley (Paris: Lachenal & Ritter-Collection Pleine Marge, 1998), 71-89.

14 André Breton, *The Lost Steps*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 60.

15 André Breton, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Marlowe & Co., 1993), 67. For more on Desnos' spontaneity as opposed to his preparation, see the first chapter of my *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

16 Louis Aragon, *Treatise on Style*, trans. Alyson Waters (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 104; Man Ray, *Self-Portrait* (Boston: Little-Brown, 1963), 223.

17 See the first chapter of my *Automatic Woman* for a reading of this automatic text.

18 Essays that argue for Woodman's explicit relation to Surrealism include David Levi Strauss, "After You, Dearest Photography: Reflections on the Work of Francesca Woodman," *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture, 2003), 124-33; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Just Like A Woman," *Francesca Woodman: Photographic Work* (Wellesley and New York: Wellesley College of Art and Hunter College Art Gallery, 1986), 11-35; Francine Koslow Miller, "Francesca Woodman," *Artforum* (May 1999): 181-82; Helaine Posner, "The Self and the World: Negotiating Boundaries in the Art of Yayoi Kusama, Ana Mendieta, and Francesca Woodman," *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*, ed. Whitney Chadwick (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 156-71; and Harriet Riches, "A Disappearing Act: Francesca Woodman's *Portrait of a Reputation*," *Oxford Art Journal* 27(1) (2004): 95-113.

19 These were published under the title "Rose Sélavy," the invented woman's name

Desnos appropriated from Marcel Duchamp, who had created it as a pseudonymous alter-ego for himself, a kind of premonitory invitation to women to step into the surrealist circle and create for themselves.

20 Levi-Strauss, 127.

21 I describe the idea of the “surrealist conversation” in the introduction to *Robert Desnos*.

22 Breton, “Manifesto,” 21.

23 Breton, “Manifesto,” 21.

24 Breton, “Manifesto,” 27-28.

25 In Ann Radcliffe’s novels, for example, houses are haunted. “Rather than belonging to a tradition of the Gothic where she meditates upon entombment and death,” writes Townsend, “her images appear to be the very opposite—deliberately toying with Gothic figures as metaphors for photographic encryption in order to stress her liberation from it” (27).

26 Foucault, 173. My thanks to Amy Allen for discussing Foucaultian experience with me.

27 Foucault, 173.

28 Francesca Woodman, “Journal Extracts,” in Chris Townsend, *Francesca Woodman* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2006), n.p.

29 Sloan Rankin, “Peach Mumble, idées sur le feu,” *Francesca Woodman*, ed. Hervé Chandès (Paris: Fondation Cartier-Actes Sud, 1998), 37; my translation.

30 One of André Breton’s final collections of essays has been translated into English as *Free Rein*, trans. Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline d’Amboise (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). Louis Aragon called the word that sets off the flow in automatism the *incipit*. See *Je n’ai jamais appris à écrire ou Les Incipit* (Paris: Skira-Les Sentiers de la creation, 1969).

31 Peter Davison, “Girl Seeming to Disappear,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 2000):111.

32 Betsy Berne, “To Tell the Truth,” *Francesca Woodman, Photographs 1975-1980* (New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, 2004), 6.

33 Gabhart, 55.

34 Breton, *Nadja*, 24.

35 James Clifford compares this strategy with that of anthropology in his *Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 121.

36 Rosalind Krauss, “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 35.

37 Breton, “Manifesto,” 14.

38 Townsend, 11, 15, 17.

39 Rankin, 35.

40 Sundell, 435.

41 Foucault, 177.

42 Breton, "Manifesto," 29.

43 Townsend, 32-33. Woodman frequented the Maldoror during her junior year abroad, 1977-78.

44 Berne, 5.

45 These essays with their focus on the experience of boundaries and the limit could be understood as early explorations of what Foucault later called practices of the self, since they focus on experiencing the self in a way that Woodman's work, seen together with Foucault's, teases out. Foucault identifies transgression as a moment when "the limit opens violently into the limitless" emerges from sexuality and its language (73). This study of the experience of the limit through an experience of transgression is also linked to the death of God for Foucault in the essay, "A Preface to Transgression." As such, it is a study of the self as hovering between embodiment and disappearance but within a particularly sexualized awareness of selfhood. Woodman is more Bretonian than Bataillan, I would argue, as her work presents more of a mysterious state of being than a raw, naked one, despite her nudity in many of the images.

46 Breton, *Nadja*, 159-160.

47 See Mary Ann Caws' translation of *Mad Love* (Nebraska University Press, 1987), 19.

48 Faye Hirsch, "Odd Geometry: The Photographs of Francesca Woodman," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 25 (2) (May-June 1994): 46. It is most likely that Woodman knew the photography of Man Ray.

49 Townsend, 61.

50 Extracts from Woodman's diaries in Townsend.

51 Robert Desnos, *Selected Poems*, trans. Carolyn Forché and Williams Kulik (New York: Ecco Press, 1991), 17. Mary Ann Caws argues that Desnos embodies "the shape-shifting tenets of the baroque," in other words, "an image that *faces both ways*, crossing the boundaries of expectation both public and private." See *The Surrealist Look* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 311.

52 Another, more disturbing version was shot in Rome, where the open-mouthed nude bends backwards in front of a wall splattered with paint that looks like blood.

53 Brunella Antomarini, "Francesca Woodman," trans. Catherine Schelbert, *Parkett* 15 (1988): 106-07.

54 They allow someone like me, who was in college in the Boston area in the 1970s, to see myself in the images, in houses that look like the ones I could afford as an undergraduate; her personal visual record seems haunted by my parallel memories.

55 For more on the surrealist fascination with seeing the world inside out, see Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron's "L'envers du monde, l'envers de la langue: un 'travail' surréaliste," *La Révolution surréaliste*, ed. Werner Spies (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2002), 349-359.

56 Artaud ends his critique of theater with the devastating gestures made by a person burned alive at the stake (probably inspired by his work on the Carl Dreyer 1928 film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*): "And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames." See Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 13.

57 Benjamin Buchloh notes that a "shift towards the performative subject (partially under the impact of a rediscovery of the Duchampian legacy) emerged in American art of the mid to late 1960s." See his "Francesca Woodman: Performing the Photograph, Staging the Subject," *Francesca Woodman, Photographs 1975-1980* (New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, 2004), 42.

58 Arthur Danto, "Darkness Visible," *The Nation* (15 November 2004): n.p.

59 See my "Anamorphic Love: the Surrealist Poetry of Desire," *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Mundy (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 2001; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 100-18. A good example of the textual surrealist in-between may be found in Paul Eluard's poems "La Parole" and "La Vie" from *Capitale de la douleur*, translated as "The Word" and "Life" in *Capital of Pain*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2006), 22-23; 38-39.

60 Foucault, 93.

61 Robert Desnos, "Confessions d'un enfant du siècle," *La Révolution surréaliste* 2 (6) (1926): 18-20, my translation. Breton's poem from 1923, "Tournesol," later analyzed in *Mad Love*, also evokes an everyday reality that permits glimpses into another dimension (see my "Anamorphic Love," note 30).