

## **Dialogue with Disappearance, Dialogue with Days**

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This paper provides an analysis of Francesca Woodman's photographic Book *Angels, Calendars*.

The paper forms Chapter 2 of my thesis “*Almost A Square: The Photographic Books of Francesca Woodman and Their Relationship to Surrealism*”, University of Essex, 2012.<sup>1</sup> 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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### **Section 1. Dialogue with Disappearance: *Angels***

The *Angels, Calendars* Book, in common with another four of Woodman's six Books, makes use of a found object base. In this case it is an Italian student's book entitled *Poesie*. Mostly written in French, it would probably have served as a vehicle both for the rote-learning and the writing out of the sonic rhythms of poetry, as well as for the practice of what was the first foreign language taught in Italy at the turn of the century. I imagine the group to have been secondary school

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

students. A prerequisite for these students would have been the execution of work in a neat, regular and flowing cursive, in the copperplate style in use at that time. A notable feature of the style was its diagonal forward slant. Woodman's intervention, both in image and in annotation, makes responses to the copperplate script both as a continual aesthetic *unterschriften* and to selected poetic phrases as well as to the occasional poem and stanza title.<sup>2</sup> As an occasional poet herself, Woodman would have responded positively to the subject matter of this Book.

The *Angels* part of the *Angels, Calendars* Book contains a total of thirteen added Woodman images.<sup>3</sup> No images have annotations. Its second part, *Calendars*, which will be discussed in the second section of this chapter, also contains thirteen images and several of them have annotations by Woodman. The whole Book therefore contains a total of twenty six added images, divided into two numerically equal parts by the artist.

First conceived and executed as a theme in Providence in early 1977, the *Angels* theme, constituting half of this Book, was developed in Rome where Woodman worked on a Rhode Island School of Art and Design European Exchange scheme from May 1977 to August 1978.

The measurements of the Book when closed are eight and three quarter inches by six and thirteen sixteenths inches. When open, its width measures thirteen and five eighths inches. With one exception (the last image is rectangular), all of the twelve

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<sup>2</sup> It has however been difficult to be precise about direct responses made by the artist to the original script, as this script has rarely been clear or large enough, in reproduction, to decipher with confidence.

<sup>3</sup> This combined title has emerged through the discursive practice. Woodman titles both sections of her notebook separately, the first in her hand scripted lower case *angels* and the second in a photograph annotation: *calendars inside this door*.

images in the *Angels* section of the *Angels, Calendars Book* are black and white positive prints in a square format. Most added images are surrounded by a white border. This varies slightly in width. The pages of the original early twentieth century schoolbook are hand-written dictated stanzas of poetry in a pale sand/sepia hue. Woodman's white borders and the white tones within her images, as her base tone, therefore make a strong contrast to this original base colour. The variation of her tones through to black makes a harsher range to contrast with the base work's vintage subtlety. The script of the past writer has occasional slight variations of tone and pen nib width. Woodman's intervention is limited, in the *Angels* section, to a part-obliteration, with white paint or masking fluid, of the text surrounding her added images, which acts as an eradication of script deemed by her irrelevant, or as the provider of extra un-scripted space around (and hence an emphasis of) the image.

As Woodman understood French, both a bi-lingual sequence of responses and an organic cross-flow between word and image, that is word-text as script, acting as an aesthetic template and word as script acting as annotation, is both possible and realised.

The outside hard cover of the Book (fig 29) is a deep maroon-brown, its battered edges a testimony to its century of existence. A torn-edged, black-bordered label is centrally placed one third from its top. On it is the hand-written title *Poesie*, in a large and perfectly measured italicised copperplate on a faint printed line. The student's name (that disturbed identity) is written on the base right of the label in a less careful script, about eight times smaller. It is indecipherable. This old label is bordered with a double line, which cuts the four corners of its own rectangle.

The first double page spread in the original document (fig 30) is made into a second generation title page by Woodman. She has over-painted a rectangle of about the size and position of the photographs to come: on the upper part of the right-hand page. Woodman lets the copperplate script bleed through this rectangle, onto which she writes her own sub-title *angels* in pen, at about six times the size of the original script. The left page is a jumble of notes between several original students in a relaxed mood, possibly after an examination. On this page the copperplate script has relaxed into many transformations and increased in size in a dramatic contrast to the severe regularity of the following pages. Amongst these entries I can decipher the name *Donato Jacobi*, an encouragement to *boire souvent un petit cognac* and on the bottom left side a small torn piece of paper with the words *po [sic] moi un livre*.<sup>4</sup>

My interpretation of Woodman's approach to this historic textual template will primarily be as a visual background for the application of her images. She seizes and emphasises with white gouache only the occasional line of text in *Angels*. This is when it might by chance relate or respond to, or emphasise, a theme or narrative moment of her late twentieth century project.

The *Angels* theme is an exploration of a sliding between two levels of existence with particular focus on the liminal. Woodman is the actor in a performance which intensely challenges photography's *given* of stillness. Theories on photography expounded by Barthes in his last work *Camera Lucida* can be

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<sup>4</sup> '... often drink a small cognac ... for me a book'.

threaded weft-like through the tissue of *Angels*. I will suggest that the series realises some of these theories in a near-contemporaneous practice.

*In terms of image-repertoire, the Photograph ... represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death ....*<sup>5</sup>

In the concluding chapters of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes locates his enquiry into the anthropological place of Death, continuing:

*For Death must be somewhere in society; if it is no longer in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life .... Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print.*<sup>6</sup>

Barthes's presupposition that photographer and subject have different identities confirms the extra intensity and the extra vulnerability of the dual position Woodman supports. This position offers her at one time both a greater autonomy and an increased psychic exposure. Margaret Sundell here expresses this aspect of Woodman's practice:

*The fragility of self-recognition necessitates an endless re-staging of the subject's autonomy. The tension and strength of Woodman's work lies in her ability to return again and again to this precise point of instability, to simultaneously create and explode the fragile membrane that protects one's identity from being absorbed by its surroundings.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (originally published as *La Chambre claire*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1980), trans. Richard Howard, London, Vintage, 1993, 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1993, 92.

<sup>7</sup> Sundell, 'Vanishing Points', 1996, 43-438.

Perhaps the most perfect encapsulation of the Barthesian idea of the pressing of the camera's shutter replicating, in its click, a *micro-version of death*, is omnipresent in this series. Peggy Phelan develops this link, referring to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to the extent of claiming that the performance Woodman constructs as a narrative can be read as both a rehearsal and as the dramatic pre-enactment of her own death:

*Woodman's photographic games can be seen in this light as well, except that rather than throwing a spool away from her gaze and reeling it back in as [Freud's grandson] Ernst does, she plays fort/da with her own image. Rather than seeking to rehearse for an anticipated loss of another, Woodman's artistic practice might be understood as a way to rehearse her own death.*<sup>8</sup>

The position Phelan occupies is extreme. While considering and remembering it throughout my analyses of Woodman's Books and realising its particular pertinence to *Angels*, I will defer from agreeing with the position she takes while keeping alive the premise and boundaries of her valuable argument through the scope of this research.

*For Woodman as for Benjamin [but I presume this is a misprint for Barthes], the distinction between the initial pose and the final print was difficult to discern. She might have thought of it as a recursive algorithm, one whose structure made her uncannily alert to the force of death within life, the lure and achievement of stillness within her ongoing creative work.*<sup>9</sup>

Although here not confining her argument to the series being discussed, certainly the *angel's* repeated disappearances and reappearances and half-appearances go

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<sup>8</sup> Peggy Phelan, 'Francesca Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time', *Signs: Journal of Women In Culture and Society*, 27: 4, 2002, 987.

