

Connections, Intersections and Coincidences: Woodman's Voyages in the Wide Surrealist Sea

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This paper offers an analysis of the links between the images in Francesca Woodman's photographic Books and a number of surrealist photographs by other artists.

The paper forms Chapter 8 of my thesis "*Almost A Square: The Photographic Books of Francesca Woodman and Their Relationship to Surrealism*", University of Essex, 2012.¹ 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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In this chapter I will investigate visual links between Woodman's Book images and selected photographic images from the body of first and second wave surrealism in Europe and the US. I will reiterate my premise argued in Chapter 1, that Woodman was both conversant with and responsive to the field of high experimentation, occurring particularly in Paris, in surrealist interwar

¹ See <http://serlib0.essex.ac.uk:80/record=b1805431~S5>

photographic practice. I will provide evidence of her continuing response, through *intersections and coincidences* to this period of the movement's history; that efflorescence of visual ideas made possible by the interchange of talent.

While in no way subjugating her own ideas and talents to those of these predecessors, her images are flagged out in small or large, always profound and considered, visual references born of knowledge that is both deep and wide, in a tribute to the earlier era.² This tribute constitutes the construction of a trans-historical dialogue pervading her work.

I would first like to investigate what I believe to be an extremely strong visual connection between the photograph by Man Ray chosen by Breton to demonstrate, in *L'Amour fou*, the *explosante-fixe* component of his convulsive beauty theory (fig 146); and an image made by Woodman in Providence between the years 1975 and 1976 (fig 147).

Man Ray's image, made in 1934, is a fine encapsulation of this element of convulsive beauty. The compression of powerful and vigorous motion caught in a blur by the camera produces a force of opposition between movement and its arrest. This opposition is held in strong contrapuntal axis in the visualisation of internal combustion through the arrested motion of the dancer. Probably dancing *flamenco*, she moves in a strong floor-stamping contraction which propels her central spinal energy downwards. Simultaneously the motion is opposed by the lifting of her arms in a controlled gesture that is born of the Spanish spirit of

² This apposite phrase is borrowed from Dawn Ades in 'Orbits of the Savage Moon' in Chadwick, ed., *Mirror Images*, 1998, 107.

duende, that dark side of ecstasy. Here a deliberate and highly effective blurring is evolved particularly through an abstract display of the shimmering concertina folds of the dancer's gown. The blurring varies in its intensity in accord with the dance enacted. The dance is both its cause and its effect. It displays the spread and speed of her movement in different registrations of clear focus and blurring. Her head, held at forty five degrees from her body, blurs her hair into a state of *unheimlich* 'fur'. In its containment near the centre of the image rectangle, Man Ray emphasises the *explosante-fixe* quality of the dancer's intrinsically combustible and uncontainable character in an impossible stasis of locked movement, that explosion of opposites. The photograph's strong light source from the right exaggerates the crisp and complex structure of her garments' folds on that side. This creates a separate wildly moving abstract form.

In what will be read as a response to Man Ray's image, Woodman's photographed figure is arched back in an opposite movement. Her figure is in a movement of expansion that is equally dramatic to his dancer's contraction and in contrast to Man Ray's, refuses the confinement of the rectangle by spilling out swathes and folds of dress material in one giant splaying action around and above the female figure and beyond the rectangle. The woman has her head thrown back out of sight as if a tornado had forced the action, in a reverse replication of Man Ray's dancer, whose downward movement eliminates all trace of face and neck. Neither of the two images contains any facial identification. Woodman has responded to the highlight which gracefully traces Man Ray's dancer's dress hemline by highlighting the small and only edge of patterned material inside her image border, half way down its right side. Her interest in material and its patterning and

texture is an innate theme in her work, particularly pursued in her Book *Quaderno dei Dettati e dei Temi*, discussed in Chapter 5.

