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Surrealism and Self-representation in the Photography of Francesca Woodman

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This is a re-edited version of a paper I presented at the annual American Week conference held in Padua, Italy, in May this year. The original version was presented together with a total of 17 photographs by Francesca Woodman. However, when the paper was selected to be published on *49th Parallel* most of those photographs (all but 6) have been deemed ineligible for publication by the University because of the nudity displayed. The alternative to a re-editing of my paper would have implied the use of a warning line alerting against the potentially offensive content of the photographs. The choice to have this re-edited version with the restricted number of photographs published instead, expresses therefore my own as well as the ACS Department's position with respect to the principle of freedom of expression and my reaction against the implication of 'offensiveness' when at stake is not only some serious artistic work but also the outstanding reputation of an institution which prides itself for being the source of inspiration for thought-provoking, groundbreaking academic work

"What happens…when woman serves as the looking-glass held up to women?"[1]

What happens when woman finds herself in the empty space between the signs symbolized by the gaze and her objectified image? How are the conditions of her visibility produced, then? Following a path through eccentric subjectivity, gender theory, semiotics and psychoanalysis, I'd like to argue about the several repercussions of the collusion between Surrealist practices and the negotiation of theoretical models of female subjectivity in the work of **Francesca Woodman**, a photographer whose largest body of work was produced in the late Seventies. Working with self-portraits, fantastical representations of the body, and even depictions of the absence of the body, Woodman expanded the exploration begun during Surrealism to express female subjectivity through hybridization, fetishization, and displacement of self.

Throughout art history, the woman has been fetishized by the male creative subject: both revered and feared as "Other", admired for the formal aspects of the female body, and cast in a passive role as object of the (male) gaze. The concepts and principles that focused Andre Breton and other male Surrealists of the 1930s and 1940s on *the female*, also limited their capacity to view women as independent, active subjects. They conceived of woman as man's mediator with nature and the unconscious, *femme-enfant*, muse, source and object of man's desire, embodiment of mad love, emblem of revolution[2]. The male objectification of *woman* responded to their need to employ a body charged with *otherness* in order to ensure their access to sur-reality[3]. That is to say that, at the same time that Surrealism attacked some bourgeois concepts, it ended up in the reinforcement of others. As Jean Baudrillard affirmed in a 1976 essay, Surrealism remained within the purview of the realism it contested and redoubled, through its rupture with the Imaginary; while what he called "hyperrealism", or the meticulous reduplication of the real, represented a much more advanced stage as it managed to eradicate this contradiction between the real and the *real's hallucinatory resemblance to itself.* That is to say that in "hyperrealism", the objectivity of the pure gaze went beyond the power of simulacra[4]. Within this essential paradox women were eventually doubly negated as subjects: first, because they were defined as

mediums of men's communication; second, because woman's sexuality came to be reduced to its "natural" biological functions[5]. *Woman* functioned at best as an idealized "Other", at worst as an object for the projection of unresolved anxieties: male subjects sought transformation through a female representational object, which paradoxically reinforced the subject-object split that Surrealism was committed to overcoming[6].

The work of female writers and artists inside Surrealism often subtly subverted the male dialogue; or it reversed the male and female positions within the dialogue, often realizing interesting dialectical exchanges based on women's own psychology and experiences[7]. Following the influence of Freud and anticipating Lacan's re-reading of Freud, women were believed to be closer to the unconscious than men, because they had not entirely entered the symbolic order[8]. However, Surrealist techniques and strategies that provided means for getting at repressed areas of the psyche were also helpful to women attempting to assert aspects of the self unacceptable within their traditionally prescribed roles. Surrealist principles were therefore employed to breaking down the binary oppositions of mind/body, rational/irrational, art/nature that had functioned to identify woman with the rejected term – body, irrationality, nature – and situate her on an inferior position[9]. As a result, in response to an attempt to resolve the Surrealist polarities of inner and outer reality, many women Surrealists found in the **self-portrait** the suitable metaphor.

In their many self-portraits, women Surrealists like Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington, and Frieda Kahlo revealed their rejection of the idea of women as an abstract principle, and a substitution of the image in the mirror as a focal point in their quest for greater self-awareness and knowledge[10]. The mirror became thus the icon for the process of self-representation which involved the identification of the subject with the object of the gaze, and then became, as De Beauvoir affirmed in *The Second Sex* (1949), the key image to the feminine condition. The use of the mirror as a tool of the artist eventually affirmed the duality of being, the self as observer and observed, at the same time spectator and object of spectacle, body and sign, image and representation[11]. To perform the terms of the production of woman as text and image finally led out of the mirror trap, and served as a demonstration of the non-coincidence of *woman* and *women*[12].

