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# ‘At Home in Dust’:
# Francesca Woodman’s *House Series*, Revisited

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A reassessment of Francesca Woodman’s work is due, particularly with respect to how her photographs contribute to theorizing “the space of the subject” (Kirby 11). Woodman’s *House Series,* which she completed in Rhode Island between 1975 and 1978, then a young student photographer of the Rhode Island School of Design, provides fertile ground to assess the importance of ‘space’ to Woodman’s work and its critical reception. Carol Armstrong’s essay “Francesca Woodman: A Ghost in the House of the Woman Artist” argues that Woodman’s “use of space—that of the house most often—of very old houses (inhabited by very young bodies)” is indicative of an identity resting on the threshold of gender (348). The “spatial aspect” of Woodman’s work, Armstrong argues, reveals the female as a “figure of irruptive difference” occupying a “ludic space”, where play is an act of self-definition (350).

Woodman’s affinity with places marked by dirt, dust and decay, however, is discordant with the easy categorization of her as one on the verge of a preoccupation with ‘feminine space.’ “Space and where we are in it” writes Kathleen Kirby in *Defining the Space of the Subject: Investigating the Boundaries of Feminism,* “determines a large portion of our status as subjects” (Kirby 12). It is my suggestion that the issues of identity in the *House Series* demand a fresh look, which considers their spatial context. Looking closely at photographs *House #3* and *House #4*, I will explore the themes of identity and place, woman and artist, with the conviction that these contrasting themes are united. Edward Casey argues in *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place World* that “body and place belong together” (45) and I begin this analysis of Woodman’s *House Series* with the assertion that place, or *where we are*, “has everything to do with what and who we are” (Casey xiii).

In *House #3* (Figure 1), a ghostly female figure crouches beneath an open window. Her blurred torso (due to movement and long exposure time) takes on a transparent quality, revealing the deteriorating wall behind her. She is wearing the kind of black slippers which can be purchased in New York's China Town. The eyes of the figure stare out from the ether of the room, which is peopled by cracked plaster, broken shards of mirror-glass and an abject piece of cloth. On the ground, what looks to be dozens of charred matches suggests this place is a smoker's hideout. In *House #4* (Figure 2), a companion photograph, a figure attempts to wiggle behind a fireplace mantel which has been detached from the wall. The same black-slippered legs straddle the leaning mantel while above her the wallpaper peels. In both photographs, the sun streaming in the window creates a dramatic play of light and darkness, a theatre of revelation and concealment.

*Figure 1***.** Francesca Woodman. House #3. Providence, Rhode Island. Estate ID / File Name: P.028. 1976. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman

*Figure 2*. Francesca Woodman, House #4. Providence, Rhode Island. Estate ID / File Name: P.021. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman

In the first critical work written on Woodman, her prodigious production of photographs before her suicide at twenty two years of age spurred the interest of the art community. Following the posthumous show of her work at the Wellesley College Museum and the Hunter College Art Gallery (Baker 53), critics applauded her ability to execute the art school problem-set in an exceptional way. Other critics declared that her work questioned the male gaze and denaturalized conceptions of femininity through self-portraiture (Krauss 1986; Soloman-Godeau 1986). Later critics have unreservedly explored her work with respect to her suicide, proposing, as does Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida,* that the self-portrait is a rehearsal for an untimely death (Phelan 1987). Her work has also been examined as to what her photos have to say, more generally, about the woman-artist (Armstrong 2006).

Woodman's intentional juxtaposition of the old, detritus-strewn house and the young, female body has been read primarily by critic Abigail Soloman-Godeau as a nightmarish

response to patriarchal representations of the female body. "Swallowed by the fireplace," Soloman-Godeau writes, "...Woodman presents herself as a living sacrifice to the domus" (252). For Soloman-Godeau, Woodman's work in the *House Series* (and in general) represents femininity as a discursive construction. I suggest that Woodman's *House Series* reflects a photographic attempt to *inhabit* these spaces, not only as a gendered construct, but as a being engaged in an adaptive process with her environment[i] — becoming, as it were, 'at home in dust.'