<sup>9</sup> Phelan, 'Francesca Woodman's Photography', 2002, 999.

far beyond the conjuring trick skills of photographic techniques which the artist surely has at her command. I think too, in contrast to Phelan's conjecture, that Woodman was intensely (almost mathematically) aware of the photographic result of her pose. In consideration too of Benjamin Buchloh's emergent hypothesis that:

*Woodman's preoccupation seems first of all to be the critique of a compulsive equation between physiognomy and the self, and of the photographic functions that seem to corroborate this false equation.*<sup>10</sup>

Buchloh uses Woodman's *From Space* series as his prime example, but I think the argument is equally well exemplified by the *Angels* series and Book.

The first added image, on page nine of the original (fig 31) depicts the artist standing in the mid-foreground of a corner of a large studio that was probably a neglected area of Rhode Island School of Art and Design's Roman headquarters at Palazzo Cenci. Her pose is solid and balanced, symmetrical except for a slight tilt of the head, her feet are in Mary Jane pumps and firmly on the ground, her torso is naked and her hands are clasped in the centre of a white flared skirt; her hair is tied back. The one clue to her pending angel status is visible in the wing made out of paper or tricked out of light. Large and detached from her in visual space, it seems to point to her, perhaps beckoning her away from the pragmatism of material life. This wing and Woodman's white skirt are the two main areas of light in the photograph. She is at this stage an unwilling angel. The 'ordinariness' of this pose is of course a deliberate ruse and increases the drama to follow by contrast. Notably it is only in this frame of the sequence that we see the artist's feet placed solidly on the ground.

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<sup>10</sup> Buchloh, 'Francesca Woodman: Performing the Photograph', 2004, 45.

In the image on page thirteen of the original (fig 32), the camera frames the whole space of the studio with a double natural light source coming from two Georgian paned windows at its rear. Woodman's figure, also at the rear of the studio, is caught in an elegant jump, lit from behind and from the right. This is an altogether joyous image; superbly constructed compositionally, with natural light used for the evocation of a transformation/visitation (even annunciation?) experience.<sup>11</sup> Woodman, half-clad in white Victorian pantaloons, seems to be arriving and about to leave in the same moment. Passing through. All at speed.

Little detail of the setting can be detected here, unlike in the first image, but the near-invisibility of her legs in this image, probably achieved by her wearing black tights, emphasises the desired illusion of flying. The two hung wings we know to be white are half-toned in silhouette over the bright windows and diagonally placed above either side of her moving figure which is framed by the centre wall's dark rectangle. These wings are an essential component of the image. A very bright light from the windows diffuses the top window-panes and forms an arch of light between Woodman and the wings. She still wears the white skirt and her arms are flung out straight to her sides; her left leg is positioned straight out, in a forty five degree ballet pose.

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<sup>11</sup> Rossella Caruso testifies to the fact that Woodman never used artificial light: *Francesca non usava mai illuminazione artificiali e, pur privilegiando ambientazioni al chiuso, si serviva solo della luce natural, apprezzando le ben note qualita di quella di Roma.* ('Francesca never used artificial light and, taking advantage of the atmosphere inside, she used only natural light, putting to good use the remarkable qualities of the light of Rome'. Trans. Barnaby Lankester-Owen). Rossella Caruso, 'Francesca a Roma' ('Francesca in Rome'), in Bonito Oliva, *Francesca Woodman* (Palazzo delle Esposizioni catalogue), 2000, 28.

This photograph is about how light (here and in most of the *Angels* images, of that wonderful Roman quality) can create and diffuse material form. Woodman has portrayed the illusion of her becoming a non-human self. And she enters this space with arms outstretched in euphoria. Are her wings made of paper, white sheet or canvas?<sup>12</sup> How are they fixed to the ceiling rafters? There is no trace of wire or wood support and yet they hold their form, flowing, yet static, perfectly. Woodman's hair makes another 'wing' over one shoulder. The strength of daylight from the main window is stunning. This is an exuberant image.

In the next image (fig 33), on page fifteen of the original, Woodman is self-photographed in an identical position in the studio to that of the last image. This is the third in a tight narrative sequence of five images. Here her figure is caught blurred in a mid-action flight or jump and was probably shot with the self-timer cable within seconds of the last image (the camera probably left on the tripod to run during the performance). Jumping higher than in the former image, only the artist's black clad legs are clearly visible, against the bright window light; the rest of her form is diffused. This image has the energy of a buzzing bee; a diffusion of form through movement caught in stasis, and is a perfect example of Breton's *fixed-explosive* concept, in particular referencing Man Ray's *Dancer* photograph used by Breton to demonstrate the *fixed explosive* idea in *L'Amour fou*.<sup>13</sup>

On page seventeen of the original is the fourth of the five-part image sequence (fig 34). Here Woodman's figure, back in focus, has moved forward in the frame

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<sup>12</sup> We learn from the testimony of Woodman's close friend Sloan Rankin, that together they...*smuggled angel wings props past the first floor offices of the empty spaghetti factory in San Lorenzo*. Sloan Rankin, 'Peach Mumble – Ideas Cooking', in Chandès, *Francesca Woodman* (Fondation Cartier exhibition catalogue), 1998, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Krauss and Livingston, *L'Amour fou*, 1985, 84.

to the front and centre of the studio. Caught in a jubilant run, her arms brilliantly intersect the wings: they become part of her body. This is the closest we come to a preview of her transformation. Her top torso is in dramatic silhouette, her arms are raised at forty-five degrees to her upright body's vertical. In this fine visual symmetry they form a wing-holding 'V', that is also probably a reference to a crucifix. She knows how to look ethereal for sure, her black leg-wear lets us forget her earthbound legs and her technical expertise removes them as connectors to the floor.

After this climax of her spellbinding performance, the emptiness of the last image of the sequence (fig 35), on page nineteen of the original, is frightening. Here an eerily empty and enlarged studio space shows only the 'noeme', the what-has-been, of the departed angel. The floating tips of the wings, which are exiting upwards, reveal a new black formlessness in a dark arching area; a formlessness which hangs formidably in the direct centre of the square image, leaving shadows where none were before. And a black stage screen, realised surely in the print's development process, is being lowered over a third of the photographic square: in front of the performance arena and onto the uneven studio floor. The screen acts as a fictional device which is both the closure of the sequence and the end of the (theatrical) performance.

A change of compositional form occurs in fig 36, on page twenty one of the original, serving to shift the emphasis of the continuing *angel* theme. The seven consecutive images, of which this is the first, can be read as a separate series. Particularly in the case of the first four, the figure (and rarely, one is that of a male

friend) is fore-grounded. The interior space is contracted, in direct contrast to that of the previous series. Encouraged by the artist to emit a symbolism particular to each image (in another departure from the repeated space of the former five images), the interior space is individuated in each of this series apart from in the last two. In this manner each image contains a separate drama, and is developed in distinct climaxes until the narrative twinning of the sequence's last pair of images.

The first image of this second series, fig 8, can take our breath away by its disturbance factor. We see a naked Woodman in contorted part-form suspended in a terrifying arc from high up in the picture frame. Her silent open mouth forms a high-pitched scream and the arm that would defend her-self is 'mutilated', through photographic processing skill, into a grotesque club-hand. Her arched torso has on it one big stripe of black paint – no, blood, that is splayed in vivid loops and sprays on a back wall that is claustrophobically close to her.<sup>14</sup> Is she trying to wrench herself from a vice of entrapment, frozen in a fear of flying? Or is this angel attempting a revisit to a world in an experience that is extremely painful to enact? Is this human morphing into a creature?