Here Woodman makes the choice to hold in clear focus most of the large area of quilted (eiderdown) fabric on the right side of her image. The folds of the eiderdown spill out in swathes of tension from the figure in an extension of her boundary. But she blurs the main dressed figure while holding onto a clearer focus of her *flesh* area of shoulders, neck and arm. By this means she accentuates the thrust of the woman's dramatic movement backward out of the frame. Similarly, the eiderdown's square quilting provides a gentle static in contrast to the figure's arched movement in the tension of combustion: in explosion, as well as to its own tightly pulled substance in vast wing-like folds. A passing reference must be made too, in the probability that Woodman would have seen it, to the photograph of Hélène Vanel performing the *Unconsummated Act* at the International Surrealist Exhibition held in Paris in 1938.³

Woodman's response and tribute to another key first wave surrealist photograph, the Rogi André image of an underwater swimmer (fig 148) reproduced in Breton's *L'Amour fou* as *Seeming to swim*, takes form in a trio of images. For this comparison I shall consider her image Again the figure position is reversed.⁴ Her courage to recreate the essential qualities of such a seminal image reveals her ingenuity and determination combined with her extraordinary imagination. Within

³ Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros*, 2005, 53.

⁴ This image was first published in 1935 in *Minotaure* and then in 1937 in Breton's *L'Amour fou*. It is clearly inspired by the love heroine of *L'Amour fou*, Jacqueline Lamba. An earlier image made by Brassai and published in *Minotaure* in 1933 (reproduced in Krauss and Livingston, *L'Amour fou*, 1985, 56) must also have influenced Woodman's compositions. This is of a nude female, her upper half-torso high-lit and raised, her head similarly arched back out of shot.

this image connection, a ninety degree re-positioning occurs, instead of the one hundred and eighty degree angle-change occurring in the Man Ray and the Woodman images just discussed.

André's image depicts the full figure of a nude female swimmer in near profile. The image is preceded (four pages earlier), by a section of Breton's seminal poem

La Nuit de Tournesol:

*Some of them seem to swim like that woman
And in love there enters a bit of their substance
She interiorizes them*⁵

The swimmer's arms are outstretched in tension behind her and the double-point made by her legs, in their upward angle, recedes slightly away from the front plane. The elegant muscular tension of the legs' action suggests the movement of a trained dancer. André accentuates the area of her figure's upper torso, head, shoulders and breasts by high-lighting it. She thereby creates the ambience of a majestic ship's figure-head.

Woodman responds to the accentuation of this part of André's image by containing only the, here re-angled, area of the figure in her image *On Being an Angel #1* (fig 40) in a masterful re-capitulation of a first wave classic not dissimilar to the clever approach in her strong response to Man Ray's *Veiled Erotic* series of the print/woman allegory acted by Meret Oppenheim, as described by Riches. She deliberately deepens the tone of the part of her image which could include some pictorial evidence of the remaining torso.

⁵ Breton, *Mad Love*, 1987, 55-56.

The Woodman image I discuss here is both powerful, wonderfully majestic and unsettling. We are convinced of her *Angel's* position above eye level, close up and like André's, figurehead-like, centrally balanced and dominating the square of her composition, until we notice the unmistakable recognition marks of a floor: the dividing lines between the boards. She has used the ingenious device of inversion to suspend our disbelief. And a small organic form, perhaps an acorn or quince, opposes gravity beside her, magnetically attached to the ceiling/floor and so twinning her angelic antics through understatement. The use of an extreme light/dark contrast pushes the drama of the image to its furthest point.⁶

Woodman's statuesque pose is a compacted contraction of a figure; her face is unusually visible. It maintains a serene expression with the mouth closed.

A linked image, the second proposed as made in response to André's image (fig 39) is one in which she makes her primary investigation of the *angels* theme.

Made in Providence in spring 1977, shortly before the period when the *Angels, Calendars Book* was taking form in Rome, this image is given the same title, *On Being an Angel* (but without a number). It repeats the other's body section and turned-angle technique in an expanded allusion to André's *Seeming to swim*.

It differs strongly in ambience from both *On Being an Angel #1* and André's image. The angel here is at menacing and in distress; *in extremis*. Seemingly she is forced floor-wards and into one position. Notable on the same wooden floor, in

⁶ André's image, in Breton's analysis, "*Seemed to swim*" ... "*seemed to dance*," said of a woman walking, may even have the meaning here of "*seems to dance under the water* ..." (Breton, *Mad Love*, 1987, 63). The poem, *Sunflower* ('La Nuit de Tournesol'), is a key surrealist text, which Woodman is sure to have known, especially fine lines like *Despair was swirling its great lovely calla lilies in the sky* (Breton, *Mad Love*, 1987, 55).

a continuance of an 'optional' narrative thread, if so read, are the same props of an umbrella and this time a record player in the middle distance. Shot so that her arched body is invisible apart from her part-torso and part-face, the contraction of visible form is almost inhuman as it condenses into a distortion of pain, as if the form left invisible has been violently severed. The mouth is wide open in a dark and silently screaming hole lined at the bottom by three high-lit creature teeth. Her wrist has become *unheimlich* in its backward, handleless arch in another reflection perhaps of Vanel's 1938 performance.⁷ This is a brilliant and disturbing image, in which Woodman addresses surrealism's Batailleian underbelly.