A radical shift from the category of the Surrealist *woman* to that of Surrealist *women*, intended as a heterogeneous group of individuals for whom Surrealism had played a significant role in their attempt to shape an autonomous feminine subject[13], had finally taken place. The starting point for women's personal quest took on the identification of the ***body*** as the main signifier of its own cultural politics as established by Surrealism, and led to the negotiation of a relationship between the female body and female identity. For the women artists influenced by Surrealism in the decades after WWII, the artist's own body was still a starting point in collapsing perceptions of the feminine self. The radical re-inventions of self-representation that had occurred in the 1930s and 1940s resonated in later artistic practices and articulated how the body was marked by femininity as lived experience[14].

Surrealism continued to attract newer generations of artists (male and female) who were seeking to explore the unconscious as site of meaning and to challenge the essentialism of rationalist binary distinctions. Surrealism's appeal was nevertheless still created by its originary challenge of the bourgeois – therefore patriarchal – social institutions of church, state, and family; and by its insistence on the centrality of the artist's psychic life in the service of revolutionary politics[15]. Consequently, many women artists who were looking for a support and promise of social liberation from feminine traditional roles, as well as for a legitimation of the expression of female imaginary, perceived the appeal of Surrealist tropes. Generally speaking, the works of women associated with the words *surrealist* and *surrealism* in contemporary art, present a common engagement with issues of representation of structures of fabulist narrative, a

concern with constructions of femininity through surface and image, a tendency towards the oneiric and the phantasmatic, a preoccupation with the psychic powers assigned to the feminine, and an interest in doubling, masking, and/or masquerade16.

In the late 1960s, a dramatic shift in European and American visual art practices began to emerge as a consequence of the drastic changes in popular consciousness. The very concept of **high** art established for visual culture was suddenly no longer unaffected. In the aftermath of WWII the success of American abstract expressionist painting had legitimated the passage of the monopoly of the concept of 'modern art' from Paris to New York. But after the United States had finally convinced Europe of its rightful place in the continuum of high culture, a new art began to emerge. The new concerns that were introduced and that still inform the art of the present, sought primarily to break from the ideological and material frame of traditional European aesthetics, calling for a new art that recognized the primacy of individual experience, and that consciously accepted the political terms within which human experience was produced and maintained, through a more direct engagement with life17. In this respect, new '**lower'** art forms emerged in the shape of photography, video, installation, and performance.

Given that women's representations of women in 1970s visual art practices were mitigated by the cultural awareness of woman as object, they generally contained a certain self-consciousness of the social construction of the feminine as surface and image. Through the very act of re-presenting oneselves as subjects, 1970s women's self-representational narratives reclaimed the right to authorship, to authority and agency in the world. Moreover, many of the artistic processes that openly incorporated the artist's body were really about transcending it, getting outside of the corporal limitations of the human **frame**18, they were about the power of experience and the value of memory acquired through bodily physical gestures intended to enter into art dialogue19.

Grown up in the atmosphere of the Sixties' and Seventies' debates, during the nearly 23 years of her life, **Francesca Woodman** produced a body of approximately five hundred photographs that, re-discovered only in the late Eighties, have eventually raised her work to a quasi-cult status. Daughter of artists20, she grew up in the studios of her parents both in Colorado and Italy, and often spent her summer vacations in the family house of Antella, near Florence. She studied at Rhode Island School of Design between 1975 and 1979 and spent a year in Rome on a scholarship. This was an extraordinarily creative period in which she was influenced by the classicism, sensuality and decay of Rome and she exhibited her photographs for the first time in the basement of the Maldoror bookshop-gallery. On her return to America she moved to New York. *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, the only book of her work to be published in her lifetime appeared in January 1981.

During her early days Woodman not only developed an understanding of art making as a way of life, but mostly as a mode of thought. One of her first self-portraits, taken in 1972 when she was thirteen (**Fig.1**), is an early example of the characteristics that will then develop in her later photographs and that stress Woodman's preoccupation with herself as a subject of art. For instance, the investigation of space and the staging of the subject in a sort of hide-and-seek game of light and shade, the dematerialization of a body which seems to be associated with no face. How strong the similarities with a portrait of Joseph Cornell taken by Duane Michals that same year in New York, especially in the way in which the body is at the same time carved and hidden by light (www.pdngallery.com/legends3/michals/art/photos_large/joseph_cornell.jpg). In fact the narrative portraits of Duane Michals, as well as Aaron Siskind's modernist teaching of photography at RISD, Man Ray's techniques, Francis Bacon's study of space in relation to the individual, and the evocative power of Italian Transavanguardia, sensibly influenced Woodman's later work.