In *House #3 and #4* Woodman features as the model, as she does in much of her work. Armstrong argues that the figure resembles the madwoman in the attic, a trope that was subsequently under attack in 1970s literary criticism (Gilbert 1979). She further characterizes "Woodman's haunted house as a ludic space, playfully demonic (and sometimes angelic) in its addressing of old myths of femininity...as a figure of irruptive difference" (Armstrong 350). However, the violent playfulness at work in *House #3* and *House #4* can be viewed as transgression of another kind. The room in decay in which Woodman's body features challenges societal expectations of domestic architecture. Framed by these walls, Woodman negates the form society expects of her as woman. In these photographs, the room in decay evokes not the opposition between female and male bodies, but the opposition between ideal and real space[ii], which may subsequently have something to say about the construction of femininity.

Woodman's use of the female model, often herself and often in the nude (Chandès 1999) has distracted critics from the space that surrounds her. However, it would be untruthful to say that her unique relationship to place and space has gone critically unnoticed[iii]. Yet, Woodman's interactions with the space around her body are often discussed in an effort to make connections to 'the gender question.' For example, Armstrong writes:

> Woodman marks almost all of her photographic spaces, whether inside or outside, inhabited by herself or other bodies or not (they are often both at once) as "feminine": the windowed house, the dark cellar, the gash in the ground, the dryadic tree, often with attendant ghosts. But she begs the question of whether those spaces are essentially or discursively "feminine." And she does so by inhabiting and investigating the zone *between* those two ways of thinking about gender, by constituting herself within a series of fissured, enfolded spaces of fleeting appearance and disappearance, in which she models a series of metaphors. (350)

In Woodman's houses, disorder reigns. Disorder, which the anthropologist Mary Douglas argued symbolises both danger and power (95), shapes not only the character of a place, but may also affect the subjects' substance. Such space is liminal, characterized by what Bernard Tschumi, in *Architecture and Disjunction* describes as "the meeting place": "...Such a place may possess the mouldy traces that time leaves on built form" (77). Decay and its resulting 'marks' tell us that whether places were at one time peopled, but have now fallen victim to the passage of time and neglect. These traces of time and of the body transform what would otherwise be called a 'space' or a 'site' (which denies a sense of belonging) into a 'place' where "identity is constructed through embodied experience...which is tied to locale, or inhabited place—and a sense of belonging" (Bennet 257). I consider the multiple 'openings' that mark Woodman's houses, such as the open window, the holes in the walls, the mirror shards on the floor mimicking pools of water as reflecting the way bodies enter and exit spaces, leaving their mark. This room is therefore representative, at best, of a 'fissured femininity,' that is, of a '*meeting* place' (Tschumi 77) where the body can, ghost-like, move across architectural boundaries.

While Armstrong argues that Woodman is "between" essentialist and discursive modes of gender identification, alternatively, Woodman's acts of appearance and disappearance in space can be viewed as "territorialising" (Tschumi 22). In *House #3* and *House #4* Woodman inserts herself into the dilapidated environment, a space that is in radical juxtaposition to her youthful beauty. Documenting herself in action in this space, she makes a stage of the decay around her. Performing acts within that space, she gives meaning to the environment, thereby declaring the 'placehood,' or ongoing life of the decaying attic to the social milieu. Therefore, how Woodman's bodily identity is *constructed* in this place is more important than whether or not *this place* is essentially or discursively "feminine". Art critic George Baker identified this necessary shift. "It is so hard to reduce Woodman's work to a sincere recording of bodily or autobiographical experience, to a simplistic documentation of the self" he writes (65). "If anything, she was documenting the limits of bodily experience, the impossibility of constituting the self" (*Ibid.)*

By documenting the 'placehood' of this room in decay, Woodman transgresses the limits of bodily experience and cultivates a chameleon-like identity. Neil Leach, in his book *Camouflage,* explores the urge of all humans to adapt to their environment, making use of Woodman's photographs as visual illustrations of his argument. He proposes that "we might posit 'belonging' as a form of attachment to a place that depends upon certain differentiation

of the self from the environment, which invites a reciprocal sense of attachment" (183). However, belonging is not articulated only through a comfortable association with place. When one's identity pushes against its surroundings, when the homely quality of a place is not immediately perceivable, there may be a great opportunity for the self to construct an identity in reaction to the space around it, and thus to facilitate interaction with society at large. For example, Casey explores the value of transition, or of becoming familiar with an unknown place:

> We enter here an architectural realm that might be called "transitional"...since it shares with [D.W Winnecott's] notion of transitional space such characteristics as freedom of movement (within certain definite limits) and plasticity of aim. Just as the child in transitional space exists between harsh external reality and self-serving fantasy, so the person on the porch— or in other comparable intermediate places, exists between private and public...certain actions not possible elsewhere can be undertaken here (121-122).