An intimate resonance exists too between a further decade-crossing trio of images. Two were made three years apart in the extended first wave period, *Self Portrait* by Claude Cahun in 1932 (fig 149) and an image from *La Poupée* by Hans Bellmer made in 1935 (fig 150).⁸ The image by Woodman (fig 151) made forty odd years later in Providence in her 1975-1978 mid-period, responds to each and both of the surrealist images. It is necessary however in this retrospective analysis and especially in making a close comparison between Cahun's image and Woodman's, that the possibility of Woodman having seen Cahun's image is very unlikely as Cahun's images were not disseminated until the 1980s. That Bellmer would have seen the image made by Cahun is probable.

⁷ See page 262 and footnote 2.

⁸ As Bellmer made his first *Doll* in 1934, according to Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge (Mass.), October Books/MIT Press, 1993, 116, and Cahun had her photographs published, although very few, in surrealist journals in the early and mid-1930s, (Rosalind Krauss dates it as *circa* 1932 in *Bachelors*, Cambridge (Mass.), October Books/MIT Press, 1999, 40-41), it is probable that Cahun's image directly influenced Bellmer.

Closely attuned both in subject matter and setting, all three images allude to the female form and a surreal displacement of it in a domestic interior that might be supposed *real* but with some irony. At once cunningly camouflaged and *bien placée*, all three figures lie, or in the case of Bellmer's signified female, is supported, along a shelf of a domestic storage unit. Chosen in all three cases to connote enclosure and display, but acting primarily in a surrealist juxtaposition with the figure of woman, this unit is a kitchen dresser in Woodman's and Bellmer's photographs and a mahogany wardrobe unit in Cahun's. Woodman's photograph relates strongly to Cahun's in the pose of the figure and strongly answers to Bellmer's image in its cutting of the figure (although the dislocated limbs of Bellmer's *Doll* will never be a cohesive anatomic form).⁹ Woodman's resonances are thereby skilfully triangular.

Woodman has shot her simple dresser in an abandoned living space, resonant of her *House* and *Space* series. The theme of enclosure and display has been addressed by her before, acutely in *Space 2*, where her images depict the artist inside a large glass-topped museum display unit.¹⁰ Her shot here has skewed the straight horizontals of the skirting board and the surface base, giving an ambience of giddiness in the interior, against which her semi-nude form, amongst the empty and conventionally functionless shelves, acts as a flourish: Gothic overtones as well as plain 1970s *sexy*. In either a clever technical feat or by taking advantage of chance dilapidation, Woodman includes only the lower half of her semi-clad form

⁹ As Cahun's images were not disseminated until the 1980s but Bellmer's already were in the 1970s, Woodman's direct source can probably only have been Bellmer. This fact strengthens my argument however that Bellmer was influenced by Cahun in the image discussed here. Periods of Cahun's practice coincided with Bellmer's and it is therefore likely that they would have known each other's work.

¹⁰ Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 2006, 118-119.

in her photograph. Her upper torso disappears behind what is, in reality and as a symbol, a broken support between the cupboard and the wall into which it is built.

Bellmer's image contains a more solid-looking dresser, complete with some stacked dishes and a cupboard door open, creating a homely and bourgeois nuance. He has placed his double-legged *Doll* in a quadrupled leg arch and dressed her four feet in white bobby socks and black patent shoes. The stark atrocity of its double-absence form flinches and flares against the domestic calm of the dish stacks on lace-edged shelves.

