

Francesca Woodman: becoming-woman, becoming-imperceptible, becoming-a-subject-in-wonder

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We are not in the presence of a passively representative image, but of a vector of subjectivation. (Guattari, 1995: 25)

This article examines a number of Francesca Woodman's staged photographs. It proposes that the whirling body emerging in much of Woodman's work activates an 'intermediary of relations' (Ziarek, 1999: 14). Through this activation the photographs participate in the production of new individuations. The article draws on the work of Luce Irigaray, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Brian Massumi and Bracha L. Ettinger. It sets to work a number of concepts that themselves operate in the in-between of relations. Concepts such as 'air', 'trans-situationality', 'wonder', and the 'imperceptible' are set in motion in order to engage with the creative forces emerging with Woodman's becoming with the world. The article first explores the composition of Woodman's photographs. This composition: allows the in-between to become expressive; generates wonder; and works to unground and mobilise some of our more conventional perceptual structures. Second, the article details the way that Woodman's photographs themselves operate within a larger relational register. At this point the article begins to conceive of a photo-thought that situates the photo-work as well as the viewer within an affective in-between. Woodman's photographs are thus not conceived of as passive representative images but rather as generative forces that participate in our becoming with the world.

'Luminous Shadows' and Photographic 'Air'



(Fig. 1) Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Rome, Italy, 1977-78.
Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

The figures in Francesca Woodman's photographs often leave the ground, and the photographs themselves seem strangely ungrounded. Both the figures and the photographs themselves are mobilised: they become 'trans-situational' (Massumi, 2002: 217) and open up towards 'a new space-time' (Irigaray, 1993a: 75). As part of this mobilised opening, Woodman often camouflages the body

and/or moves it in front of the lens during exposure. Chris Townsend points out that the effect of Woodman's 'movement'/'camouflage' is neither to make "woman" invisible nor to make the female body disappear (Townsend, 1999: 34 and 2006: 8 and 43). Woodman's photographs are much more creative than that. I would suggest that many of Woodman's photographs make visible her 'luminous shadow' (Barthes, 1982: 110). In doing so, they 'render visible' a woman of the future – a 'becoming-woman' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 342 and 275). [1]

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes stresses the importance of the body's 'luminous shadow'. He relates this shadow to a *photographic 'air'*. This 'air' is necessary to the 'life' of the photograph:

...the air is the luminous shadow which accompanies the body; and if the photographer fails to show this air, then the body moves without a shadow, and once this shadow is severed, as in the myth of the Woman without a Shadow, there remains no more than a sterile body. It is by this tenuous umbilical cord that the photographer gives life; if he cannot, either by lack of talent or bad luck, supply the transparent soul its bright shadow, the subject dies forever. (Barthes, 1982: 110)

Woodman's photographs express this *photographic 'air'*. The depicted female figure is not therefore (in Barthes' terms) 'sterile', or without 'life', but moves together with a 'luminous shadow'. This shadow has many aspects, some less literal than others. In one particular photograph the shadow of Woodman's body appears to have been burnt onto the wooden surface of the floor. However, this shadow does not match the current position of Woodman's body. It is the lack of match (between body and shadow), not the actual shadow itself, that becomes the 'luminous shadow', the photographic 'air'.



(Fig. 2) Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976.
Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

However, in many of Woodman's other works, there is no clear break between her animated body and what appears to be an animated shadow. In some photographs one can almost perceive the very air in which Woodman moves. Air, shadow and body come together, or the air itself becomes her shadow. Here there is a strong relationship between the actual and photographic 'air', even if they are not exactly the same. On numerous occasions the life-giving air is made semi-visible in the blurred movement of the body and Woodman's clothing – dresses or skirts in particular. These form a kind of vapour around her. The body in the photographs borders on the threshold of the perceivable.



(Fig. 3) Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976.
Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

Like Woodman and Barthes, Luce Irigaray pays careful attention to 'air'. She explains; 'I stand in air, I move in air, it's in some way the place I occupy. Unlike Heidegger, I would say that my first home isn't language but air, the indispensable medium (or vehicle) of communication...' (Irigaray, 2000: 130). In her "conversation" with Heidegger, Irigaray argues that due to his '*forgetting of air*' Heidegger's thinking is in a sense too grounded: 'he hardly ever leaves the ground, whether that of the earth or that of the logos'. This is a problem for Irigaray, because 'air' is 'necessary both to life and to the relation': in fact, 'life' and 'relation...are one'. Therefore 'to forget air means forgetting the element that makes individuation and relation possible' (Irigaray, 1999 and 2000: 136-137). Francesca Woodman is not so forgetful. Her photographs turn 'the ground' itself into 'air'. This makes new individuations possible and this in turn facilitates a future-directed becoming.

As mentioned, Barthes also remembers the life-giving 'air'. At one point he relates the photographic 'air' to a photograph of his mother. For Barthes this 'air' captured his mother's 'being' and 'kindness' – her essence (Barthes, 1982: 109-110 and 69-71). In Woodman's photographs the 'air' is a little different. Woodman's 'air' becomes a transformative 'third dimension' – not reducible to individual beings (Irigaray, 1993a: 82). Her 'air' reminds me a little of the excessive *grin* of the Cheshire cat – lingering for a while after the first encounter between Alice and the cat in Wonderland.