The following image (fig 37), on page twenty three of the base book, follows with a much-needed serenity. Woodman has applied a light, transparent paint in a block over the whole original poem/text on this page. At first reading this is an image constructed in the high modernist manner of beauty of composition, from a

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<sup>14</sup> The wall marks clearly link it to the *Splater (sic) Paint* series; for these images see the Chandès, *Francesca Woodman* (Fondation Cartier exhibition catalogue), 1998, 110-111, where the here-discussed image is printed by Woodman in reverse, to equally strong effect.

fusion of the equals of form and content.<sup>15</sup> The spinal arch contorted into terror in the previous image (fig 36) is here softened into a gentle tension. A fine contrast occurs between the spine's rhythmic line and the hard wall's corner, of which the deep-toned rectangle on the left acts as half of the visual frame around the figure's upright. This frame's right half, in an even deeper tone, darkens into the depths of the room, providing a little space and a little mystery. Some paint marks on Woodman's back link us to the previous image and can be read as a thread of narrative. An over-exposed area to the front of the form dissolves it into a partial disappearance as the angel hovers in the liminal sphere.

The following image (fig 38), on page twenty five of the original book, is a disturbing one, with strong links to the first image of the sequence (fig 36). This angel is once again in extreme distress. Only her top arched torso is visible, her mouth is an open screaming "O". The prop of the umbrella, counter-angled to the long shafts of sunlight, is a clear phallic symbol which could also be read as a symbol of protection in the everyday sphere. The full perspective of the floorboards makes the figure appear to be bursting out of the frame. Or perhaps dying; when read as fiction, this angel/human has been speared down to earth; a symmetrical body compacted into an inhuman mass. She/it is anguished in capture: pinned like a butterfly to a panel, or painfully immobilised like an upturned tortoise: those human limbs-perhaps-becoming-wings rendered awkward and ineffective. Has the angel landed wingless in this room, this alien habitat? Here is the disturbance factor: she is the grounded angel, transgressing the natural order.

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<sup>15</sup> What T J Demos describes as *Modernism's obsession with pure presence*. He continues: *In the mid-twentieth century, abstract painting and sculpture were pledged to the intensity of optical immediacy ...* T J Demos, 'A Matter of Time', *Tate Etc.*, 9, Spring 2007, 100.

The gallery-print version of this image (fig 39) must have been printed by Woodman first. It includes more details than the Book's version, from which two small sections have been cut, one from the top and one from the bottom. The cut section at the top makes it more difficult to identify the studio objects at its far

perspective, recognisable as a small display case and a film reel, or clock, in the uncut version (fig 39). The black circle formed by Woodman's mouth in the (cut) Book version makes of her scream a silent and unworldly thing. In fig 39 however (uncut), the inclusion of her teeth gives that scream a human ground, a human voice. In the (cut) version printed in the Townsend monograph, the annotation/title *on being An Angel* (sic) is included, hand-written by the artist in pencil.<sup>16</sup>

The Palazzo delle Esposizioni catalogue reproduces a related image (fig 40) placed at an angle, mounted across a rectangle of white paper and under-scripted in Woodman's bold hand *on being An Angel #1* (sic).<sup>17</sup> The Fondation Cartier catalogue reproduction of the same image, however, like the catalogue of the 1992 Shedhalle, Zurich exhibition, places its square image squarely on to the page, with no annotation and with no visible border.<sup>18</sup> The dark area below the suspended figure is printed in such a dark tone that, unlike in fig 39, no floor board lines can

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<sup>16</sup> Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 2006, 125.

<sup>17</sup> Bonito Oliva, *Francesca Woodman* (Palazzo delle Esposizioni catalogue), 2000, 84.

<sup>18</sup> Chandès, *Francesca Woodman* (Fondation Cartier exhibition catalogue), 1998, 82; Harm Lux and Friedrich Meschede, *Francesca Woodman: Photographic Work* (exhibition catalogue, Shedhalle, Zurich and other venues, 1992–93, with essays by Harm Lux and Kathryn Hixson), Zurich, Shedhalle, 1992, 77.

be deciphered, apart from in the top right-hand corner where some incoming light reveals the acorn form and another shadow.

Through these two images (figs 39 and 40) Woodman remembers Rogi André's photograph *Seeming to swim...* which Breton used to accompany his poem 'La

Nuit du Tournesol' in *L'Amour fou* in 1937.<sup>19</sup> Rogi André's swimmer has an innocently benign manner however, in contrast to Woodman's *angel*. This link is further discussed in Chapter 8.

Another first wave surrealist photograph with which Woodman here makes a dialogue is the Brassäi image *Untitled* from 1933, published that year in *Minotaure* and later printed in *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*.<sup>20</sup> It is as if Woodman had photographed herself in the same pose as Brassäi's model from a position behind her upturned elbows (which support her raised torso), focusing on the thrown back head.

The next Book image (fig 41) on page twenty seven, relates to fig 37. This image is that unusual occasion when the artist photographs a male model (angels are after all, androgynous). The diffusion of the standing, photographically cropped

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<sup>19</sup> Image and poem first published in *Minotaure* in 1935 and in Breton's *L'Amour fou* in 1937. André's image (see fig 148) is that of an underwater dancer/swimmer:

*Les uns comme cette femme ont l'air de nager  
Et dans l'amour il entre un peu de leur substance  
Elle les interiorise  
(Some of them seemed to swim like that woman  
And in love there enters a bit of their substance  
She interiorises them)*

Breton, *L'Amour fou*, Paris, Gallimard, 1937, 64.

<sup>20</sup> Krauss and Livingston, *L'Amour fou*, 1985, 56.

nude form, through light exposure, in fig 37 is here exaggerated into the conjuring of ether, achieved through the manipulation of a super-imposed negative. We can see such a technique used, for example, by Maurice Tabard, in his *Untitled* of 1930.<sup>21</sup> The young man's pose in Woodman's image is a study of the horizontal. His arms are raised in an out-of-shot symmetry suggesting the beginnings of wings. This image strongly references the inter-war surrealist image by Man Ray from 1933.<sup>22</sup> Man Ray's image is also of a male nude torso with raised arms in a folded position. They transmute into the bull's horns and his nipples transmute into the bull's eyes. The horizontality in Woodman's photograph is gently fragmented by a whimsical angle into the suggestion of a spirit form departing through the window.

The following image (fig 42), on page 29 of the original book, is the source shot of one of Woodman's most singularly arresting images. Here the photographed trace is heavily gouged out of a hard yet crumbled earth/floor in a desolate interior, as opposed to the ethereal ectoplasmic trace of the previous image. And this trace takes up a full two thirds of the composition's square. We can read it as the heavy fall of the angel and its subsequent wrenching from an earth it/s/he loves. Formally exact, only the imprint of the legs, not the rest of the body, is shown, implying the physical (that is dirty and painful) connection of the limbs to (and into) the ground. The real legs almost hang, but the toes just touch the earth before leaving: they form one visual triangle, whilst the trace of them, their hewn shape, forms another. Together they form a diamond. The consequent reversal of the shape, in positive and negative, feeds us an intense drama. This image cannot

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<sup>21</sup> Krauss and Livingston, *L'Amour fou*, 1985, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Krauss and Livingston, *L'Amour fou*, 1985, 16-17.

be discussed without a short investigation of an existent connection to images from Ana Mendieta's poignant *Siluetas* series.<sup>23</sup> Mendieta's series was not only made in the same temporal framework (1976-1978) as Woodman's *Angels*, *Calendars Book*, but shares with it a deep psychological as well as a strong visual resonance.