Cahun's image is the earliest of the three to have been made. It is a self portrait with Cahun dressed as an exaggerated version of her child-self. She wears bright white ankle socks, Bermuda shorts and a dotted summer top. In the blonde shiny curls of her wig is an over-large bow. Feigning sleep, she rests languidly on one folded arm; the other hangs over the polished wood of the drawers. The child-Cahun fits snugly into the lowest shelf of the high cupboard unit above the drawers. Both the unit's doors are flung open to reveal her self-display. This is her day of 'airing', perhaps. Lucy Lippard refers to this image here:

*Although she concentrated on the face, it is almost invisible in one of her most powerful images, where she is curled upon the shelf of a dresser like a small girl hiding from punishment or prying eyes while simultaneously hoping to be discovered.*¹¹

¹¹ Lucy Lippard, 'Scattering Selves', in Shelley Rice, ed., *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1999, 38.

Two images in particular (figs 152 and 153) out of the eighteen photographs in Hans Bellmer's *Les Jeux de la poupée*, the maquette for which was made and photographed through eleven years between 1938 and 1949 contain a strong thread with a pair of images by Woodman from her Book *Portraits Friends Equasions* (see Chapter 3, figs 71 and 72). Interestingly, before working on *Les Jeux de la poupée*, Bellmer had published his *Doll* photographs in book form, *Die Puppe* in 1934 and *La Poupée* in 1936.¹²

Thirteen of Bellmer's images are interior shots with props such as stairs, a bed, a chair back and even a bamboo fly-swat. But it is two from the five images of the thirteen which Bellmer photographed in the exterior setting of a wood, which Woodman references in her two Book images.

Woodman is concerned primarily with making organic and human equivalents to the givens, in this case equations and diagrams, of her base text in the two images from *Portraits Friends Equasions*. In the first she recreates the diagram of the base-page fastidiously in tree or human form but distorts the balance of the diagram's angles by a few degrees. The tree itself functions as a representation of six lines of extension in the circle form. The man in the image is half present only as the motion of an arm raised in greeting removes the focus of his form. By the second image, when Woodman has joined him, his form is re-established through clear focus. Here the tree constructs a vertical division line in a rendering of a two people equation. In Woodman's two images the male figure has none of the menacing attributes of Bellmer's, whose man stands hidden behind the tree, a

¹² The first book was published in Karlsruhe (Th. Eckstein) and the second book in Paris (GLM): Diez, *La Subversion des images*, 2009, 116.

voyeur, watching the *Doll*'s secret performance. Her man seems reassuringly ordinary and surely a 'friend'.

Mahon describes the *Doll* from Bellmer's second series, made earlier, here:

*Bellmer's second doll, with her ball joints and multiple limbs, allowed for greater physical, and by extension greater erotic, manipulation. Her four-legged, headless, naked form, staged in nature, presents the spectator with a disturbing image of illicit desire.*¹³

Disturbing indeed and the effect of the images in Bellmer's series can be strongly subliminal, probably intensely so for a woman; their subliminal hold occurring some time after, even years after, the first reaction of disturbance.

Woodman also shows in these two images her familiarity with the tree Bellmer constructs in another of this series (fig 154), in which the standing *Doll* co-forms the trunk of the tree with its own trunk that is splayed into two branches at its top. Woodman's tree both splays into two at its top at the same angle and has a trunk constructed with the addition of a lighter wood support.

It is not relevant here to delve deeply into the topic of the dissemination of surrealist photographic imagery during Woodman's formative period in the late 1960s until the start of the 1980s. Suffice it to say that her acute knowledge of the subject is evidenced in her work, in its abundance of references and tributes, in deep acknowledgement or multiple asides. The artist could have seen the work in

¹³ Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros*, 2005, 51. She is describing the series *La Poupée*, made three years before *Les Jeux de la poupée*.

facsimiles of *Minotaure* which had first been published by Albert Skira between 1933 and 1939 and re-published by them between the early 1970s and 1981. In response to Skira's re-publishing of *Minotaure*, many reproductions appeared in journals such as *Artforum* and *Art International*, throughout the 1970s. These would have been available in the libraries of both Rhode Island School of Art and Design and the University of Denver, where her father taught in the Fine Art faculty and were therefore accessible to Woodman, as attested to by Townsend.¹⁴

Seen in the context of her period of practice, it is evident that Woodman was acutely conversant with first wave surrealist photography. She drew on it as a source from which to fecundate her practice. She created a unique and formidable body of work which although containing profuse and profound references to key surrealist works, remains equal to them at all times.

¹⁴ Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 2006, 35.