(Fig. 4) Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1978.
Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

Woodman's lingering air involves an 'encounter with the world'. This *air of encounter* creates wonder in the photographic experience. According to Irigaray wonder 'corresponds to time, to space-time before and after that which can delimit.... It constitutes an *opening* prior to and following that which surrounds, enlances' (Irigaray, 1993a: 76 and 81-82). Woodman's photographs, like Irigaray's wonder, do

not 'delimit'. Rather, it is as if Woodman's air is ready to encounter a new situation. Or as if her *photographic 'air'* is moving from one situation to another, leaving the *ground* and becoming 'trans-situational' (Massumi, 2002: 217). In this becoming, Woodman's air, like the smile of the Cheshire cat, opens up towards a 'new space-time'. As we shall see, this opening does not capture an essential being but 'renders visible' a becoming, a *becoming-woman*. This *becoming-woman* meets the more general '*air of the world*' and this meeting generates wonder – 'the opening of a new space-time' (Irigaray, 1993a: 75; see also Ziarek, 1999).

As we have seen, Woodman's *becoming-woman* and her *photographic 'air'* linger like the grin of the cat lingers. Woodman's becoming also has other correspondences to aspects of Alice's adventures. [2] For example, in a series of photographs titled *Space²*, Providence Rhode Island, 1975-1976, one senses a similar confinement to the one Alice experiences when she grows larger than the house in which she finds herself in Wonderland. In these photographs Woodman moves her body within a seemingly closed glass 'display case'. These cases often seem very confined. Indeed, in one of the photographs from the *Space²* series, Woodman's body is pressed against the glass (Krauss, 1986: 43; Sundell, 1999: 436). However, the space's closure is made ambiguous by a gesture within the image. One arm reaches around the back of the case, where there appears to be no enclosure by the glass, to touch the glass on the "outside". [3] 'Exterior' and 'interior' space are simultaneously given felt sensation and undermined (Sundell, 1996: 436-437). As Townsend also notes, the clear dividing line between 'outside' and 'inside' collapses. It is clear that the body's confinement is not total (Townsend, 2006: 25).



(Fig. 5) Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976.
Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

Similar ambiguities are present throughout Woodman's work. Allusions to, and uncanny multiplications of, entrances are present in many of her works. At times doors, windows, and other figures of entrance and exit (framings, glasses, mirrors) appear to attain their own energetic qualities. In a photograph from Providence Rhode Island, 1975-1978, for example, there is no human figure present in the image, only a door oddly suspended in the room, with only one corner resting on the ground and another on the wall. The entrance to the old empty room in which the door is positioned frames a hallway in which doorways to other rooms are visible. In another photograph from the same period we encounter Woodman in an old room. This time one door is half open, the other closed. The lower part of Woodman's dress is a little hazy because she swings her body slightly in front of the lens. It looks like the body is caught up in the mirroring of the entrances and exits, again mobilised by the air.

These mobilising qualities of the photographic 'air' recur in many of Woodman's photographs. In general, there is a preoccupation with movement, slow and fast, actual and virtual, within decaying spaces, windows, doors, mirrors, entrances and other passages. Margaret Sundell notes that this suggests a series of *foldings* or, one could say, dynamic and modulating punctuations – of the framed space with that of the 'outside' (Sundell, 1996: 435; see also Townsend, 1999: 36-37). A good example is the kind of folding present in the photograph of Woodman in the glass display cabinet. This folding makes us think beyond the frame – even the frame within 'the photographic frame' of the glass cabinet itself (Sundell, 1996: 435). Significantly, this 'folding' also challenges the supposed *photographic 'stasis'* (Townsend, 1999: 34-37 and 2006: 50).

In an early photograph, *Untitled*, Boulder, Colorado 1972-75, the setting – a graveyard – is more confronting. The passageway in this photograph is of a more uncanny nature than the doors, windows and so on mentioned above. A figure (Woodman herself) is climbing through a cross-shaped opening in a headstone on which is written *to die*. Death and life are folded into each other, in a further play on the motifs of entrance and exit, generation and decay. That the figure in the image is unclear indicates the extreme mobility of this folding. This is a mobility made strangely virtual when presented in the supposed instantaneity of the photographic image. The body looks like a spirit, although one not clearly distinct from the material environment surrounding it – the headstone, the air and the grass on the ground. It is as if the entire photograph vibrates due to the quick movement of the body. [4]

Indeed, in many of Woodman's photographs, the artist/model seems excessively lively. In front of the lens, Woodman spins around, jumps, ducks and shakes parts of her body. Some of Woodman's photographs in which the body appears particularly blurred, and "merged" with the world, are *House #3*, *House #4* and some of the photographs from the *Space²* series. In *House #3* Woodman is again found in a room of an old house, with walls peeling and old wallpaper on the ground. Woodman appears as a smudge beneath one of the windows. Her body looks like it is emerging from the air, while simultaneously being whirled around by it. Gaby Wood writes that Woodman 'throws herself through a space, blurred like a Francis Bacon painting' (Wood, 1999: 22).

In *House #4* Woodman's blurred body ducks in between the wall next to a fireplace and the dislodged fire surround leaning against this wall. Woodman could be seen to be 'merging with' the wall, the fire surround or the space in between (Townsend, 1999: 37; see also Kent, 1999: 53). However, Woodman is also situated between all these possible mergings in a kind of double passage: 'becoming, or emerging from environments' (Woodman in Townsend: 2006: 244). Not quite merging, Woodman takes part in what Ettinger would call a relational 'differentiation-in-co-emergence' (Ettinger, 2006: 140).



(Figs. 6 and 7) Francesca Woodman, *House #3* and *#4*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976.
Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

In some of the photographs from the *Space²* series Woodman's emerging body whirls – and is whirled – through the space of an empty and almost featureless room. The edge of one of the window-frames, from which daylight enters the room, can just be seen in the upper right-hand corner of these photographs. This light dynamises the movement of the figure. It is as if light captures the *air*, and then folds it into the photograph. In another photograph from the series Woodman's head looks like it is spinning around and is about to carry her body upward or forward through space. For Townsend it is the use of the body 'as a disordering principle' here that is important to Woodman's "questioning" of time as well as space. 'Far from being a body trapped by time and space, hers is a body that...calls time and space into question'. With this questioning of time and space Woodman's *photographic 'air'* becomes transformative (Townsend, 2006: 27-28; see also Solomon-Godeau, 1986: 21). Woodman is ready to encounter 'a new space-time' in that her whirling air stretches towards the potential for future becoming.