Mendieta, born exactly ten years before Woodman in 1948, was exiled from Cuba in 1961 in her early adolescence and this series constitutes an enactment of her mourning for her country. In *Siluetas*, executed between 1973 and 1980 on land in Iowa and Mexico, a re-enactment of her birth is symbolised as an emergence from the earth, the symbol of mother and country, which is simultaneously a vision of and arguably a desire for, her own death. Our knowledge of the series is entirely built on the photographic documentation of what was an intensely private performance. The performance ritualised her pain and its desired catharsis and was not conceived for any public participation, at least not at the time of its making. The moulds (womb cradles or shallow graves), mounds, sprays and fires she makes are at once a commemoration and an extinction of herself, in that self's body-form and in this manner they form a parallel to Woodman's project. The works of *Siluetas* expel from that body-form an identity (from culture) and nourish it, yet eject it from its own memory and return it to the quiet neutrality of the natural environment. As works of art, these events exist as photographs which are not quite documents, but in essence rather souvenirs.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> De Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible*, 1996, 164-170.

<sup>24</sup> As expressed by Miwon Kwon: *While a document is predicated on the belief of an authentic moment of origin, the souvenir is based on a recognition of its loss.* Miwon Kwon, 'Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta', in de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible*, 1996, 170.

So the works made as performance about loss are themselves ‘lost’, washed, blown or covered by nature’s gentle and violent continual movements. They exist now only in the photographic trace that is the art work. This captures the emotion of the first act which made an ephemeral mark on a land oblivious to the human condition.

Ultimately, the performative aspect is as endemic to Woodman’s *Angels* as it is to Mendieta’s *Siluetas*. Both series address the theme of absence. Where the performance of pain is intrinsic and unrelenting in *Siluetas*, Woodman’s *angels* carry a redemptive jubilation and buoyancy.<sup>25</sup>

An intensity and variety of emotion is confronted and explored through the location of it in her chosen personification. In photographing this self in wide ranging settings and an intriguing array of poses and antics, she creates a range of selves that are both emblematic and explicit and that evolve into a performance. Because Woodman’s work and its performance are compressed into photographic form, is it more or less of a trace than the photographic recording, the *afterimage* of what has been enacted, in Mendieta’s work?

Woodman’s fascination with, and identification through, the angel figure is due to its leverage in a material and extra-material world. In sequences of disappearance and reappearance which resonate strongly with Mendieta’s investigation,

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<sup>25</sup> Philippe Sollers describes her position thus, in his essay ‘The Sorceress’, 1998, 10-11: *There is no ostentation or megalomania, no religiosity, no display of mimed pain or suffering. Her role is not to intimidate us by crying that there is nothing more than madness, passion, death and horror – that would be vulgar. ... She remains constantly dynamic and buoyant. She periodically conceals herself, doesn’t take her ordeal seriously, even if (what a terrible image this is) she can represent herself with open mouth, emitting a stream of what look like bubbles.* Sollers refers here to the image *Self portrait - talking to vince*, Providence, 1975-8, reproduced in Chandès, *Francesca Woodman* (Fondation Cartier exhibition catalogue), 1998, 50.

Woodman explores the negation and re-establishment of her own self. The image in the *Angels, Calendars Book* which has the deepest resonances with Mendieta's *Silueta* images, as in, for example, fig 43 from the Mexico series (1973-1977) and fig 44 from the Iowa series (1976-1978), is the tenth image of the *Angels Book*, (fig 42). I am aware that these two Mendieta images are in colour but I have worked from published black-and-white reproductions which I deem more appropriate for the purposes of this comparison.<sup>26</sup>

Most poignant and most terrifying in Woodman's image (fig 42), is not the upward lifting of her naked figure, viewed here as legs only, but the trace the legs leave in the pebbled mud. A diametric reverse of her loosely hanging, spread legs only, (perhaps chosen as the body part in contact with the ground), is gouged out in the ground itself. The narrative enacted is of the embedment of her legs, and their subsequent gouging out; as both temporal stages, the before and after, are simultaneously realised in one image. A severance from the material world is enacted. It has strong repercussions with Mendieta's severance.

Woodman's pervasive interest in texture contrast and the revealing of the structural layers of architectural boundaries, (walls, floors, ceilings), is visible here in the strong contrast of flesh and stone. The rough stone under-layer of a stratified interior ground acts here and in much of her work as both as a sharp aesthetic and a rich allegory. The narrative aspect is poignantly reinforced by the visibility of some earth/floor dirt on Woodman's right foot. It is notable that no human artefacts are present in the interior which, having the double aspects of floor and earth, is itself liminal. Her angel is in mid-disappearance, bravely alone;

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<sup>26</sup> Posner, 'The Self and the World', 1998, 165; Kwon, 'Bloody Valentines', 1996, 170.

shaking off the world's beautiful and dreadful pull; either returning to, or newly entering, the angel sphere.

The image on page thirty one of the original book (fig 45) incorporates for the first time in the *Angels* section two figures, one of which is probably the artist and the other that of a friend. Woodman is clearly playing with narrative threads already woven into this series of seven images: the materiality of existence and a visualisation of a dramatic disappearance into another, non-material, sphere. The incompatibility of the two enacted worlds is crystallised superbly in the juxtaposition between one naked figure and one fully clothed figure occupying the same interior.

This interior is a keenly described domestic space. The clothed friend sits demurely in a high-backed Shaker chair, clasping her hands in her lap and gazing out of frame with an intently vacant look. This figure, dressed conventionally apart from her bare feet, reinforces the extraordinary nature of Woodman's continuing narrative drama. She is depicted as oblivious to Woodman's performed exit. The angel's form is blurred in movement and part-obscured through deep shadow. The softening of the angel's curved form, enacting its disintegration in the now, is heightened by its contrast to the hard architraving verticals, in an example of a theme consciously pursued by the artist throughout her project.<sup>27</sup> It makes a natural frame for Woodman's centrally placed figure.

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<sup>27</sup> *Me and Francis Bacon and all those Baroques are all concerned with making something soft wiggle and snake around a hard architectural outline.* Woodman's words, quoted by Peter Davison, 'Girl, Seeming to Disappear', *Atlantic Monthly*, 285: 5, May 2000, 110.

The next image (fig 46), on page thirty three of the original book, is directly connected to its predecessor in narrative. This image enacts the simultaneous but separate experiences of the angel and her now absent friend. The only trace of the erstwhile friend is a white cloth (in the brightest toned area of all) on the chair's seat not visible before. Read as narrative and in assuming a more 'normal' day was hers, we might wonder whether the friend has left the room to water a plant or answer the telephone. But now the angel swings, caught in a diagonal motion. A vivid suggestion of movement in a *still* image is created again by blurring and a consequent 'doubling' of one leg. Her extrovert behaviour, in its conjured narrative crescendo, is brilliantly juxtaposed with the friend's ordinary day. Woodman has shot this image from a slightly higher angle than she did the previous one, possibly so that the proof of her hanging support, the top of the door-frame, is visible, but also to show the figure rising. And she has photographed her own body both times (in figs 45 and 46), so that deep shadow eliminates her head and at least three-quarters of her torso. She has transformed herself into a creature: a liminal being about to exit. For this is the shuddering finale of the *Angels* series: a re-enactment of the climaxes of the earlier images.

The angels of Woodman's *Angels, Calendars Book* are both an investigation of a physical space in terms of traditional elements like perspective, light and architecture and an investigation of temporal and ephemeral space. She self-photographs the angel in fast shot images, which amount to an almost filmic sequence. Her angel, a configuration of a fictional protagonist and a visual template, disappears and reappears, transcends and is degraded, brought in and out of the space rectangle and backward and forward in the frame. Narrative works in

this series as a chain with potentially interchangeable links, as images rear into autonomy and buck back into sequence. Narrative is, here and in the other Books (with the exception of *Portrait of a Reputation* and *Quaderno Raffaello*), not necessarily either linear or mono-climactic. In spite of the innate fluency of the highly successful sequence, each image, both since and before the series' inception, can be and has often been printed individually and is autonomous, with that beauty of composition celebrated high modernism.