Woodman's desire to be a witness to place, to use her body in unusual ways as the vehicle of entrance, and to radically assimilate with her surroundings is illustrated in these photographs.

The movement of her body in *House #3* allows her torso to take on the pattern of the wall behind her. In *House #4,* her legs make sensuous contact with the leaning mantle place. In another photograph, from an untitled series completed in New York, Woodman mimics her environment, using a dead fish's spine to reflect the deteriorating wall behind her (Figure 3). In *Untitled*, as in the *House Series,* it is as though Woodman's body is trying to merge with place. The fish bone she holds in her hands mimics the spinal interior of the wall.

*Figure 3*. Francesca Woodman. Untitled. New York. Estate ID / File Name: P.140. 1979. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

I take this merger as proof of Tschumi's statement that, "not only do we grow into and become a part of our environment, but our environment becomes part of us. Architecture, it would seem", he continues, "plays a vital role in the forging of personal identities" (*Ibid.)* In *House #3,* Woodman's body is making gestures in an effort to assimilate with the wall behind her (her movement and the exposure time of the shot allow for this visual effect to be achieved in a way only possible in film). In *House #4,* her body attempts to make use of an entrance— the leaning mantle is a way into the body of the room. And Woodman's body, specifically her legs, are allowing for an articulate corporeal engagement with this opening. In the *House Series*, Woodman uses architecture to forge an identity. Her body reflects or mimics the place she's in and assimition of this kind, Leach argues, "potentially contains within it a specifically architectural concern, in that assimilation involves a process of relating to the environment" (3).

With respect to the issue of identity, Woodman's gestures in space also demand a certain attention. *House Series* reveals the violence and "the intensity of a relationship between individuals and their surrounding spaces" (Tschumi123). Woodman's gesturing suggest, as Judith Butler argues, that identity is something exterior and constituted by our

acts, gestures and behaviours (qtd. in Leach 172). Woodman's gestures are at the same time reflective of her body's ingression into this specific place[iv]. For example, Tschumi writes that:

> Bodies carve all sorts of new and unexpected spaces, through fluid or erratic motions. Architecture, then, is only an organism engaged in constant intercourse with users, whose bodies rush against the carefully established rules of architectural thought...the body disturbs the purity of architectural order (124).

Viewed in this light, Woodman's photographs are particularly astute example of the violence bodies enact on spaces. In *House #4,* Woodman's body penetrates the space between the wall and the leaning fireplace mantle. In *House #3* and *#4* the body is energized by the place it moves in. Woodman's photographs stand as artefacts of how body and place can be bound together— not only by a trick of light and exposure times, nor by the two dimensionality of the photograph itself—but by the intimate relationship of persons and places.

As a result, *House Series* challenges the conventions of womanhood. Woodman declares herself as a being-in-the-world, or perhaps more particularly, as a being-in-*this-unacceptable*-place. The place, in return, allows her the agency to transgress both social and architectural boundaries. For example, Jean Shinto acknowledges the importance of Woodman's relationship to her dilapidated rooms, asking:

> Where else might she have felt so free to drape herself in peeling pieces of wallpaper, making virtual clothes of them? Or to splatter plaster (and, again, herself) with dripping paint, like an Action painter? Or to expose a little more of some crumbling wall in order to draw our attention to the similarities between lath design and the fish scale she is holding against her own similarly striated back-bone? (20)

Indeed whatever Woodman's reasons for her affinity to such spaces, the way this architectural space conditioned her artistic practice reveals a great deal about the independence and interdependence between individuals and spaces. Woodman's transgression of architectural boundaries draws attention to an overlooked container of identity— space— which may operate against the "constraining enclosures" of words as the "grounds for identity" (Kirby 14)[v].