(Figs. 8) Francesca Woodman, *Space²*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976.
Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

In an early essay considering Woodman's work in a feminist and transformative light Abigail Solomon-Godeau points to 'the undertones of extremity and excess' in Woodman's photographs. She argues that Woodman's 'initial act of radical perception is the necessary preamble to the emergence of a second act of exemplary transformation.' (Solomon-Godeau, 1986: 19). For Townsend, it is in part because of the 'excess' with which it provides us – 'an excess of' movement and energy, 'time' and 'space' – that Woodman's work 'refuses... photography's "decisive braking", its closure of space and time' (Townsend, 1999: 34-37). It is only when this is understood – together with the challenge this makes to perceptual structures – that the transformative force emerging with the female body in Woodman's photographs can be fully comprehended. It is this force that provides Woodman's photographs with their power of

wonder and renewal. In Francesca Woodman's photographs this force – a force of both air and body, like the cat's lingering smile – keeps 'wonder in the world' (Massumi, 2000: 203). [5]

Elastic Sensations and Wonder

In many of the photographs Woodman's body itself seems almost *elastic*: it stretches, expands and connects. Deleuze (2003) refers to a related 'elasticity' in his analysis of Francis Bacon's paintings. Deleuze is concerned with the relation between movement and sensation, possibly reversing the everyday understanding of this relation. According to Deleuze's analysis of Bacon's paintings, '[m]ovement does not explain sensation; on the contrary, it is explained by the elasticity of the sensation ... it is not movement that explains the levels of sensation, it is the level of sensation that explain what remains of movement' (Deleuze, 2003: 41). [6] Deleuze writes that 'there are many movements in Bacon's paintings'. Again however, the 'air' is involved. In considering Bacon's 'triptychs of light', Deleuze refers to 'a type of movement and force' in which '[e]verything becomes aerial' (Deleuze, 2003: 84-85).

Deleuze's concept of the relation between movement and 'the elasticity of sensation' can also be understood in relation to Irigaray's concept of wonder. If Irigaray thinks of 'air' as the 'first element' (Irigaray, 2000: 137), she thinks (with Descartes) of wonder as the 'first of...the passions' (Descartes, 1931: 358). For Irigaray, wonder, like air, creates 'mobility'. It enables us 'to move': 'Wonder is the motivating force behind mobility in all its dimensions. From its most vegetative to its most sublime functions, the living being has need of wonder to move' (Irigaray, 1993a: 73). Bringing Irigaray and Deleuze together here, I will suggest that 'the elasticity of sensation' – like Woodman's *photographic 'air'* – also keeps 'wonder in the world'. Wonder returns the favour. Wonder folds 'the elasticity of sensation' into the ongoing creation of the world as mobilised and open.

Irigaray argues that, in many "paradigms" of modes of relating, the movement of the world beyond that of subject/object, self/other divisions appears to be excluded (thus her focus on air as well as wonder: both are relational and concern movement). According to Irigaray there is not even an 'opening up' to 'the other' in such paradigms. This is a problem because it *splits* not only the world but also 'our life' and 'our bodies...into several worlds' (Irigaray, 1993a: 69 and 72). [7] Irigaray writes the following about what she sees as our current 'passively experienced passions':

Sap no longer circulates between the beginning and the end of its incarnation. And there is no *window*, no sense remaining open on, or with, the world, the Other, the other. In order to dwell within it, transform it. What is lacking in terms of the passions is *wonder*. (Irigaray, 1993a: 72-73)

This points to the need to think wonder, movement and relation together. If wonder is thought in terms of a mobile 'relationality' (Ziarek, 1999), it follows that wonder can be perceived as a mode of relating in which the self opens up to world and the other. It is also a relationality in which the subject/object relation itself opens up – to the point of breaking down – so that an 'excess' or 'intermediary' can continue. As Irigaray writes; wonder is a 'third dimension. An intermediary. Neither the one nor the other' (Irigaray, 1993a: 74 and 82).

In this 'third dimension' it is a question of 'encounter', no longer a question of what is lacking. Ziarek explains that for Irigaray 'perhaps the most important aspect of wonder is that, unlike desire' wonder 'is not constituted through lack'. This is because wonder 'precedes' desire (Irigaray, 1993a: 81). It

'functions as the very intermediary of relations, their *third term*' (Ziarek, 1999: 14). One of the most significant aspects of wonder then is that a kind of 'excess' or 'third dimension' is produced by a continuously emergent relationality (Irigaray, 1993a: 74 and 82). 'Wonder operates as a transformative interval...it produces a change not simply in the manner of the subject's being but in the very mode of the relation itself' (Ziarek, 1999: 6; see also Irigaray, 1993a: 73). [8]

In sum, wonder is 'intermediary', a 'sense remaining open ... with ... the world', something like Deleuze's 'elasticity of sensation', which can be experienced as a kind of relation. However, it is crucial to note here that relationality does not link the 'already-constituted' (Massumi, 1997: 175). Rather, like becoming, 'a true *relation* is that which *constitutes* the terms that it connects' (Barthélémy in Simondon, 2009: 15). So Woodman's elastic *folding* with the world – her movement and break down of the subject/object division – involves an opening in/to the world and an 'elastic becoming' with the world (Manning, 2009: 36). Woodman's photographic 'air' creates an 'intermediary' 'elastic' wonder, which facilitates new individuations.

