

Quaderno Raffaello: Anticipation and Delight

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This paper provides an analysis of Francesca Woodman's photographic Book, known variously as *Quaderno*, *Quaderno Raffaello* and in the facsimile edition published in 2011, *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*.¹

The paper, here with some minor modifications, forms Chapter 6 of my thesis “*Almost A Square: The Photographic Books of Francesca Woodman and Their Relationship to Surrealism*”, University of Essex, 2012.² This thesis investigates Francesca Woodman's work within the framework of surrealist ideas materialised, though not exclusively, in photography.

I argue in this thesis, sustained by my parallel and comparative investigations of André Breton's *Nadja* (1928, revised 1963) and Woodman's Books, that it is in her five found object Books that Woodman comes closest to demonstrating her deep comprehension of the activating position of images to words in *Nadja*, thereby contributing to the extension of first wave surrealist ethic into her own era.

The thesis includes what is to date the only full descriptive and interpretative analysis of all six of the photographic books that Woodman made in her lifetime.

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Succinct in presentation and finite both in its form and its message, the short Book *Quaderno Raffaello* is, in the intervention made by Woodman to its found object base, both an urgent missive to a lover and a playful sexual summons. Measuring eight and three sixteenths inches by five and fifteen sixteenths inches when closed, it opens to a double page width of eleven inches and five sixteenths.

¹ Francesca Woodman, *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*, Milan, Silvana Editoriale, 2011.

² See

<http://serlib0.essex.ac.uk/search~S5?Xdunhill&searchscope=5&SORT=D/Xdunhill&searchscope=5&SORT=D&SUBKEY=dunhill/1.5.5.B/frameset&FF=Xdunhill&searchscope=5&SORT>

Described as *Quaderno Raffaello* in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni catalogue, I would speculate that this Book is of a later date than both *Angels, Calendars*, from around 1977 to 1978 and *Portraits Friends Equasions* made in around 1978 to 1979, but slightly earlier than or concurrent with the published *some disordered interior Geometries*, which dates from 1980.³ Thus, like *Quaderno dei Dettati e dei Temi*, it can be placed in the 1979-1980 period, when Woodman had been back in the United States a full year and living in New York City. This dating system, however, does not necessarily harness the Book's images tightly to an alleged period.

Quaderno Raffaello is one of two Books in which Woodman uses transparencies and semi-transparencies taped onto and over the original text rather than positive, full opacity prints.⁴ This method allows the original copperplate script in its rhythmically blocked written paragraphs of magenta ink, in this instance on a European squared base page, to be mysteriously visible through the image stuck on to the page. Each photographic image is attached with one piece of sellotape down the length of its left side.

Containing seven applied Woodman images, the original Book has a pink front cover adorned with peacock feathers and edelweiss flowers, over and under a scrolled illustration of a smoking factory in an industrial complex.⁵ *Quaderno* is printed in a large copperplate script, under which the small adverb *di* (of or from, belonging to), is printed before an empty line for the student's name. In this space

³ Achille Bonito Oliva, curator, *Francesca Woodman: Providence, Roma, New York* (exhibition catalogue, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, 2000), Rome, Castelvechi Arte, 2000, 203.

⁴ The other is *Quaderno dei Dettati e dei Temi*.

⁵ Woodman, *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*, 2011, 3.

Woodman has written her name, using a mock copperplate, to play with the idea of being in tandem with the period of her chosen base work. An energetic erasure of the former student's name by Woodman is visible underneath. The then popular baroque illustrative ambiance of the front cover details an alternative printer to her earlier Book *Portraits Friends Equasions* (*Raffaele Stani* of Naples) and to *some disordered interior Geometries* (whose printers were based in Rome).⁶ The printer in the present case is *Cartieri Franco Rossi*, of Perale. The Book's name alludes both to *Raffaele Stani*, the Naples printers of the *Portraits Friends Equasions*, template and to an Italian boyfriend of Francesca's.