In that Woodman articulates her identity— 'the space of the subject'— in terms of the borders of interior space anticipates the preoccupations of new millennium artists who have furthered the artistic exploration of the boundaries of the subject. For example, the

installation work of Catherine Bertola embraces the dust, debris and detritus of abandoned sites to recreate "the patterns of past lives left behind, revealing the underlying material and temporal condition of spaces" (Sandino 285). In the installation piece, *The Property of Two Gentleman*[1], Bertola recreated the pattern of elaborate wallpaper from the dust and debris of the floor of a house, simultaneously celebrating the marks of loss and of presence in a place.

By photographing or working with abandoned places and their resident dust and detritus, Woodman and Bertola reveal how the marks of decay, as much as the marks of affluence (such as elaborate wallpaper), make places meaningful. Edward Casey muses as much when he writes:

> Even if we vacate a place and it stays unoccupied, it does not become an instant void or revert to being a mere part of space. So long as we (or other living organisms) have once lived there, it has become a place—and it *remains* a place, insofar as it bears the sedimented traces of our presence (103).

Places, as well as people, have an identity— a cultural history. And while Bertola and Woodman share an impulse to artistically colonize abandoned sites, and an affinity for dust and mould, Bertola highlights the lives of others, and the deep (perhaps indestructible) connection between persons and homes. Woodman, however, was more interested in examining her subjectivity through the possible affinities of her body for the space around it. Perhaps this explains why Woodman's former tutor, Sloan Rankin, remarked that while "most photographers prefer a dust-free neat-ness [...] it seemed to me that Francesca was most at home in dust. (She also had a special fondness for mould)"(Schinto 19). As Bertola's work reveals, to feel at home amidst dust and mould is not a condition unique to the personality of Woodman. That Woodman was 'at home in dust,' suggests that she was fascinated by the human relationship to the world and the role that places play in that relationship.

I conclude with the thought that *House Series* is a kind of visual argument about human desire to feel connected, to find our place in the world and to feel at home. I've encountered Woodman's work with an attitude akin to that of critic Margaret Sundell, who in the forum entitled, "Francesca Woodman Reconsidered," suggested that while the feminist

[1] Please follow this link to see an image of this piece: http://www.axisweb.org/seWork.aspx?WORKID=46534. Catherine Bertola (Artist) *The property of Two Gentlemen* (installation view). Douglas Atfield (Photographer). 2006. WEB. *Axis.* 30 March 2010.

analysis of Woodman's work is not invalid it should not be "the only matrix through which her work is assessed" (Baker 59). It was Carol Armstrong's essay however, "Francesca Woodman: A Ghost in the House of the Woman Artist" that inspired me to 'revisit' *House Series* with space in mind. What is meaningful about the 'spatial aspect' of subjectivity does not negate the importance of Woodman's photography to feminist discourse. The most interesting thing about Woodman's houses is that they are marked by "the mouldy traces that time leaves on built form" (Tschumi 77). Unlike Armstrong, I found little revealed there about the nature of 'the woman artist.' To my eye, the transgressive, boundary-pushing spatial relationship of Woodman's work transcends feminist readings. Instead, *House Series* asserts "how critical the daily interaction of subjects and their bodies in social spaces can be" (Kirby 18). Edward Casey argues that a sense of belonging in the world depends upon an understanding of places and spaces. This appeal to what Woodman's work has to say about 'the self in space' will lead, I hope, to further discussion on the contribution of artists who show us the ways that body and place belong together.

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[i] Specifically, how Woodman represents her body in orientation to the built environment can perhaps be explained by Edward Casey's concept of *inhabitation*. He considers inhabitation to be, "not merely at our destination but fully *in* it, so much so that we often take the place for granted and cannot say in what it consists" (121).
[ii] For a discussion on the opposition of real and ideal space see Tschumi 68-69.
[iii] See Armstrong 348-350;363
[iv] "Direction, like dimension, arises from the body's ingression into places, however indirect or subtle this body's contribution may be" (Casey 102).
[v] Kathleen Kirby writes that, "Words...clothe us, define us, determine what we can and can't do, where we can and can't go. They are constraining enclosures we seek to vault as well as, often, a ground for identity that we take up purposely, for personal and political reasons"(14).