The 'air' of Woodman's photographs provides 'the elasticity of sensation' and this gives rise to the experience of wonder. With this wonder an opening up to the forces and '*air of the world*' is found. Yet this implies that in Woodman's photographs, the movement of the body does not only originate internally. Woodman's movement is, at least in part, an effect of *the forces of the world* (see Deleuze, 2003: xi and 34-43). [9]

These forces are particularly obvious in a Woodman photograph from Rome, May 1977-August 1978. Sundell notes that in this photograph, which resembles Bacon's paintings in its elasticity and movement, the body of the photographer/model is jerked violently 'backwards' away from a wall towards 'the viewer' (Sundell 1996: 438). Woodman's face is blurred and her 'mouth open' in a mute scream. We see a smear of paint across Woodman's back and the wall is covered with streaks of the same 'substance' (Sundell, 1996: 438). This photograph is one of Woodman's more disturbing images as this time the 'encounter with the world' seems painful, in a way not found in many of Woodman's other photographs. Yet, even if painful, the encounter still provides wonder along with an 'elasticity of sensation', to the point that, as in many of Woodman's other works, there is a break down in the subject/object division (Sundell, 1996: 435). Sundell points out that this is signalled in the streaks of paint found on both body and wall (Sundell, 1996: 438). The paint here operates as an 'intermediary'. Its effect (together with the movement) is used to fold subject and object into one another while still leaving an 'interval' in which to become (Irigaray, 1993a: 73 and 82).

Woodman's folding then is suggestive of a further undoing of the entities of figure and ground, subject and world (Sundell 1996). With this undoing, bodies and the "meaning" of bodies are not experienced as pre-given (Solomon-Godeau, 1986). Through the appearance of 'the elasticity of sensation' a window or door is opened to the 'outside' – beyond the culturally coded *studium* (Sundell, 1996: 435; Barthes, 1982). Beyond this *studium* wonder emerges.

For Jean-Luc Nancy, wonder is an encounter with the 'limit' of 'signification' – an arrival 'at the limit' as well as a *renewal* of this very 'limit' (Nancy, 1997: 67). Woodman's photographs give image-body to the arrival at the limit of current cultural significations – the *studium*. Yet these image-bodies perhaps overcome this limit as much as they may renew it. The ambiguity involved is found in the many active challenges to divisions that are constantly breaking down: subject/object, figure/ground, body/world. In Woodman's photographs the opening of these divisions, and their refolding, open up multiple

passageways through the world. This is not only symbolised, but repeated processually, again and again, in the many encounters with passages, windows, doors and doorways. As Sundell notes;

Woodman's photographs seek out and surpass the borders between subject and object, self and environment, and in sensibility they reveal a moment hovering precariously between adolescence and adulthood. The *house* series (1975-76) exemplifies this play of physical and psychic limits...If Woodman's preoccupation is limits, the examination of them is constantly grounded in the body or, more precisely, in the act of bringing the body into relation with an outside element that destabilises it and renders it liminal. (Sundell, 1996: 435)

Some of Woodman's movements beyond clear cut divisions emerge in photographs from the *Space*² series. In one of the photographs from this series Woodman's body is again positioned in an old room with wooden floors and scraps of wallpaper on the floor. The body is placed against a peeling and cracking wall between two windows. However, the figure is only partly visible because Woodman covers her face and upper torso and the lower part of her body with some of the peeling (floral) wallpaper. Again it is ambiguous whether Woodman is being enveloped by the wall or 'emerging from' it, like Venus from a shell ambiguously poised between opening and closure, world and limit of relation to the world. In another photograph this emergence is even more suggestive: Woodman's body is here breaking through a large sheet of paper *and* she carries a large shell (Kent, 1999: 53). Here the shell itself seems an opening. It evokes the experience of putting a large shell to one's ear and hearing the sea meeting the 'air' of the world (see also Irigaray, 1999: 152). [10]



(Fig. 9) Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Macdowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire, 1980.
Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

In a later series of photographs, (Macdowell Colony, Petersborough, New Hampshire, summer 1980), shot outdoors, Woodman wraps bark around her arms to make them merge with the birch trees in the forest. However, this kind of camouflage is not only about merging with the environment. It also has

the effect of creating an opening – an interval between the trees. This interval is created by the fleshiness of Woodman’s stretched arms and hands against the forest background. Arms, hands, bark and trees are folded into each other in the very production of the interval.

Deleuze writes that ‘A people is always a new wave, a new fold in the social fabric: any creative work is a new way of folding...’ (Deleuze, 1995: 158; see also Deleuze, 1993). As we have seen Woodman’s creations of intervals in the house series – and her photographs more generally – carry out such a ‘new way of folding’. Woodman’s folding – in her whirlings, for example – involves the body and air, ‘organic’ and ‘inorganic’ objects (Townsend, 1999: 36), the house as well as time/space itself. This folding carries a particular power: it brings new things to life. In Woodman’s many interior shots it is almost as if the non-organic, the room/house itself, seems alive.