## **Section 2. Dialogue with Days: *Calendars***

The *Calendars* section of the Book opens out from the tight focus of the first section's theme, *Angels*, into a broader sphere. Month names and occasional comments about the weather in Woodman's annotations perform the function of reigning in the new multiplicity of themes and encasing them in a quotidian diaristic reality which is a thousand miles from their imaginative scope. But the manner of tying an image to the exact day she is living in is exciting and successfully ignites the cross-temporal nature of the Books. At times these months and seasons, those markers of imposed time, intertwine in harmony with or in discord to the poems of the base text.

In Woodman's case the diaristic can be contained in one image (linking, dancing signifiers) or realised in a pair or a series of images. The temporal sphere is more often addressed by the artist in a diagonal zig-zag sequence: forward and

backward or lateral but not straight. For my purpose *diaristic* is a term equally applicable to word or image structures.

We know, from Townsend's section *Journal Extracts*, edited by George Woodman, that Woodman practised *diary writing*; and assuming the American word 'journal' to have the same meaning as the English word 'diary', we know too that the diaries were written in what she called 'steinwriting' on *ledgers* which were carried with her at all times.<sup>28</sup> I would submit that her photography practice contained many shared elements with her 'journal' practice, that of reflection and the recording and working out of visual projects. By this method she kept pace with her own ideas and plans. In her continuing and mutually responsive practices of daily image making and daily journal writing she proves herself equally capable of planning and reflecting in the domain of words as in the domain of images. She is also able to use images in a manner established by the diary's convention of words.

She could activate the thinking through of her ongoing projects as well verbally as she could visually and she participated in the two spheres with a flexibility of access to both which is rare among artists and writers.

Woodman's annotations in *Calendars* are written in a deeper hue of sepia ink than that of the written text of the original and the pen nib she uses is much broader than that in which the first text is written. The artist's choice of sepia ink and her use of an old-fashioned nibbed pen create an element of unity in at least a nostalgic nod to the history of her matrix. Her script though is plump and

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<sup>28</sup> George Woodman, ed., 'Journal extracts', in Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 2006, 241-248.

unashamedly *modern*, in scale about six times larger than the harmonious *unterschriften*. The resulting rhythms between scriptive ink tones and image tones in both sections has much subtlety and the relation between the 1890s text and the overlaid 1970s images and text evolves through the whole Book as a response that is primarily visual. Occasionally however, Woodman will harness a poetic phrase from the original stanzas either to inflect her image or for her image to inflect.

All images in the *Calendars* section are stuck, with the opaque corner photograph mounts, in common contemporary use, onto the right-hand page of the double page spread. They are mostly square, but sometimes rectangular in format and all, with the exception of the last image, have a white border of a varying width around them.

A natural division between *Angels* and *Calendars* occurs in this Book when the first *Calendars* image (fig 47) captioned in Woodman's bold, late twentieth century script *calendars inside this door*, eases us out of the intensity and drama of the *Angels* theme. A new interior is introduced, the domestic details of which are reassuring. The interiors to come will contrast strongly to the anonymity of the interiors in the *Angels* section.

Here we see the corner of a tiled-floored, light-walled room which is probably, from its tiles and door proportions, Italian. Against one wall stands a nineteenth century chiffonière made in dark mahogany and on its surface is a model of Aphrodite, her dark shadow reflected in the chiffonière's mirror. Poetry is present in the domestic and this Aphrodite can be read as a clever and beautiful transmutation of the angel into a domestic sphere. It is a forecast too of

Woodman's germinating interest in figures and architecture of the classical era, which she was to develop as the *Temple Project* in her late career. The weight of the Aphrodite's sculpted base, a firm rectangle on the flat polished surface, quietly establishes some much needed stillness after the whirlwind entrances and exits of the angel. Maximum formal contrast occurs between the small figure's half-draped form and the hard repeated rectangles of two doors on the corner wall. The door on the right is three quarters off-frame. Just visible over the right door is Woodman's arm. Its dark curve visually repeats the ornate front curves of the cabinet.

And in the narrative sphere what could entice us more than the anticipation of a closed door about to open? The artist's operation in the fictional must rest at the occasional and the humorous, however. But true to the spirit of 1970s post-minimalism and conceptualism, the next image (fig 48) represents *cloudy days* in the abstract. An arrangement of ten square pieces of paper, each equidistant, on a pavement of Italian chip mosaic, splits the rectangle of the image in a vertical diagonal, as the real surface is shot from a high point.<sup>29</sup> This diagonal serves to accentuate the border between two floor surfaces (perhaps of kitchen and dining areas) and two levels. Woodman's bent black-clad legs, appearing with her feet as a double *S* shape, break the hard-edged rectangle's domination and rise up from the flat plane above the image edge. Her legs cross the border, as do four of the paper squares.

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<sup>29</sup> The semantic space between the visual and the textual field in interpretation, from the poetics of the cloud form imagined in *several cloudy days*, to its photographic realisation in the material form of paper squares, implies a surrealist movement which simultaneously contains a post-minimalist prosaic.

The hand-written caption unwinds the precision of the displayed equidistant ten paper squares, in its *several cloudy days*. Above this phrase in sepia ink is the trace of another version in a bright emerald crayon. Its large words refuse to fit into the photograph's white border, which its trace penetrates. The vagueness of the title's *several* is stretched into the abrupt exactness of the number *ten* in this impossible, acute and humorous symbolisation. We are immediately brought into Woodman's daily life.<sup>30</sup> Other examples of the direct time focusing caption of this image in the Book are *november, yet another leaden sky* and *winter landscape*. The word *calendars* indicates what can be either a dream-like interpretation of time or a precise pinning of a moment.

The exemplification of daily life present in Woodman's *Calendars* section is a chain of ideas which may be broken or repeated, reflective, surprising or anticipatory; as untidy and as organic as Breton's revolutionary *pris sur le vif* technique in *Nadja*, which caused his composite *text* and anti-novel to live outside its pages. Woodman's understanding of this procedure and its embodiment in her practice is part of the experiment of all her Books, most significantly and finely evoked in *Calendars*.

The sequence of her practice is complex; the Book images not only precede a development into potential framed gallery prints or the experimentally finite form of the late blueprints, but are subsequent to them, thrown from a developed form back into the experimental. Harriet Riches talks here specifically about

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<sup>30</sup> I have made a comparison between this photograph and that of the white irregular half cylinder object in *Nadja* in Chapter 1.

Woodman's *Portrait of a Reputation* but what she describes can be applied equally well to *Angels, Calendars*:

*Breaking open the frame of the still photograph, Woodman creates a web of connections not only between the shots within the series of the book, but to other seemingly self-contained photographs elsewhere. Woodman's practice of explicit self-reference not only upsets a serial logic, but also loosens the book format's enveloping structure.*<sup>31</sup>

The importance of journal-keeping to Woodman is implied here by her close friend Sloan Rankin. It is noteworthy that the artist equates life with photography.

Rankin quotes Woodman:

*...this journal used to be a consequence of my life – of the photographs. Actually now it is the primary force. Photographs are simply illustrations to relieve, That [sic] is OK, we like a picture book.*<sup>32</sup>

Her practice of continuously writing journal entries, both after and before taking photographs, is a separate but essentially linked practice to that of her photographic Book-making, which contains strong journalistic or diaristic currents.<sup>33</sup> The movement backwards and forwards through time, which combines an assessment of existing photographs with a planning of new ones, occurs in her writing practice as much as in her photography. Overall, Woodman's practice of writing, in either journals or as image annotations combines with her image-

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<sup>31</sup> Riches, 'A Disappearing Act', 2004, 109.