Quaderno Raffaello's front cover illustrations have the breadth to incorporate most academic subjects at school level; whereas the back cover, with its neatly presented geometric forms differs from the front as it has a specialised format.⁷ This has a regularly displayed selection of geometric forms inside a decorative border printed on it. These include rhomboids, a cylinder, a triangular pyramid, and an octagon. Woodman has stapled pages in between the two covers. The codes and symbols of another discipline subvert the analysis of theological text in the original book's content. Woodman will subvert it anew in her subject matter.

All the interior pages appear to have been flattened and re-arranged from a codex format into a single foolscap folio page which shows the two 'open' pages side by

⁶ Woodman would certainly have noticed and probably encouraged the coincidence between the named subject of this Book, *Raffaello* (her boyfriend) and the printer's name, *Raffaele*, of *Portraits Friends Equasions*. Typically, she leaves the coincidence to float unanchored.

⁷ Woodman, *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*, 2011, 20.

side.⁸ Evidence of staple holes along the top edges of the pages indicates Woodman's method of making the selected pages into a book. By her action of stapling the pages together along their top edge, she has trapped the codex format into obsolescence. This action is made more curious by the consequent continuous flow of original script with no gap between the pages. In this method at times the original script's sense is retained and at times it is fractured. The archivist has removed Woodman's staples for the ease and clarity of photographic record and the prioritisation of an upright position for both the original script and Woodman's image would seem inevitable.

A dynamic narrative composite is contained within the seven image chain in the pages of *Quaderno Raffaello*. It shares a direct focus on a mono-narrative and its foolscap format with Woodman's much earlier *Portrait of a Reputation* (of ca 1975). Every added transparency is positioned similarly on the page; at just above half way up over the script area, so that two-thirds of the template's script is visible under the image and one-third above. Each transparency is placed and stuck on a right-hand page. The first double page of the Book has a blank bright pink end-paper area on the left side opposite the image. This is repeated in reverse on the final page so that the bright pink area occurs on the final page in place of an image, to the right of a script page. This attention to rhythmic symmetry so typical of Woodman creates a tight form in which to hold the dynamic narrative.

⁸ Foolscap folio, a standard paper size in European use since the fifteenth century up to the introduction of A0-A6 as European standard in the late 1970s, measured 17 inches by 13 1/2 inches.

call collect 901-274-4184

in hoping

The last phrase, the annotation to the penultimate image, is placed away from the image and in a different position from all the previous ones, exceptionally in this Book, beneath both image and original text. It is written horizontally, in rhythm with the original text, but breaking dramatically from her annotative text. It breaks too from the preceding annotations by being written in a contemporary script. The ambiguity present between the word *i(')m* where a dot could form the apostrophe and *in* is probably deliberate. The artist would have enjoyed pushing through double meanings. She has added two dots above each of the two words. These catch and repeat the round form of the ball in this image. Woodman has probably responded too to the chance event of there being two dots and a small pink ink glow showing through the ball in the foreground. Does the ball to symbolise hope?

The first image of the Book depicts a female figure standing in a slightly coquettish pose on the right middle ground.⁹ She is wearing a dark old-fashioned wig and what looks like a belted white night-dress. Her head is turned fully side on while she preens herself. She adjusts her clothing, brushes off some dust or perhaps looks in a hand mirror. Her legs are crossed over each other in a carefree, flippant position. Unwanted garments are dropped on the floor beside her, in strong tonal contrast, of course, to a dark, rug-patterned floor. A long mirror is propped at an angle in the left corner of the room. In its props of mirror and table

⁹ Woodman, *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*, 2011, 5.

and of a female figure in the process of dressing, this image is a more straightforward and lighter version of the image pair in *some disordered interior Geometries* (there with a chair, not a table).¹⁰ It is divided into three sections and reflects a corner of a left central white wooden table and a white crumpled piece of clothing on the floor. Woodman has conjured an image in which she is happily occupied, not without irony, with the fripperies of adornment; in expectation of her lover. She is mesmerised by daily dreams and in a state of relaxed self-absorption. This image captures an afternoon light. The diaristic element is immediate and made urgent by the annotation *call me as soon as* which pulls the audience directly into a moment which they share. We want more; we want the phrase to be completed straightaway and we cannot wait to turn the page.