At age 14 Woodman found her guide to photography in a gifted teacher she met at Abbot Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. Wendy MacNeil, unusually for her time, focussed her

teaching on the importance of ideas over technical preoccupations, which encountered Woodman's predilections. Woodman was indeed intensely fascinated by the work of contemporary photographers, such as Clarence John Laughlin and his gothic Southern Surrealism among others. However, the most profound sources of Woodman's work are not to be found in a relationship to contemporary mainstream photography of the 1970s, neither in the formalist modes privileged in art schools such as RISD, nor in the photographic work now designated as postmodernist, since Woodman's work contains no reference to mass culture, even if it regularly stresses the status of the photograph as representation21. The body of work that mostly seems to be recalled by Woodman's art, is Surrealist photography. However, what is really crucial in Woodman is her re-interpretation of it together with other complex interactions she matured during her year in Rome. Woodman improves Surrealist photographic techniques in order to reproduce their power in the oneiric representation of the self but meanwhile she tries to stage her own reading of woman's privileged place in the negotiation of desire.

If the juxtaposition of Surrealism and **photography** had seemed nothing but a paradox to Breton, this is because the revolution in values promoted from the 1930s, conceived of a reorganization of the very concept of the so-called photographic real versus a reification of unconscious activities. However, with the employment of techniques such as Ubac's *brûlages*22, Man Ray's rayographs23 and solarization24, and then negative printing, multiple exposure, photomontage, and photo collage, Surrealist photography allowed the possibility of a discursive re-interpretation of its more "straight" outcomes resulting from the instantaneous recording of events. One of the most interesting photographic strategies was that of **photographic doubling**. The appeal of the technique mainly resided in the very act of addition of a copy to its original, which created a sense of failing uniqueness of subject as well as a perception of difference. In this guise presence becomes **seriality**, and contributes to the spatial marking of the first element as a signifying simulacrum. Since repetition itself stresses the deliberate intentionality of the act of representation, we could argue that the production of meaning through doubling denotes doubling itself as the "signifier of signification"25. Spatial marking at the same time deals with the boundaries established by the camera frame, which mainly indicates the dichotomy between the experience of the real and the experience of representation that Surrealist photography deliberately marks in order to stress the act of artistic creation.

And doubling, as well as the serial multiplication of the image as principles and techniques, is widely spread in the photographs of Woodman, either in the guise of the use of mirror devices as in the *Self-Deceit* Roman series (1977-78), or in the form of addition of other models resembling her features in the portrayal of her own image. In one of Woodman's *Providence* photographs for instance, we can see a portrait of three young girls, among whom Woodman has made herself recognizable by wearing her black Mary Jane shoes, hiding their faces behind a drawing of Woodman's own face, a copy of which is also on the wall. The doubled image in Surrealism has often assumed a determination to break with unitary meaning or a deliberate attempt towards the simultaneous representation of the real and the unreal and/or the illusory26. At the same time the doubled image that provided women artists with a tool for a critique of otherness, also provided them with a means to argue about otherness by its reproduction as sameness; in other words, the woman made Other to herself, engaged in a dialogue with the very self that produced her life as narrative27.

Discussing women's autobiography, Sheila Rowbothan states that a woman cannot experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined as 'woman', that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been circumscribed by the dominant culture (male)28. Not recognizing themselves in the reflections of cultural representation, women develop a dual consciousness: the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription. In taking the power of representation, women consequently project onto history an identity that is not purely individualistic, nor purely collective29. De Lauretis herself, expanding on Althusser's concept of the subject in ideology30, theorizes a

subject that is at the same time "inside *and* outside the ideology of gender, and conscious of being so, conscious of that twofold pull, of that division, that doubled vision"31.

It's difficult to avoid any reference to Lacan's concept of "**mirror stage**"32 (or of "misrecognition") when referring to the process of photographic **doubling**. Discussing the child's first encounter with its image in a mirror as the source of a fictional self-projection that influences subsequent identity formation, Lacan offered an interpretation of doubling as the replication of a conscious subject that becomes significant within a persistent exploration of the double as a structural principle of optical power. Lacan's theory of the subject, derived from Freud's concept of narcissism and the "specular ego"33, relegated woman to the position of signifier for the male other, her subjectivity determined by the discourse of patriarchy. If we agree to see the camera as being itself a mirror, we can observe Woodman's mirror photographs (**Fig.2**) as an attempt for the renegotiation of bodily, temporal, spiritual boundaries during the enactment of her self/body through a registering of its traces and through images that suggest its absence. In particular, Woodman created a series of self-portraits entitled *Self-Deceit* in which she seems to be playing a game of hide-and-seek with the aid of a large mirror (e.g. *Self-Deceit #1*, Rome, 1978). Her nude figure crawls in front of the glass as if she were afraid to acknowledge her sense of otherness, and the mirror becomes a barrier that conceals rather than reveal identity. In a following series of self-portraits emblematically called *A Woman/A Mirror/A Woman is a Mirror for a Man* (1978) Woodman represents herself trapped in between a mirror and a transparent glass, as if hidden and confined within the boundaries of femininity.