<sup>32</sup> Sloan Rankin, 'Francesca Woodman: Photographs' (essay to accompany exhibition at Herbert F Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 2003), Ithaca (N.Y.), Herbert F Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 2003, 5, with my [Rankin's] *interpretive punctuation*.

<sup>33</sup> Rankin, *Francesca Woodman: Photographs*, 2003, 5: *The journal was a previously used ledger [found object again] with headings such as "Dulee W. Flint Motor Sales" written in careful flowing cursive [as in students' script]. In great contrast, interspersed throughout, is the hurried vertical scratch of Francesca's thoughts and ideas. There is vague punctuation and yet considerable attention to train of thought. The journal always lay open in the studio or our apartment near an ink pot and, for an elegant aesthetic continuity, Francesca kept most entries in ink by way of nib and reservoir, just as the previous owner had.*

making practice in a diaristic venture. Writing and photography are interdependent though different aspects of the same process.

Peggy Phelan argues, affirming that in this aspect of Woodman's work the artist moves decisively in her Book practice from a position of reflection on already-made images to a position of forward image planning.<sup>34</sup> Woodman's reflections on her images are often made through the making of other images. It seems that Woodman manages both positions simultaneously, in a sustained, if difficult, confluence. For my purpose I take Phelan's use of *diary* to mean photographic Book. Phelan limits her pertinent argument by confining this process to the *either/or*:

*The movement from thinking of her diary as a place to reflect on completed work to thinking of it as a place to plan future compositions is a psychically complex one. It is to move from the present as a place to contemplate the past to the present as a way to shape the future.*<sup>35</sup>

Phelan alleges too that *some diary entries are like scores for performances that were composed but not developed and the diary functioned as a rehearsal space, a book for first drafts for her compositions.*<sup>36</sup>

Clearly it would have been impossible for any artist, particularly one dying young, to develop all *scores* to the level of *performance*. And in the spirit of post-minimalism, Woodman's natural element, whatever level the performance reached, it was just another interpretation of the score. However, as my knowledge of Woodman's six Books grows, I am increasingly astonished at the

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<sup>34</sup> Phelan, 'Francesca Woodman's Photography', 2002, 991.

<sup>35</sup> Phelan, 'Francesca Woodman's Photography', 2002, 991. I interpret her use of the word *diary*, as I believe she meant it, as *photographic book*.

<sup>36</sup> Phelan, 'Francesca Woodman's Photography', 2002, 991.

quantity of images in her oeuvre which have been developed from the Book format into the framed auratic soliloquy of the single print and back again to the Book search-grid she loved.<sup>37</sup>

The third image in the *Calendars* section of the *Angels, Calendars* Book (fig 49) shows a slightly blurred figure in black, pigeon-toed and photographed minus the head. In a compressed visual echo, the same ten paper squares of *several cloudy days* (fig 48) are here arranged on a rough paved surface. There is darkening by charcoal of two or three paper squares, suggesting, as in the former image, the smudging of the days by cloud. The flat surfaces of the paper squares here occupy less than a third of the image square. The wall rising at a right-angle behind the figure has a substantial broken area of plaster gouged by dereliction from its surface. This gouged area of wall is shaped like a cloud, for this image, without a caption, surely extends the *several cloudy days* theme. It is reproduced as an independent print, in a lighter tone and with some cropping and in reverse register, by Townsend.<sup>38</sup>

The next image (fig 50) continuing the *several cloudy days* theme, shows Woodman's top half. Her head is turned off camera but we still see part of her neck, in a taut sideways stretch and an area of her hair. She wears a pale woollen sweater. Dramatic emphasis is focused on her hand, which leads us towards her vanished head. The hand's open spread of fingers lies relaxed over her chest. Strong chiaroscuro from the natural light source of a window in the corner of the room (domestic and well-decorated this time in contrast to fig 49) carves out the

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<sup>37</sup> This idea of a return to the sphere of experimentation from conventionally deemed *developed* spheres will be looked at in Chapter 9.

<sup>38</sup> Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 2006, 158.

contours of a panelled shutter as the immediate background to her figure. The shutter's hard edges make a strong contrast to the curves of the soft human form. The next part-rectangle, at right angles to the shutter, has its own contrast in the curves of the wrought iron of this outer balcony. The light from a cloudy day is present only as close as this to a window.

The following image (fig 51) shows a poorly lit room corner with a door architraving emphasised off-centre, its open door space a deep dark void in which a just discernible, mostly dark, figure stands in back view. The unintelligibility of form is probably intentional, as Woodman refines the forms into an abstract sequence. A link to the former image (fig 50) is made as a lit hand, graceful and outspread, pierces the dark void. A finger points at the remaining two thirds of this composition in which stands a shiny topped round Shaker chair, the same one on which her friend was seated in the last images from the *Angels* section of the Book. From the hand falls what may be a shroud or an imposed blurred light area. Two small horizontal curves of bright light, one at the top left and the other in the lower left, impact on the diagonal rhythm of this image.

Woodman's use of the hand (and sometimes the glove) as a symbol, demonstrates her flowing appropriation of one of surrealism's most widely used and evocative tropes. Two photographs by Lee Miller from 1930 and 1931 are an example of a direct visual precursor.<sup>39</sup>

The next image (fig 52) has the caption *a winter landscape*, hand-written by Woodman using her sepia ink. I am for once able to decipher a small piece of this

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<sup>39</sup> See Krauss and Livingston, *L'Amour fou*, 1985, 222-223 for Miller's images.

original script. The poem title on the bottom left of the facing page, clearly in direct tandem with the project, is *Nuit d'Octobre*. Of the two short original script lines which she has left visible above the image, I am able to decipher the lower line, (I think) too, as *le lait, bon a boire*.<sup>40</sup>

Within this thoughtfully constructed image, these phrases from the original script are a springboard for the artist's adventurous mind. In this image, made entirely from interior objects, Woodman spoofs a more conventional winter landscape in the zig-zagging motif of the white lace dress clutched by her fingers. The zig-zags of a snow-capped mountain range, as well as icicles, are here succinctly referenced. More ice is simulated by the mirror laid on the floor on which she has propped two white cards at forty five degree angles, but each with a differently angled reflection. This mirror reflects light only in the small area of its lower right-hand corner and the background is mostly very dark in tone, enhancing the dramatic placing of white and light objects. How clear the thick straight lines are which delineate the surface between the real object and its reflection under the cards. Woodman's feet and ankles are in the shot, one foot curved as if from cold: think shiver, think frostbite. Again the human curves strongly contrast with the white cards' hard edges, a theme present in a large quantity of her work in and outside the Books. To the top left of the composition is a dragonfly *seeming to fly*.<sup>41</sup>

The next image (fig 53) stuck by Woodman onto page 49 of the original student book, is captioned *winter landscape*. The near repetition of the caption to the

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<sup>40</sup> *Milk, good to drink.*

<sup>41</sup> Often included by Woodman as a trope; for her the dragonfly was an emblem of truth.

former image (fig 52) *a winter landscape* is a subtle word shift leading us to suppose that this image and the next (fig 54) form in the variations of their pair the definitive rendering of *winter landscape*: no argument.

If film can be thought of as a series of moving pictures Woodman goes some way here in making movement occur through these two ‘still images.’<sup>42</sup> They are glued into a sequence by the aid of Woodman’s annotation. The caption is written in exactly the same 1970s hand script that is an upward hand over the original’s diagonally slanted copperplate.