On the next page the phrase is extended into another annotated section where it is still readable as a separate, emphatic, statement fragment and as a nugget of poetry *you can. I am.*¹¹ Woodman might be borrowing a full stop from the underlying text, teasingly, so that the phrase *I am* can be interpreted both as an end, *I am* and as a beginning *I am (In my beginning is my end)*.¹² Remembering that the American word for a rubbish bin is trash *can*, the image which visualises the phrase, in depicting a bin, could be construed as a literal clue as well as a desired surrealist crossover pun between a word and an image. In a converse manner, André Breton similarly puns through image into word, in the superb

¹⁰ See Chris Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, London, Phaidon, 2006, 238.

¹¹ Woodman, *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*, 2011, 7.

¹² T S Eliot, *Four Quartets* (originally published 1944), London, Faber & Faber, 1986, 21, 27. The first line of the second Quartet, *East Coker*, is repeated as the first line of the second stanza and inverted, *in my end is my beginning*, as the final line of the quartet: a circularity that fuses well with Woodman's often mathematical sense of construction.

conflation of image and word in the last pastoral and symbolic image of the revised edition of *Nadja: LES AUBES*.¹³

Here the printing of the background is in so dark a tone that it is hard to distinguish the hint of form/s on the right of the bin. Is the form (human figure?) leaning against the bin, falling out of it or hiding behind it? There is too the implied reference to Samuel Beckett.¹⁴ I guess that it is probably a seated Woodman-wraith dressed in a reflective material like satin, only the folds of which are visible; a Woodman in typical half-obliteration. The vertical folds of her garment and the sheen of its fabric reflect the texture and fluted structure of the galvanised metal *can* in an example of Bretonian *circumstantial magic*.¹⁵ This image has resonances to an image in the *Dettati e Temi* Book, in which Woodman is seen clinging to the vintage iron lamp post she has climbed.

The third Woodman image in the present Book shows the same garment as seen before but here it is draped over the back of a wooden country chair.¹⁶ It is creased and shiny, as of satin, again. Woodman's hand over the chair's back holds it in place as its folds hang down to the floor on the left of the chair. Supplying the subject of the previous annotation's *I am*, with immediacy, this handwritten caption reads *anxiously waiting*. Her tentative visibility in the image (her hand and one foot only) and the shimmering quality of the empty dress, which might or

¹³ André Breton, *Nadja* (Breton's revised 1963 edition, originally published Paris, Gallimard, 1964), Paris, Gallimard/Folio Plus, reprinted 1998 with dossier by Michel Meyer, 154. See also http://www.andrebreton.fr/Resources/Assets/56600100891710/HR_56600100891710_1.jpg

¹⁴ In Beckett's play *Endgame*, written in 1958, the character Nell lives in a dustbin.

¹⁵ This is one component of his theory of *Convulsive Beauty*, fully expounded in Breton's *L'Amour fou*.

¹⁶ Woodman, *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*, 2011, 9.

might not be worn, become emblematic of her apprehensive and nervous state, the state of not knowing, expecting and yet not yet being able to give full rein to the expectation.

On the chair's seat is placed a favourite truth symbol of Woodman's: the dragonfly, visible at an angle on a light block. The chair, white painted or of a light natural wood, is photographed exactly central in the composition. Its form is lit from the left along with the draped dress it supports and the artist's hand. The remaining area to the right of the chair, across three quarters of the image square horizontally and one third of it vertically, is shot in very dark tone. Through this area the fingers of Woodman's hand just appear, holding the chair's top, making a good formal visual repetition of the linear chair-back uprights. The result of this is that the *L*-shape formed disintegrates the plane of floor and wall and makes a surface too opaque for the original script to penetrate. The rectangle of transparent light tone on the top left of the image permits the copperplate underwriting to be seen in the regular rhythms that are its beauty.

And at a point made visible by her use of a darker toned ink, Woodman has underscored one phrase of the under-script, which I can decipher as *la tua signora*, 'your woman'. In this gesture she appropriates a piece of the original poetry for her own narrative-poem and simultaneously intervenes in the aesthetic sanctuary of the horizontal antique cursive by transgressing it with her twentieth century vertical mark; her script.