In connection to the **mirror** image, in his 1919 essay 'The Uncanny'34, Freud ties the uncanniness generated by the idea of doubling to the primitive fear of mirrors: he reads the double as a first narcissistic projection that translates both the shadows cast by the body and the body's mirrored reflections. According to Otto Rank's study35, superstitious beliefs interpret the double as shadow as the earliest form through which the soul is imagined, or even as the form in which the souls of the dead return to haunt or take possession of the living, and the polished surfaces of mirrors themselves are believed to be a medium for the return of the dead36. Of course one has to consider the apotropaic potential of these creations of the mind that, while expressing the attempt to protect oneselves from a feared object, actually end up representing it through the strategy of doubling; and all this, if seen through Roland Barthes's eyes, could just validate photography's connection with death through its process of objectification of the subject37. In particular, **Fig.2** associates the question of mirror doubling with another recurrent issue in Woodman's photographs: that of her seemingly **dead** or sleeping **body**.

Common features of Surrealism had been the belief in dream, in free association, in hypnotic states, in automatism, in ecstasy or delirium38; the concept of *bassesse*39 as developed by Georges Bataille, which had contributed to the theorization of horizontality as the pure expression of the instinctive animal nature; and the consideration of woman as a central, obsessional subject , especially in the guise of *femme-enfant*40, the so-called woman child who was believed to be an enchanting clairvoyant creature who through her youth, naiveté, and purity possessed enough direct connection with her own unconscious to allow her to be a guide for man. Therefore, if we just put side by side the belief in dream, the aesthetic theory of horizontality, and the idealization of the woman child as a medium for the access to the unconscious, we will see why the history of Surrealist art seems to be literally covered with bodies of sleeping or seemingly-dead young women.

Furthermore, this aspect in Woodman seems to be linked to the deliberate choice of denoting her own limp, lying, motionless body with common props of femininity such as dress, flowers and underwear, instead of leaving it nude as she mostly does in the majority of her self-portraits. The use and over-use of accessories41 is in fact a typical feature of Woodman's self-portraits that has been variously associated to **fetishism**42, in that they simultaneously provide an

appropriation of the Surrealist fetish and an ironic critique of Surrealist fetishism. Garter belts, high-heeled shoes, jewellery, black Mary Jane shoes[43], gloves, stockings, Easter lilies, Calla lilies, are all there to reveal "both her burgeoning womanhood and her understanding and deliberate assertion of 'the fetish status of the woman's body' as defined by Western art in general and the Surrealist photographs of Man Ray and André Kertész in particular"[44].

Woodman's photographs are always characterized by an almost bare or basic setting in which her body and few other objects are displayed. Occasionally she portrays herself in the company of other people or in outdoor natural settings that, anyway, reveal little about the actual location, and practically nothing about the historical or social contemporary realities. Since 1972 Woodman started to transform her own environment adopting unusual dress, behaviour and inhabiting unique surroundings, which constantly amazed and charmed all those who fell under her fairy-like influence[45]. Her environments, often densely installed with different collections of objects, are always very important to Woodman and frequently appear as the settings of her photographs. Woodman seems to prefer indoor, domestic derelict uninhabited interiors, which she uses as a stage to enact her personal *mise-en-scene* where the props of her choice suddenly lose their own intrinsical predictability and finally rise to a new existence in a totally new relationship with the feminine subject. In a particularly meaningful example of this process (Roma, May 1977-August 1978), Woodman portrays herself nude and kneeling; with a hand she's hiding her pubis. In the foreground a white Calla lily has been put standing against a wall. The Calla lily is a symbol for pure, virginal love that here is instead positioned in order to resemble a phallic object, or rather a deadly one, since the Calla is also a poisonous flower and Woodman seems to be trying to protect herself from an unknown fate.