In the first image of this pair (fig 53) Woodman has marked three words from the original poetic stanzas with a small cross at the top, *Et quand mort*. They are written in a uniform copperplate, immediately above her image. Is she imagining death, her own death? This is a central tenet of Peggy Phelan’s argument, explored in the first section of this chapter.<sup>43</sup> Certainly it is beyond dispute that contemplation of death is a pervasive theme of Woodman’s work. *Et quand mort*, and when dead: this pair of images consequently relates back to themes explored in the *Angels* series of this Book, here through the specificity of day and season, the chosen springboard of *Calendars*.

Here, in figs 53 and 54, the same floor section (Italian chip mosaic tiles) of the same space is twice caught on camera film. We are given no indication as to the scale of the space as no upward plane is shown. It is probably an interior, if the season, winter, is not just imagined, but ‘real’. The base structure of a Bentwood

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<sup>42</sup> The thrust of the argument behind the curating of *La Mouvement des Images* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in the autumn of 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Phelan, ‘Francesca Woodman’s Photography’, 2002, 979-1004.

rocking chair, present in both photographs, has a rectangular section of moulded plaster propped against it in both images. This is the darker, positive structure of the white negative plastic mould. In the first image, fig 53, the light plastic mould, white, undulating in peaks and rectangular, is linked to its product by the mould's corner leaning onto it. The mould is the before-trace of the real product as the footprint is the after-trace of someone walking in snow. Seeming to leak from the mould, some scattered white powder (flour, plaster?) denotes the real substance from which the transmutation into the real and solid occurs. Woodman, photographed naked three quarters in frame, cross-legged on the centre left of it, is captured spreading this powder, but only just captured, only just there, for despite the absence of blurring a sense of her speedy entry is strong. The scattered powder does not only describe its own process but symbolises a scattering of self. It is invisible in the second image of the pair, fig 54, where Woodman holds down a corner of the plastic mould to cause it to register visually as a triangle under which she lies. Its absence eliminates the trace of the other, the transmutation; which is the description of the liminal.

In these two powerful images connections exist to her gallery print series *Self Deceit* (in the crouching pose of the artist with a talismanic prop which in that case is a mirror) and to the video she made while at Rhode Island School of Art and Design in which she is filmed lying in white powder and leaving a trace image of her body on a wooden floor.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The most relevant image from *Self Deceit* is reproduced in Chandès, *Francesca Woodman* (Fondation Cartier exhibition catalogue), 1998, 105. The relevant 'stills' from the video are reproduced in the catalogue of Woodman's One Person Show in Siena: Marco Pierini, ed., *Francesca Woodman* (exhibition catalogue, Santa Maria della Scala, Siena, 2009-2010), Milan, Silvana Editoriale, 2009, 102.

The next image (fig 55) depicts a female figure from centre to mid-calf, clothed entirely in a loose long black garment. Dramatically, one arm only, shot from mid forearm down, is visible. This arm curves into its hand which in turn curves around the round edge of a very shiny steel bowl, held upright the better to show its contents. Two dark loops of long hair make this a baroque curving in a minimalist composition. Although looking through a magnifying glass reveals this to have the surface texture of a fish, or tripe, its front bulge and position conjure a mammalian embryo. We know Woodman loved to haunt the Fish Market in Rome, in which city she made the images for at least a good part of this Book.<sup>45</sup> She has probably made this extraordinary and unsettling image from quite ordinary source material through the alchemy of her resourceful intelligence.<sup>46</sup> This image makes reference to an interwar surrealist photograph by Wols and is developed in the artist's wider corpus in a photograph made in New York in 1979, *Untitled* (fig 56).<sup>47, 48</sup>

The dead fish or still-born embryo is a symbol for the death of light and nature in winter. The upper central position of the bowl and its contents could imply the

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<sup>45</sup> *In Rome we carried bags of live eels across town from piazza Vittoria*: Woodman's friend Sloan Rankin reminisces in her essay Rankin, 'Peach Mumble', 1998.

<sup>46</sup> A much clearer print from the same negative is reproduced in Bonito Oliva, *Francesca Woodman* (Palazzo delle Esposizioni catalogue), 2000, 132. Here developed with the added script in Italian: *Forse qualche volta Andreno tutti (?) alla mia casa a mangiare pere come gusto*. (*Perhaps Andreno will come some time to my house to eat some pear with gusto*). I have, with the help of another's scrutiny and a key word in this script, deduced that the bowl might possibly contain a large, somewhat deformed, pear and its reflection. This visual play brings to mind the skill of Brassai's *Involuntary Sculptures* of 1933.

<sup>47</sup> Wols, *Serpillère dans un sceau*, ca 1938, reproduced in Marion Diez, ed., *La Subversion des images: Surréalisme, Photographie, Film* (exhibition catalogue, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2009-2010), Paris, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2009, 262. Wols's image of a featured metal bowl with handles contains small snakes, whereas Woodman's contains a larger organic mass, probably a piece of tripe. Her bowl, in smaller register as it is held by the figure (Wols's is on its own), resembles that of the Wols image acutely, particularly in the play of light around the rim and on the inside contents.

<sup>48</sup> Woodman's own referenced image, reproduced in Chandès, *Francesca Woodman* (Fondation Cartier exhibition catalogue), 1998, 130, features both hands of a similarly black-robed figure with a complex organic object on the left.

centrality of a reliance on inner resources in the winter season. But a powerful disturbance is at work in this image, if so read, of a human girl carrying an inhuman being so tenderly.

Present in the next image (fig 57) are two female figures. An organic round form makes an echo to the (confined) round form of the steel bowl in the last image (fig 55), but here it is also its geometric opposite in its open-ended leaf structure which ‘explodes’ from its centre in front of the lower abdomen of the left standing woman, from the same position as that in which the bowl was held. This woman’s identifying head is, typically, cropped out of the shot. The large succulent leaves of the plant protrude in equal, energetic lengths. Whereas the steel bowl form of the last image acted as a symbol for death and confinement, the plant is alive and thriving, symbolising, perhaps, the advent of spring. This is a finely organised composition. Woodman’s figure with its bent leg and two inwardly pointing hands shows her face (its inclusion in itself unusual) in profile, with her gaze directed at the fecund plant and just cut off a little at the top, from the frame. A piece of material, perhaps a man’s tie, caught in patterned sunlight, hangs between the two figures. One hand, a shoulder and one of Woodman’s legs are also lit by sun. Her clearly etched profile meets one of the light-edged leaves in a fine visual concision. With some caution I would venture to extract a note of optimism from this image.

*Avril* is the title of the poem in the original French text which wraps round the next image (fig 58), captioned by the artist, with a good surrealist absurdity combined with a mathematical precision (these months are exactly six months

apart), *november*. Another glimpse of optimism in spring's coming, perhaps? Woodman has obliterated the centre lines of poetry purposefully, with erasing fluid, to make a tabula rasa on which to place her image as well as to emphasize her cursive *november* and the original word *Avril*. She has not done this since opening out the page space for her own title of *angels* at the Book's beginning. Her caption-writing arena is for once clear of the century-old underwriting.

This image is different from those preceding it of the *Calendars* section in its chosen geographical space. Precise architectural detail such as this has not been in evidence since the first image of the *Calendars* series (fig 47). It is probably shot in Palazzo Cenci, in some more derelict areas of which several *Angels* images were also probably photographed. A gallery print version with a differently posed figure exists.<sup>49</sup> This huge sun-hit paved corridor or cloister shows a naked Woodman trying to remove herself from a solid oak Renaissance bench. Or is she trying to take it with her? Her right foot seems to drag on the ground and almost to make or trace the low diagonals of sunlight. Her face is turned away from the viewer, her head is in shadow. On one level this is a great study of dramatic light. At least the light is returning after all those leaden skies. It is also a study of stasis and movement with some address of convulsive beauty's *explosante-fixe* element. Woodman again develops the high contrast between the solid wooden form and her own human warmth and softness in a dramatic action in clear photographic focus. She connects her own form to the bench's form quite simply through the surge of light.