If *waiting* is interpreted visually by the near-vacuum of the empty chair in this image and the word *anxiously* is (very imaginatively) once more interpreted by the shimmering satin of the draped dress, we can move into an interpretation of the next image's annotation *your reply* as denoting both the fullness of certainty and a readiness for the emotional exposure and discomfort that truth might bring.¹⁷

Here Woodman stands looking deliberately sumptuous in the satin evening dress, now full after its empty flopping over the chair in the previous image. The flouncing of her jutting hip, in this self-consciously *sexy* pose, causes the satin material to open out its folds towards the chair's corner. This corner is still draped with another piece of *anxious* un-ironed, un-ready, vintage satin, perhaps as a reminder of Plan B. Its high-lit folds direct the eye to the dragonfly. These folds make a triangular form which extends and continues the angles of folds of the worn dress (these too form a triangular structure) and incorporates the double diagonal of Woodman's arms. The dragonfly picture is here developed in importance and held emphatically towards the audience in Woodman's open hand over the chair back. She will know the truth, the answer, the *reply* and she is ready, expectant and glamorous, for the desired erotic encounter, that seduction, imagined in the fullness of this image.

The central position in this Book held by this image in would have been considered important by Woodman with her high awareness of mathematical

¹⁷ Woodman, *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*, 2011, 11. Although necessary here for the analysis, the concept of a direct visual interpretation of a word, though sometimes occurrent in the photographic Books, substantially limits the subtle confluence between the two spheres that is mastered by Woodman.

structure. This image can be seen as the apex of a triangle, with its two bases formed by the three images which precede and follow it. Nevertheless not a slave to mathematics, Woodman makes a dramatic deviation from her evolved pattern, constituting an arrest, by leaving the Book's final image un-annotated.

The next image returns from the fantasy conjured by its predecessor to give the would-be lover the wherewithal to make a meeting possible: the exactitude of an American telephone number, *901-274-4184*.¹⁸ In its precision the given number transforms the audience's position from that of an interested spectator into that of an urgent and intimate participant.

This is achieved by a lightning flash element of surprise, its impact in offering a sudden shared intimacy comparable to that of Boiffard's photograph in *Nadja* of the shady canopied restaurant in Place Dauphine. In that photograph we see the starch-cloths on the tables ready for dinner, enhanced by the caption *We have our dinner served outside by the wine seller*.¹⁹ Even when consideration is given to the fact that Breton's image primarily inflects his main text (from which it is directly lifted) and Woodman's caption primarily inflects her image, both examples share the effect of an abrupt pulling of the audience into an intimate narrative moment.

Woodman's caption begins with the admonishment to *call* and reverse the charges of the call. For the first time in this Book the annotation *call collect 901-274-418* spills out above its transparent image border into the primary copperplate.

¹⁸ Woodman, *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*, 2011, 13.

¹⁹ André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard with added intro. by Mark Polizzotti, Harmondsworth (UK), Penguin, 1999, 82.

In an important departure from the compositional situations of the three preceding images, this image depicts a large interior space with a dramatic perspective marked by three big windows. The natural light they afford glides and shines onto a mainly uncluttered wooden floor in compressed diagonals. It is the half-light of dawn or dusk when the sun is low in the sky; it half-lights the figure and the few objects in the stark interior. No sign of the satins and other props of the last four images are here; this interior is decidedly a non-domestic space, a studio. The figure, probably Woodman, stands close to a battered cardboard box or leather trunk and next to the vertical form of a cylinder, perhaps a large roll of photographic paper. The strong dark tone on the left of the figure here confuses rather than dissolves its form. It appears to be Woodman or her model, performing, an 'ordinary' self; dressed in an outfit remarkable for being *ordinary*: a light cardigan with a dark straight skirt. Her head appears bowed and the one arm visible is folded behind her back.

She is about to travel or move house. An oblong ball that is doubled by its shadow on a shiny floor (to Woodman's left), here works as a symbol of hope or anticipation. (The ball recurs in the next, penultimate image.) At the far back corner of the space is an empty, dark chair, which is a very different empty chair from the white version of the preceding two photographs, but again it symbolises expectancy.