(Fig. 10) Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, New York, 1979.
Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

Townsend points to a series of photographs, New York, 1979, in which there is another complex folding of the inorganic into the organic body. These photographs again depict a wall and Woodman herself. The wall’s ‘crumbling plaster’ here gives way to a partial exposure of the old structure that is supposed to hold the plaster in place. This underlying structure looks almost like a horizontal row of fish bones (Townsend, 2006: 57 and 1999: 36; Sundell, 1996: 436). Both Townsend and Sundell note that Woodman plays with this idea – in one photograph she is facing the wall with her back exposed to the camera. With one hand Woodman, who is wearing a dress that is open in the back, places a fish bone-like object against her naked spine (Townsend, 1999: 36). A kind of camouflage is again experienced in relation to the wall. However, as Sundell notes, there is also a play on the relationship between Woodman’s living spine, the “dead” spine of the fish, the “spine” of the wall and the printed pattern on

Woodman's dress (Sundell, 1996: 436-437). Organic and inorganic objects begin to communicate through the 'intermediary' of the dead organic bone or the exposed structure of the wall. Townsend argues that in Woodman's work 'No privileged attention is given to the self above the inorganic'. They are folded in to each other (Townsend, 1999: 36; see also Sundell, 1996: 436-439).

In Woodman's folding, then, the non-organic forces of the world such as those involved in the walls and doors of the house, are not incidental to the images (Townsend, 1999). Deleuze and Guattari could be describing a Woodman photograph when they write, 'The house takes part in an entire becoming. It is life, the "nonorganic life of things"' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 180). Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the 'house' is important precisely because sensation is not reducible to the organic. With the house, because it is a question of more than "the body", the 'bloc of sensations' that is art emerges. This bloc 'embodies' the virtuality of the relations involved. It 'gives' this 'a life' or 'a universe' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 167 and 177).

What applies to the house applies in a slightly different sense to the 'nonorganic life' of Woodman's photographs themselves. There is a 'nonorganic life of things' in the photographs as 'blocs of sensations'. This is at work within and beyond 'the elasticity of sensation' that the photographs contain. This changes our understanding of the aesthetic power of photographic images. In possessing a 'nonorganic life', photographs also possess active 'elastic' powers that 'whirl'. They too can participate in our becoming 'with the world' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 183, 184 and 169). [11]

Whirling Space and Haptic Vision

Woodman's becoming also involves a whirling with the world. The whirling in/of the photographs is an emergence of the self (with the world) rather than a mastering 'of the world'. It involves a bringing out of self and/world rather than a contest between them. In other words, Woodman's whirling – like wonder – is a relation that itself creates both body and world (see Irigaray, 1993a: 77 and 1993b: 98-99).

Yet "which world?", "which bodies?" and "which relations?" remain important questions. Irigaray (1993b) has made some significant observations that address these questions, in her discussion of play as whirling. Not any world will do. [12] At one point Irigaray writes: 'I want to become outside of your world. The time is past when I stayed still to enable you to keep moving. What do I care about sharing in your games! If, by doing so, I must give up my own' (Irigaray, 1991: 18). This assertion is in part directed towards Nietzsche and his ideas about the feminine but Irigaray's assertion can also be addressed to Freud. Irigaray points to his description of the '*fort-da*' game in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. Freud suggests that this game is a way for the child to actively deal with and control 'the absence of the mother' (and Freud assumes presence or absence as key here, before the game begins) (Irigaray, 1993b: 97). It is therefore also play relating to the beginning of both the separation from the mother and the child's own emerging autonomy. Irigaray, however, describes a very different mode of play that, according to her, is often carried out by girls. The game Irigaray describes involves a 'circular' 'whirling' in space and even though I am not confident that any absolute gender difference really exists in relation to the practice of whirling, I draw on Irigaray. The notion of whirling is important to understanding the full force of Woodman's photoworks. Irigaray writes:

Girls describe a space around themselves rather than displacing a substitute object from one place to another or into various places...*they whirl about in different directions*: toward the outside toward the inside, on the border between the two. They whirl not only toward or

around an external sun but also around themselves and within themselves. The *fort-da* is not their move into language...Woman do not try to master the other but to give birth to themselves. (Irigaray, 1993b: 99)

Most of us would have seen children 'whirl around' a playground, skipping, skate boarding, and swinging each other around. Following Irigaray, I understand this whirling as an ongoing creation of a 'territory' through time, a kind of embodied refrain (Irigaray, 1993b: 98). The whirling both situates and differentiates the body from its surroundings. However, the kind of differentiation created through whirling also includes a remaining connected with the world. This is no longer a world that "stays still" but instead a world that itself whirls and changes. The lack of separation between one's whirling body, the whirling world, and the dizziness of this new kind of self-world relation, is related to, or a transformation of, wonder. This kind of play is clearly present in many of Woodman's photographs but it is missing from Freud's account of childhood development. Perhaps Irigaray is right when she suggests that 'wonder' is 'the passion Freud forgot?' (Irigaray, 1993a: 80).

There are also different relations to vision in Freud and Irigaray's accounts of childhood games. Understanding these can also enhance our understanding of the productive power of Woodman's photoworks. In relation to "seeing", the *'fort-da'* is important in terms of a perception of 'optic space'. In the constitution of this space, relations are transformed into "things" that are present or absent. Space becomes meaningful in terms of the presence or absence of these "things". Irigaray's notion of whirling describes a perception/creation of what Deleuze and Guattari (in relation to vision) call a 'haptic space'. According to Deleuze and Guattari this type of vision gives 'the eye...a function that is haptic rather than optical'. It is concerned with 'orientation, location, and linkage' – and I would say whirling (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 492-494). Again the relational air is not excluded.

It is important to note that the two different "games", and their different relations to vision and space, are not mutually exclusive. In Woodman's whirling photographs one gets a sense of both 'optic' and 'haptic space'. Indeed, her images stage both an encounter and a contrast between the two. The *optic* quality is the framing, the doorways and the other focussed, clear-cut and formal compositions. Although, at the same time, the almost uncanny multiplication and occasional dislocation of these various framings can become somewhat dizzying in itself, and tend towards the *haptic*. [13] The haptic is more fully expressed in the blurring and whirling of Woodman's body.