In *Horizontale* (Providence, Rhode Island, 1976-1977) Woodman adopts the same hiding gesture of the hand that, in this case, is doubly represented by a glove as a fetish and by the hand of the artist at the same time. What really looks amazing in this picture however, is the way in which Woodman's legs, bound by a ribbon forming a regular pattern on her flesh, create a contrast that plays against the geometric pattern of the rug below. In this way, if fetishism is the substitution of the unnatural for the natural, Woodman creates her own aesthetic object, a fetish of herself. A Surrealist precursor of *Horizontale* is Hans Bellmer's *Unica* (1958)[46], featuring the artist Unica Zürn wound tightly with a string that crops her body like a piece of meat, therefore eliciting questions about sadomasochism and its relation to art. We know by the way that the male Surrealists of the 1930s and 1940s celebrated the Marquis de Sade as the incarnation of the free erotic desire capable of transforming human consciousness[47]; in short, Surrealism can be said to have explored the possibility of a sexuality that is grounded in the idea of the *informe*, in fantasy and representation, rather than on 'human nature'[48].

A process of transformation of Woodman's body into an aesthetic object takes place in many of her self-portraits where her body is positioned and cropped to resemble something other, and it does so ironically, as if to confront and problematize her feminine identity – e.g. her body is denatured first into an embellished, mockingly feminine reproduction of Brassaï's phallic *Nude*[49] (1933) in one of her New York photographs (1979-80), then into a torso-face in one of her Providence series (1975-76) which ironically refers to Magritte's body-face in *Le Viol* (1934). But Woodman's attempted transformations of her body led her also further toward the accomplishment of proper physical metamorphoses, like in the three series *Angels* (1977-78), *House* (1975-76), *Space²* (1975-78).

Woodman always felt fascinated with the ways in which the human body could be made to seem an apparition. As a young teenager she photographed a naked person crawling through a large, cross-shaped gap in a tombstone. By using a slow exposure speed, she turned that person's body into a blur, even as she rendered the world around it bright and clear. Woodman used this technique throughout her life, photographing herself jumping, bending, waving, and stretching,

usually in near-empty rooms. In 1977 she started the series *On Being an Angel* while still in Providence, and then subsequently completed the *Angel Series* in Rome in 1978 (**Fig. 3**). Rosalind Krauss has hypothesized that some of Woodman's series might have originated from the framework of student assignments, and that the *Angel Series* might have stemmed from the need to respond to the task of photographing "a non-existent being"[50]. However true or not, Woodman's emphasis on distortions within structuring elements of physical and representational space, results here in the development of an ineffable, impossible attempt to experience something: Woodman's angel rises out of the bottom frame of the field, her breasts open out into the image, her wings float into light, her scream fills space.

During her year in Rome, the beauty of Baroque fountains had inspired Woodman's *Angel Series*, which she photographed partly in the premises of a spaghetti factory, but echoes of Italy pervaded Woodman's work in various changing forms also through the *Self-Deceit* and *Eel Series* (both accomplished in Rome), and would have haunted her work even back in New York, in her *Temple Project*. In retrospect Woodman's experience in Rome seems to have been essential for her to develop core aspects of her later work in a way that goes from her profound appreciation of Italian architecture, to her fascination with the eclectic Symbolist, Surrealist, and Futurist range of books, catalogues and journals she found in the Maldoror bookshop, as well as to the lasting friendship relationships she established with the bookshop's owners and other artists who in Rome, in 1978, were in a transition from Minimalism and Conceptual art to the later called *Transavanguardia*.

Deeply engaged in exploring the extreme limits of bodily experience, Woodman gives shape to a strongly performative work that unveils her fascination with margins and boundaries. In the *Angel*, *House*, and *Space*² series her body dissolves, mutates, merges with the environment, and just like the Surrealists themselves had anticipated, she breaks with the notion of the unitary self and embraces a defamiliarized and at times threatening body of fragmentation and incoherence. Woodman's work in the *House* and *Space*² series, both accomplished in Providence, offers images of the body that border on the unfamiliar, the uncanny, the transitional, and the grotesque. In the *House* series (**Fig. 4** and **Fig. 5**) Woodman explores issues of hybridity and transforms them into a self-reflexive project that owes much to Surrealism's concern with the collapse of interior and exterior reality, and finally leaves the body as a signifier of absence and deformity.

Distortions, faceless bodies, cropped bodies, dissolving bodies, all contribute to the idea of a constant transitionality and mutability of being. Woodman engages her body in a subtle and at times strongly dynamic physical exchange with the built environment, thus achieving the goal of both revealing and concealing her body and identity. She is the girl hidden under the detached mantel of the old fireplace, she is the woman in the wallpaper of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, imprisoned in the overlaying pattern, creeping around the circumference of the room, who is unnamed because the experience she is undergoing robs her of her identity. She is the presence haunting those decrepit surroundings, and like one of H.P. Lovecraft's gothic creatures, that in the writer's imagination had really haunted the houses of Providence, Woodman is the ghost inhabiting the unhealthy, damp, sinister atmosphere of that dilapidated house[51].