Read as narrative, our protagonist is ready, her trunk and photograph roll at her side, her habitat has changed; she seems to be waiting for the arrival of a train, her lover, a change, in a summons from the telephone call.

Possibly shot in the far corner of the space used in the above image, the next image depicts a doll-like Woodman, seated in the same white country chair as that used in earlier images in the Book.²⁰ She appears doll-like partly because her body leans out from the chair's stability as if controlled by wood and rivets rather than musculature. And she is dressed in a long, patterned skirt with a tucked-in old fashioned blouse, resembling a 1930s country American from an Andrew Wyeth painting or a Walker Evans photograph. Her figure is unsteady and appears to be very close to toppling off the chair. Even her bare toes are curled away from the low chair bar on which they rest. This precarious position, the lean sideways, is dangerous; visually symbolic of the danger she is in, in exposing herself to hope, as her annotation *in hoping* encapsulates. She holds her stomach, the seat of emotion, with one hand. She is right in the back corner of a large room falling, at the image base, into deep shadow. The area of shadow expands in a giddy perspective towards a foreground that is more like a bleak 'distance' than an interior, in which the only marked point is a white, near perfect, orb: the now-round ball. Near us, it is out of reach for her cowering, frightened, figure. Again, when projected as a symbol of hope, it can roll in any direction. It is photographed here saturated with light, in strong contrast to the deep shadow in which it was shot in the previous image.

²⁰ Woodman, *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*, 2011, 15.

In this image Woodman again photographs herself with her head off-camera. It is for us to imagine, in the thread of the narrative, whether she has received the desired telephone call or not. Is she in a newly intensified state of nervous anticipation? The annotation, for the first time in the Book, significantly, is written in her natural 1970s handwriting. It is also placed, importantly and again for the first time in the Book, under the image and under the original script's end. Her caption is inflected with a kind of zany optimism by this change: she has added two pairs of watching eyes in a double dotting above each word. A larger dot is also apparent on the ball, in a happy manoeuvring of the under-script in which she has also brightened an area of pink ink.

The final image of the Book is un-annotated.²¹ It is both the climax and the consequence of the six annotated images that precede it. We, the audience, have our dénouement. Woodman's/the protagonist's expectations are realised in a narrative sense in a simultaneous parody. Here, strikingly, without annotation, (for the first time in the Book), the image shows a half-naked Woodman in the role of an extrovert seductress, displaying her ankle-booted legs and bottom, in a performance staged for a seated spectator/lover. We can see very little of this *lover*, just a little of the head is visible above the back, in a black rectangle, of a traditional armchair. But surely the head's top is furry, that of a bear, not that of a human. The absence of an annotation implies a relaxation of control as well as a strong inflection of the image. The narrative is being propelled from the distillation of the art form back into the arena of a real, surreal life.

²¹ Woodman, *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*, 2011, 17.

Thus retaining a subtlety up to the end, Woodman reminds us with the device of humour that the reality of her personal life will only be revealed when a creative necessity pushes it through crevices in her project for us to glimpse.

The final double page spread of the Book has no image attached to it and the original script page on the right has been torn out and pieces of it re-stuck onto the opposite page²². These fragments disrupt the script's linear flow, in one instance at a right angle like that of the annotations on previous pages. They partially obliterate small areas of script and make jagged what is everywhere else in the Book a straight edge. A strong vivid pink, the card of the cover's inside is exposed, repeating the inside front cover's motif. Bright endpapers amongst the interior pages' pale buff norm. The torn and re-stuck residue of the last script page constitutes a purposeful fragmentation that is an aesthetic change of gear. Its torn triangles overlap the bright blank the pink page offers as the Book's end and the narrative's continuance.

As in all six Books considered in my thesis, narrative readings, amongst so many other possible readings, are in this instance most intensively fulfilled at the same time as being deliberately unresolved or disrupted, remaining cryptic and open-ended for their audience.²³

²² Woodman, *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*, 2011, 18-19.

²³ See footnote 2 above.