Irigaray's notion of whirling can be related to Woodman's photography, then, in a number of ways.

First, the figure in Woodman's photographs 'co-merges' with the environment (see Ettinger, 2006). The body creates a territory although this is not the territory of the body alone so much as a simultaneously created territory of body and world.

In Woodman's photographs the body becomes an extension of the world/space around it and the world an extension of the body (Sundell, 1996: 436). This felt, elastic aspect of 'haptic space' is *rendered visible* in Woodman's photographs in a manner that literally blurs the clear-cut divisions along the lines of 'presence/absence', visibility/invisibility. In this way Woodman is also drawing attention to the temporality of territory – the ongoing experience of space as changing instead of space defined by the anxiety about the 'presence/absence' of "things" (Townsend, 1999: 35-36). Or, one could say that Woodman is allowing for a visibility that preserves within it the power of the unseen – perhaps the power of time. It is almost as if Woodman's photographs make perceivable the kind of 'transformative

interval' that Irigaray found in wonder (Ziarek, 1999: 6). If one approaches Woodman's photography with an anxiety about presence foremost, this aspect of her work is likely to be lost.

Second, Woodman's photographic whirling produces a way of looking that renders relationality visible. [14] Woodman's photographs produce a vision of subjectivity that in Ettinger's terms enacts relation and 'differentiation-in-co-emergence'. This is an ethical (Ettinger argues feminine) mode of becoming and seeing where differentiation is not only understood as separation, negation or loss (Ettinger, 2006: 88-89). The blurred and camouflaged quality of the bodies in Woodman's photography does portray our bodily fragility and mortality. Yet this quality is also central to the transformative and experimental strength of Woodman's photographic works. Townsend writes that Woodman 'introduces a visual element which disrupts the order of forms and so maintains their difference, their continued instability' (Townsend, 1999: 37; see also Solomon-Godeau, 1986: 25 and 32). Woodman's whirling unsettles 'the visual field'. Once this 'field' is no longer stable change and transformation become possible (Solomon-Godeau, 1986: 25; Townsend, 2006: 54). Of course in their "whirling", Woodman's photographs also comment on the traditional conceptualisation of the photographic medium itself (Townsend, 1999 and 2006). According to Townsend, Woodman's 'movement' of her body in front of the lens destabilises the supposed 'temporal arrest' of the photographic image and the 'camouflaging of the body' unsettles the 'photographic framing' of space. For Townsend, Woodman's photographic works therefore involve 'a kind of reanimation' of the very "foundation" on which photography is supposed to be based (Townsend, 2009: 20 and 27 and 1999: 34-37).

I would like to take this insight one step further. Woodman's photographs can help us develop a photo-thought that does not conceive of the photograph as a passive 'representative image' but as a creative force that can participate in the production of new subjectivities (Guattari, 1995: 25).

The third key point is therefore that the notion of whirling (like wonder) conveys the manner in which Woodman's photographs themselves are productive forces participating in our becoming with the world. In the viewing of Woodman's photographs, it is not only Woodman's whirling that is important but also the viewer's movement, by which is meant the way in which the viewer is "whirled" by the photographs. This is perhaps the 'elasticity of sensation' as experienced by the 'co-emerging' photograph and viewer. Woodman's photographs – her *photographic 'air'* – feed into the way in which we ourselves 'become with the world' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 169). Her photographs (through the whirling 'excess' or 'interval') become part of our own whirling with the world. Indeed, they emphasise that this whirling with the world is a core – and not just an optional – part of our being in the world. Woodman's photographs themselves 'co-emerge' with the world, including the viewer (see Ettinger, 2006).

Woodman's individual photoworks whirl the viewer, but they can also do this collectively. A kind of *whirling* viewing was particularly obvious in an exhibition of Woodman's photographs at The Photographers' Gallery in London in 1999 (one of the first large retrospectives of her work). This exhibition mode further emphasised the powers of the photoworks by encouraging the viewer to become with them. Some photographs were placed on the gallery walls but many were also exhibited on and around a number of columns placed throughout the exhibition space. Other images were placed horizontally on tables under glass. The many viewers had to "whirl" around the space and the images in order to look at the photographs. The traditional exhibition mode, where the works are placed on the wall and the viewer inspects at a distance, was seriously challenged.

Through the kinds of whirling involved in viewing Woodman's photographs, the viewers remained connected with both the space and the images in what Ettinger (2006) would call a 'metramorphosis'. In Massumi's terms our whirling with Woodman's photographs can again be understood as 'trans-situational'. In this trans-situationality, individuations of subjectivity would emerge out of a 'relational...causality' (Massumi, 2000: 193), a causality which itself whirls.

In sum, Woodman's photographs become productive players in our becoming with the world. They can also be seen to produce a way of seeing that renders relationality visible. However, in Woodman's work relationality is not understood simply as the relationship between 'already-constituted' organic bodies or things. As we have seen, her work also incorporates the co-constitutive relationship 'between the organic and the inorganic' (Townsend, 1999: 35). This relationship exists within the photographs. As mentioned, Townsend suggests that 'No privileged attention is given to the self above the inorganic' (Townsend, 1999: 36). I have argued that this also applies to the relationship between viewers and photographs. The photograph itself becomes an active 'part-subject' (rather than a passive object) (see Massumi, 1997; Ettinger, 2006 and Guattari, 1995). [15]

We can begin to see how Woodman's photographs allow us to conceive of photographs themselves as generative forces that can participate in the production of new subjective possibilities. A real strength of Woodman's work is that this production takes place within a larger ethical and relational register where visibility is also reconceived (see also Ettinger, 2006). For example in one photograph from the *Angel Series*, Roma, September 1977, an inorganic object lingers on the border of visibility; a hazy white shape or smudge is framed by a doorway. The overall effect is a sense of being able to perceive what cannot normally be perceived with the naked eye. The title itself suggests an 'angelic presence' (Kent, 1999: 53). Is this presence that of the organic or the inorganic? It is not so easy to tell – although it is in fact an outstretched arm shaking what appears to a piece of material (Kent, 1999: 53).