The Surrealist desire to dissolve any difference by blending the bodies with furnishings, architecture, or nature, responded to their belief in the possibility for dualities to coexist in a state of disunity; in fact for Breton, even the ultimate polarity between life and death could potentially coexist[52]. This desire in Woodman produces a strain of melancholy that most notably in the series *Space*² (**Fig. 6**) and *From Space*² succeeds in the accomplishment of a gloomy atmosphere of entrapment. While in some of the photographs she seems to be testing the potential of a dimly lit empty space in order to define it through the inscription of her freely moving body, in the 'cage' pictures (*From Space*², Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1976) the exploration of the

geometries is taken to extreme effect. The 'cage' pictures expose Woodman's nude body entrapped in a glass and wood display case she had found in the storerooms of a museum. In this cage her body presses against the glass panes, it shines as if caught by a blurring blaze of light, or it appears like a shadow of claustrophobic imprisonment. What mostly emerges from this series is first of all the way in which a three-dimensional space is made to fit the square frame of a picture and, secondly, the significant choice of a cage as an object of study.

A characteristic of Woodman is her fondness for the **square** photographic **format**. A horizontal format is a widely accepted way to make photographs, particularly if working with a figure in a landscape. By using a square format, Woodman creates a constricted space instead, in which a viewer is made aware of how the body is flattened and framed and, considering that many of her photographs address the representation of space, the square format seems a deliberate choice. The choice of the display cage, on the other hand, is strongly indebted to the conceptual interpretation of the idea of 'display', which renders Woodman's body at least doubly objectified by a gaze that pins her twice as an object. Barthes has eloquently made clear that any choice to photograph a subject inevitably transforms that subject in a spectacle, and that photography has the power to transform a subject in an object, literally into "a museum object"[53]. At the same time the museum glass display case intensifies the impression of 'being on display', eternally at the center of the gaze. Images of women trapped in cages have often been taken by the Surrealists to convey disturbing ideas of a female exoticized other, and of masculine control[54]. Namely, if one function of the cage is that of the display, another is that of preventing the escape of what is considered to be threatening and monstrous.

In a famous essay, Julia Kristeva identified the feminine space, and more precisely the metamorphosed maternal body, with the monstrosity of the abject[55]. That which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is considered abject; of course the concept of 'border' may change, but the function of what's considered monstrous is the same. *Woman*, being herself a sign of 'otherness' is therefore deemed as monstrous, as an exotic monster to catch, tame and exploit in order to gain access to hermetic knowledge. The Surrealist assault on Western assumptions of bodily wholeness and integrity, and obsessively on female bodily wholeness and integrity, follows the dissolution of the natural and the assumption that woman, being herself the fetish *par excellence*, is nowhere in nature. *Woman* and *photograph* become then "figures for each other's condition: ambivalent, blurred, indistinct, and lacking in…authority"[56]. In fact, part of Woodman's artistic aspiration seems to rely on the use of the photographic means to reflect on photography itself, and to reflect on how the entrapped feminine fetish is disfigured in order to disavow the accomplishment of female subjectivity.

To conclude this journey across Woodman's photographs and Surrealist imagination, I'd like to focus on two last pictures, both taken in Rome, that I see as emblematically linked to the issue of *othering* and *otherness*. The first picture (Providence, 1976) shows Woodman sitting on a chair in the corner of a bare, empty room (only her arms and legs are visible) and a dark human shape marked on the floor. The second picture, called *Yet Another Leaden Sky* (**Fig. 7**), shows Woodman heavily clothed in a dark frock hiding her face behind a round white object while confronting a giant tortoise that is crossing the room. The 'tortoise' picture is particularly striking because of its intrinsic absurdity, absurdity we only find in dreams. Here Woodman seems afraid of the exotic animal and hides her face as if seeking solace by choosing 'not to look'. The refusal to acknowledge the existence of the exotic in the realm of the everyday, domestic, cultural and urban interior, reflects the fear of the other as abject. The tortoise could be there as a symbol for the exotic objectification of the female self, for a threat of castrating female sexuality, or just as a metaphor for all the uncanny feelings people are afraid of, a metaphor for the need to shelter from the realities of life. Like Freud's 'uncanny' and like the mechanisms of dreamwork that so much fascinated the Surrealists, anything we find unidentifiable in terms of

'real world logic' belongs to the category of the *marvelous.* The marvelous, the exotic, the abject, all unite here in the creation of the uncanny other.