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<sup>49</sup> Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 2006, 167.

*December* is Woodman's title for her next image (fig 59), now extremely well-known in its gallery print version. Therefore the months of November and December have each been encapsulated in a separate image. Spring's flash in the plant and sunshine image of fig 57 is over. This image is part of an important and well-known pair; the other of which depicts Woodman against the same wall, naked.<sup>50</sup> The wall is divided horizontally into two sections which Woodman matches in her half-clothed two-sectioned figure. The Book image is reproduced as a gallery print in the Fondation Cartier catalogue, in reverse and in a lighter tone.<sup>51</sup> Woodman stands against a derelict wall. Three quarters of the wall had once been painted and this section is therefore of a much darker tone than the upper quarter area of the wall. This paint is now flaking off, revealing the original wall, the plaster of which is gouged and indented. The torso of her half-clad figure is smeared with dirt. Her vintage dress is rolled down to the waist and replicates the speckled dereliction of the wall. This is an anamorphic resemblance within the *circumstantial magic* genre of Breton's *convulsive beauty* theory, so well understood by Woodman. The dress's lower folds are deliberately blurred: to complete the camouflage and not, in this case, to create movement. She references such first wave surrealist photographic epics as Man Ray's 1923 image *The Return to Reason* where the female figure (Lee Miller) in three-quarter view is overlaid with sunlight patterns and his *Untitled* from 1931. In the later image Miller holds her arm back from her torso in a similar way to how Woodman holds hers.

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<sup>50</sup> The other image of this pair is reproduced in Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 2006, 154.

<sup>51</sup> Chandès, *Francesca Woodman* (Fondation Cartier exhibition catalogue), 1998, 108. For a more sustained comparison of different printings of the image pair, please see Chapter 9.

The next image (fig 60), again now much reproduced and celebrated as an autonomous print, is of the artist wearing dark garments and crouching in an unlit corner of an Italian interior. Audaciously fore-grounded is a tortoise made by this method to appear nearly twice the size of her. The monumentalised domestic pet is imbued with the foreboding of a prehistoric monster on the rampage. Woodman backs into her corner as if threatened, scared, by the animal. Lit from the rear, the markings on the tortoise's shell make a coned-rectangular (trapezoid) symmetry with the floor's deep perspective of square chequered tiles. Woodman hides her face from the predator with a round white plate; its circle draws light cleverly to her corner and contrasts with the squares and trapezoids.

Shot from a lower angle here than a similar image reproduced on the Palazzo delle Esposizioni catalogue's cover, the dramatic tension constructed in this image surpasses that of the catalogue's cover image, in which Woodman, half standing and a little more upright, looks elegant and the tortoise merely inquisitive, not threatening.<sup>52</sup> The light thrown onto the tortoise belies the Book image's annotation, hand-scripted below the image *yet another leaden sky*, but perhaps the atmosphere of oppression and fear is another simulation of the claustrophobia induced by winter's leaden skies.

Mysterious, precisely composed and with much attention to depth of field, the next *Calendars* image (fig 61) is a very different photograph of another room's corner, from that photographed in fig 60. This depicted corner is claustrophobically full and dark when compared with the light and open space of

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<sup>52</sup> Bonito Oliva, *Francesca Woodman* (Palazzo delle Esposizioni catalogue), 2000, front and back covers.

the previous image. Yet if claustrophobic, it is serenely so, in this elegantly conceived and realised composition, which is the last image of the *Angels, Calendars Book*.

What looks like a Victorian mahogany round pedestal table curves its sumptuous solid surface through the top right part of this final image, this *Swan Song*. The curve of the table-top (perhaps the chiffonière from the first *Calendars* image) is interrupted by the bright white border of a photograph of a man with a swan, its hard white edge intersecting the fine curve of the table, just overlapping its shiny edge.<sup>53</sup> Below the table's thick surface is an area of such deep dark tone that it is only possible to imagine what is there. But emphatically interrupting this dark area is a solitary white kid glove, resonancing the famous bronze glove photographed and described in *Nadja*.<sup>54</sup>

To the left of the table's top, which is in crisp focus, is a deliberately out-of-focus form which must surely be that of Woodman, in a visual reduction of her human form to two slanted ovoid forms close against the table's top. In this reduction of form she is about to disappear: to become de-materialised, about to sing. The placing of this image at the end of the Book is significant. Phelan's courageous conjecture that Woodman's chain of images could constitute a rehearsal for her

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<sup>53</sup> This postcard photograph was probably found by Woodman in the *Libreria Maldoror* in Rome. An image of a swan and human profile was included as a series of small images grouped as a frieze, displayed above the skirting board, in her BFA degree show at Rhode Island School of Art and Design entitled *Swan Song*. Above the frieze were hung the giant series. Other instances and images on this theme are explored in Chapter 9.

<sup>54</sup> Breton, *Nadja*, 1999, 56-57: ...on the very spot where I had so hoped she would not leave the blue glove, a bronze one she happened to possess....

death becomes acutely relevant in its light, nourished of course by the Proustian reference of the photograph photographed.<sup>55</sup>

Woodman has captioned the image underneath with her hand-written *swan song*. She had used *Swan Song* previously as the title for her graduation show at the Woods Gerry Gallery at the Rhode Island School of Art and Design in 1978, coincident with the time this Book was made. This brilliant series of photographs, each measuring three feet by four feet, in newly digitised restoration, was exhibited in London in 2007.<sup>56</sup>

A compelling and beautiful legend in circulation since the time of Aristotle, the white mute swan, *Cygnus Olus*, is allegedly song-less and silent throughout its life, until the moment just before its death. It is expressed here, in Tennyson's words:

*The wild swan's death-hymn took the soul  
Of that waste place with joy  
Hidden in sorrow: at first to the ear  
The warble was low, and full and clear;  
...  
Sometimes afar, and sometimes anear;  
But anon her awful jubilant voice,  
With a music strange and manifold,  
Flow'd forth on a carol free and bold;*<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Phelan, 'Francesca Woodman's Photography', 2002, 1002: *Woodman's use of photography as a way to rehearse her death allows us to consider her art as an apprenticeship in dying, rather than the thing that somehow outlasts or conquers death*. On a human level, enormous difficulties can arise from Phelan's position. Taken as a key to understanding many sequences and series in Woodman's oeuvre, however, Phelan's position can, at times, be alarmingly insightful.

<sup>56</sup> Victoria Miro Gallery, 19 June-28 July 2007. The *Swan Song* series is discussed in Chapter 9.

<sup>57</sup> 'The Dying Swan' in Tennyson, *Poems and Plays*, London, Oxford University Press, 1968, 15.

This legend has become deeply and romantically embedded in western culture, epitomised as an exceptional creative act before death. The quality of the act is realised by its crystallisation in the pain and poignancy of a material end and its inevitable re-assessment of that life's achievements.

It is no surprise that the dying swan myth holds a fascination for Woodman as it encapsulates her career's rigorous interest in the liminal and that symbolisation of transgression and transmutation that is captured in her recurrent imaging of overlapping borders and revealed inner layers. In this second section of the Book she is compelled to record these months of her life, sometimes by name; they are a part of her process of drawing on the everyday and its objects to fertilise her practice.