(Figs. 11) Francesca Woodman, *from Angel series*, Rome, Italy, 1977.
Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

As mentioned, this kind of movement appears in a large number of Woodman's photographs: most often Woodman's own body in movement is encountered. In another image from the same *Angel series* an out of focus body hovers above the ground. Next to this female figure, dressed in a skirt, we see,

suspended in the air, a couple of material or cardboard wings. [16] Again the inorganic seems to have come to life, and the wings call out to Woodman's body. The "wings" are just close enough together to make the viewer want to move the body into the space between the wings. The wings also draw attention to a window. Through this window the rays of a sharp daylight reach into the room, as if to emphasise that this is inorganic life we are dealing with, not the threat of death that the inorganic is sometimes seen to pose.

I mentioned previously that Woodman's photographs could be understood, and in fact have been, as depicting the 'disappearance' of the female body. Townsend in particular is critical of such views (Townsend, 1999: 34 and 2006: 8). This supposed disappearance is perhaps particularly obvious in some of the angel images where the body appears to be moving. However, as we have seen, Woodman's photographic 'air' can also be experienced, against disappearance, as a *rendering visible* of something we do not usually perceive. This is in part because, if we follow Irigaray, 'air' is 'an element of nextness', 'whose imperceptible presence' enables 'becoming' and 'relation', rather than 'closure' (Irigaray, 2000: 136). It is this 'becoming' or 'nextness' that is 'rendered visible' by Woodman.

Becoming-woman, Becoming-imperceptible, Becoming-a-subject-in-wonder

Woodman's photographed body is never fixed in its many appearances: as we have seen it is in a 'process of becoming' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 177). The female figure in the photographs can never be pinned down. She hides and moves and changes. Writing about a certain instability of female form and corporeality, Irigaray explains that the 'incompleteness of her form, her morphology, allows her continually to become something else' (Irigaray, 1985: 229). This finds its echoes in the long exposure time, movement in front of the camera and the kind of 'game of hide-and-seek' (Sundell, 1996: 435) that Woodman the model uses to stay mobile – in a 'process of becoming'.

Irigaray writes:

If we are to have a sense of the other that is not projective or selfish, we have to attain an intuition of the infinite:

- either the intuition of a god or divine principle aiding in the birth of the other without pressuring it with our own desire,
- or the intuition of a subject that, at each point in the present, remains unfinished and open to a becoming of the other that is neither simply passive nor simply active. (Irigaray, 1993a: 111-112; my emphasis)

I do not intend to follow Irigaray's call for the divine here. The second suggestion about an open, 'unfinished' becoming seems the more attractive. If one experiences the infinite, wonder and an opening up to the world in Francesca Woodman's photographs, then her photographs must be considered in the light of this 'unfinished' becoming.

For Deleuze and Guattari, every '[b]ecoming is always double' – 'becoming is always in the middle'. It 'neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two'. Becoming occurs in/as the kind of 'in-between', which can be seen to emerge in Woodman's whirling becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 306 and 293). A 'double deterritorialization' is involved in this becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 142) – a deterritorialisation of Woodman's own body and of other objects – the headstone is an example. This is a 'shared deterritorialization' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 293). Furthermore, such a deterritorialisation involves a kind of 'becoming-imperceptible'. This does not mean invisibility, but

rather a molecularising of the optic in which the perception of “things” and “the world” is destabilised. This ‘molecularization’ establishes the power of the imperceptible as that which has not been placed within the ‘state of things’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 345 and 6). In Woodman’s photographs the body encounters the imperceptible. Woodman’s whirling in the middle of a room or next to a couple of cardboard wings is a ‘becoming-imperceptible’. To reiterate, this ‘becoming-imperceptible’ is not about disappearance. It is certainly not about women becoming invisible or disappearing. [17]

As just noted, in encountering the imperceptible, becoming also encounters the molecular. Considering both sides of this becoming allows us to understand how Woodman mobilises the perceptual field. Woodman’s photowork is an attempt to address and to renew the very limit of what is perceivable. Her vision reaches the past and *whirls* it into the future of ‘a new space-time’. It is in this sense that Woodman’s photographs produces new visions for our possible becomings. However, Woodman’s photographs also make it clear that what we may call a feminine quality of the photographs can emerge in part from some of the more traditional structures of the visual world, transforming these structures as it whirls and undoes them (see Solomon-Godeau, 1986). [18]

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), there is a movement that is *not* a movement within the current ‘signifying regime[s]’ – the *studium*, if we follow Barthes (1982) – but instead a becoming towards the molecular. The molecular breaks away from the ‘state of things’. Like Barthes *time-punctum* it is ‘imperceptible by nature’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 119 and 281). Somewhat paradoxically, however, Deleuze and Guattari also write that movement and becoming – the imperceptible – ‘cannot but be’ perceivable (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 281). Yet this is a different kind of perception (echoed perhaps in the difference between the *optic* and the *haptic*). Here movement and becoming are perceivable on what they call the ‘plane of immanence or consistency’ – which here could be called a *plane of whirling*. The ‘plane of immanence or consistency’ is where becoming ‘takes place’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 281).