In the 'shadow' picture a human shape (presumably Woodman's) is lying at the feet of the sitting person whose fetish shoes mark as being Woodman herself. The issue of doubling as discussed earlier in this paper is self-evident; however there is more to it. I imagine that mark as being a water mark that Woodman made by simply lying on the floor. But water marks tend to dry and then fade, they are ephemeral, just like shadows, and phantoms. Freud sees the 'double' as an insurance against destruction to the ego, a denial of the power of death. In psychoanalytic terms, this double is the first narcissistic projection, the earliest form through which the soul is imagined. The double as shadow can be a self-projection, a locus of collapse of interior and exterior reality, a shield against limiting boundaries. And, in this self-representation in space, space itself is for Woodman like a "devouring force…[where] The body desolidifies with [her] thoughts, the individual breaks the boundary of [her] skin and occupies the other side of [her] senses...[Where she] feels [herself] becoming space"57.

As a woman of the 1970s, Woodman gets outside of the corporal limitations of her female human **frame** through the very act of incorporating herself as subject of her own art. Applying strategies of doubling, fetishization, and metamorphosis, Woodman renegotiates bodily, temporal, and spiritual boundaries. Her body, as the main signifier for feminine identity, symbolizes a margin that not only delimits the morphology of her imaginary self, but also allows the access to the unfamiliar, the social, the symbolic. Her body is an open boundary between the outer reality, the social institutions, the unconscious, the "Other". In brief, following Freud, Woodman affirms that we can become **subjects** only to the extent to which we also are **bodies**. So, if again we wanted to ask, *What happens when woman finds herself in the empty space between the gaze and her objectified image?* In Woodman's own words, woman would multiply her image and, in the midst of so many illusory ghosts of herself, she would conceal the true herself, who makes them move.58

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1 Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London and Basingstroke: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 6- 7 (italics mine).

2 Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli, Gwen Raaberg, eds., *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 1991), p. 2.

3 Ibid., p. 6.

4 Jean Baudrillard, 'Symbolic Exchange and Death' in Mark Poster ed., *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988) pp. 119-148: 145.

5 Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, p. 20.

6 Ibid., p. 8.

7 Ibid., pp. 5-6.

8 Ibid., p. 19.

9 Ibid., p. 8.

10 Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 4.

11 Ibid., p. 92.

12 De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, p. 36.

13 Whitney Chadwick, ed., *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 3-4.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 5.

16 Ibid., p. 6.

17 Laura Cottingham, ed., *Seeing Through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art* (Singapore: G+B Arts International, 2000), p. 119.

18 Ibid., p. 121.

19 See for instance Adrian Piper's performances in the streets of New York with balloons stuffed under her clothes, bubble gum stuck over her face, wet paint on the front of her shirt; Eleanor Antin's self-imposed weight loss; Carolee Schneemann's trapeze-style performance while suspended nude from a ceiling; Linda Montano's positioning in public dressed like a chicken.

20 George Woodman was primarily a painter from the 1950s until 1987, when he turned to photography full-time. For nearly 40 years he has divided his time between the U.S. and Italy, and he has visited the Pitti collection regularly (the exhibition included work from the last eight years). His photographic images are highly constructed, with elements often double exposed or reversed, and layered over other images of objects, people or nature. Betty Woodman is a well-known ceramist.

21 Abigail Salomon-Godeau, 'Just Like A Woman', in *Francesca Woodman: Photographic Work* (Providence: Wellesley College and Hunter College Art Gallery, 1986) pp. 11-37: 18.

22 Photographs in which the image is modified by melting the negative emulsion before printing. Ubac describes the procedure as a system of placing the glass plate of an exposed negative over a heated pan of water in order to melt the emulsion (Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingston. *L'Amour Fou. Photography and Surrealism*. New York: Cross River Press: p.42).

23 Cameraless "photograms" produced by placing objects directly on photographic paper, subsequently exposed to light (Ibid. p. 24)

24 Photographic paper is briefly exposed to light during the printing process, thereby altering in varying degrees the relationship of dark and light tones, introducing elements of the photographic negative into the positive print (Ibid., p. 28).

25 Expression borrowed from, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. J. and D. Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 339-40.

26 As argued also in 'Corpus Delicti' by Rosalind Krauss, *L'Amour Fou*, p. 78.

27 Whitney Chadwick discusses this point in her introductory chapter to *Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*, p. 29.

28 Discussed in Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice', in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), pp. 72-82: 75.

29 Ibid., p. 76.

30 Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses)Notes Toward an Investigation)', in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971)

31 Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender. Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1987), p. 10.

32 Jacques Lacan, 'Le Stade du Miroir Comme Formateur de la Fonction du Je', *Ecrits* (Paris : Seuil, 1966) ; in English as 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I', *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1982).

33 The formation of the subject around a dynamic of seeing/not-seeing that initiates the castration anxiety around which male sexuality is formed. In Whitney Chadwick, *Mirror Images*, p. 8.

34 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. And ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-73), vol. 17, pp. 234-35.

35 Otto Rank, *The Double*, trans. Harry Tucker, Jr. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

36 Ibid., pp. 62-3.

37 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 14.

38 Just think about Breton's fascination with Charcot's study on hysteria and Dalì's famous 1933 photo collage in which he identified hysteria with the phenomenon of ecstasy.

39 An axial rotation from vertical to horizontal of the subject of representation, which apparently allowed the achievement of the *informe* - or rather of the shapelessness of meaning –Georges Bataille, 'Informe', *Documents* 1, no. 7 (December 1929) : 382.

40 This image of ecstatic inspiration was at the same time one of innocence and sexual ambiguity, at once erotic and irrational.

41 Notice how in Fig.5 Woodman appears as wearing 4 garter belts, surrounded by 2 pairs of stockings, looking herself like a garment left there lying on the sofa. If underwear garments have been commonly associated to fetish objects and therefore to phallic power, then Woodman's body in this picture has to be interpreted as a strong symbol of phallic power.

42 Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Dialogue and Double Allegiance. Some Contemporary Women Artists and the Historical Avant-Garde', in Whitney Chadwick, *Mirror Images*, pp. 128-154: 146-7.

43 See for example the use of the same type of 'schoolgirl' shoes in the *Poupées* series (1935) by Hans Bellmer.

44 Posner, 'The Self and the World. Negotiating Boundaries in the Art of Yayoi Kusama, Ana Mendieta, and Francesca Woodman', in *Mirror Images*, pp. 156-171: 167.

45 While at Abbot, sleeping in her closet, Woodman turned her room into a photography studio. It was when she filled the room with feathers that she provoked the house authorities, and her parents were advised that she was "too extreme". (Ann Gabhart. 'Francesca Woodman 1958-1981', in *Francesca Woodman:Photographic Work*, Wellesley College Museum and Hunter College Art Gallery ed., 1986: 53-58, 53).

46 Bellmer's photos of Unica had appeared on the cover of the Surrealist journal *Le Surréalisme, même*, no.4 (Spring 1958) – not hard to find for Woodman during her period at the RISD (1976-77). Furthermore, a number of books and articles about Surrealist eroticism appeared in the 1970s, with discussion and illustration of Bellmer's work. During

Woodman's stay in Rome (1977-78), she surely saw Surrealist photographic work in the avant-garde bookstore Maldoror; and also subsequently in New York (1979-80) when she met the art collector Timothy Baum, who also owns some Bellmer photographs.

47 See for instance Mary Ann Caws, et al., *Surrealism and Women*, pp. 19-20.

48 Rosalind Krauss, 'Corpus Delicti', in Rosalind Krauss, *L'Amour Fou*, pp. 55-112: 95.

49 Brassaï, *Nude* (1933); in this famous photograph, the female body and the male organ have each become the sign for the other. Another interpretation of this photograph by Woodman (Fig.13) is given by Susan Rubin Suleiman in her essay 'Dialogue and Double Allegiance', in which she argues that Woodman might have found her inspiration again from one of Bellmer's *Unica* photographs.

50 Rosalind Krauss, 'Francesca Woodman: Problem Sets', in Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999), pp.161-177: 173.

51 "The small-paned windows were largely broken, and a nameless air of desolation hung round the precarious panelling, shaky interior shutters, peeling wallpaper, falling plaster, rickety staircases, and such fragments of battered furniture as still remained. The dust and cobwebs added their touch of the fearful", H.P. Lovecraft, 'The Shunned House' (1924), http://www.dagonbytes.com/thelibrary/lovecraft/theshunnedhouse.htm, The Complete Works of H.P Lovecraft, visited on 28 April 2004.

52 Posner, 'Negotiating Boundaries in the Art of Kusama, Mendieta, and Woodman', in *MirrorImages*, 156-171: 158.

53 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 13.

54 See for example Man Ray's *Mannequin*, 1938.

55 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 53-55.

56 Rosalind Krauss, 'Corpus Delicti', p. 95.

57 Roger Caillois, 'Mimetisme et Psychasténye Legéndaire', *Minotaure*, no. 7 (1935), pp. 8-9. Quoted in Rosalind Krauss, *L'Amour Fou*, p. 74.

58 Francesca Woodman, *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* (Philadelphia: Synapse Press, 1981)