On this plane, becomings are not put into fixed structures or transcendent forms, as they are, for example, within the optic (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 266-267). The latter would involve the attempt to cut them off from affect, wonder and relationality. Such attempts to diminish relationality in favour of normative structure are attempts to render becomings, and the opening we find in wonder, invisible *on the plane of more transcendent forms and fixed structures*. Normative perception attempts to habituate perception – and subsequently the world as perceived – to transcendent forms, fixed structures and regular ‘measure’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 306). The ‘plane of immanence or consistency’, however, provides a different basis for perception. For Deleuze and Guattari, on ‘the plane of consistency’ ‘concrete forms’ are whirled and tangled to the point of losing their regulative power:

The plane of consistency is the intersection of all concrete forms. Therefore all becomings are written like sorcerers’ drawings on this plane of consistency, which is the ultimate Door providing a way out of them. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 251)

Woodman’s ‘becoming-imperceptible’ is thus not about disappearance but about reconstituting the nature of the perceptual field and changing the ‘threshold’ of the perceivable world (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 281). It is about a becoming in which the female body is deterritorialised in order to render its becoming with the world visible.

With this becoming with the world, Woodman opens the door towards an alternative visibility based on wonder. Woodman’s photographs are a more complete encounter with the virtual, which is immanent

within the world (air). Again, this is not a becoming invisible but a question of an alternative visibility. Woodman's photographs – by admitting change, becoming and the richness of haptic visibility into the plane of perception through her camera – could thus be seen to allow for a change in the form of the world, even in bodily morphology. Perhaps it could be said that the female figure in Woodman's photographs is a *becoming subject-in-wonder* as much as a *becoming-woman*.

I will conclude by teasing out what is involved in becoming a subject-in-wonder. In its relationship with wonder, subjectivity is not to be understood in the traditional sense (as a centred subject) but as displaced from its centre and distributed into the temporal world (see Ziarek, 1999). Wonder, for this kind of subjectivity, is an opening up towards the world – which is to say to affect, to time and to the virtual. Recall that, according to Irigaray wonder 'corresponds to time, to space-time before and after that which can delimit.... It constitutes an *opening* prior to and following that which surrounds, enlaces' (Irigaray, 1993a: 81-82).

According to Descartes wonder is the 'first of all the passions' (Descartes, 1931: 358). According to Irigaray (1993a) it enables us to move, it must *last* and renew itself and according to Sallis (1995) it must *never be surpassed*. Descartes suggested that we wonder when we encounter something 'new' or unknown. According to him wonder is 'a passion of youth' (Irigaray, 1993a: 78-79) and will eventually be overcome in the mature subject governed by reason – one who comes to understand the object (Descartes, 1931: 365). However, if wonder is here to stay, as Irigaray (1993a) and others suggest, then both the subject and the object must be constantly deterritorialised from their transcendent states and structures. Subject and object are constantly whirled into the world of wondrous becomings. With regard to photography, this implies that, rather than positioning photographs as empirical objects of study looked at from outside in a supposedly stable world, we would be concerned with looking at photographs in terms of a relationality that exceeds either object or subject. This is a relationality that calls for a different kind of empiricism – an *immanent* and *dynamic* empiricism in which study and studied are whirled together. [19] This is exactly what Woodman's photographs call for us to respond to. Woodman's *photographic 'air'* opens up the relationality between subject and object and awakens us to wondrous perceptions of spaces and times that are not givens. At this point a *becoming-subject-in-wonder*, deterritorialised by wonder, involves a becoming with the world for which there is no equivalence and no transcendent concept, and a 'production of subjectivity' (Guattari, 1995: 1) for which there is no fixed 'measure'.

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Notes

[1] Deleuze and Guattari write that 'visual material must capture non visible forces. *Render visible...*not render or reproduce the visible' (1987: 342).

[2] Woodman has not to my knowledge been compared with the smile of the Cheshire cat, but she has been referred to as an Alice in Wonderland. See for example Sundell (1996: 435).

Much has been written about Woodman's photographs and it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the entire body of literature on Francesca Woodman. However, I would like to mention that a version of this article first appeared as a section of a longer PhD chapter in 2002. The article is thus primarily informed by some of the early scholarship on Woodman's work, in particular: Sundell (1996); Townsend (1999); Krauss (1986); Kent (1999); and Solomon-Godeau (1986).

A shorter version of this article was presented in 2006 at the AAANZ conference *Reinventing the Medium*.

<http://thehappygeek.com/aaanz/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/AAANZ-abstracts.pdf>

See p. 3 for the abstract.

[3] An observation also made by Townsend (2006).

[4] Kate Bush suggests that often Woodman's 'body becomes an expressive tool which mingles with the other objects she chooses to photograph' and that, contrasted with 'the strength of' these objects, Woodman's photographed body looks vulnerable and fragile (Bush, 1999: 4). Indeed, if Woodman's photographs are encountered with only her life story in mind – sadly Woodman took her own life in her early twenties – her images may seem sad, even traumatic. They may seem only to express the fragility of the human body for the viewer. It is true that Woodman's photographs do have a fragile quality to them. However, it is important neither to view Woodman's images through her suicide nor to understand the mobility and virtuality of her body as only suggesting a kind of fragility. As Townsend has pointed out, this has led to suggestions that the depiction of the body as "vanishing" 'foretold' the premature death of Woodman's herself in real life (Townsend, 1999: 34). I would much prefer to focus on the ambiguous depiction of movement/stillness, and the concurrent sense we get of the life of bodies and 'things' in Woodman's vibrating photographic *air*.

[5] Massumi, following Whitehead (1968), writes that 'Philosophy is the activity dedicated to keeping wonder in the world' (Massumi, 2000: 203).

[6] See Manning (2009: 29-42). She extends Deleuze's notion of 'the elasticity of sensation' in her analysis of movement as relational ('relational movement') and develops the concept of the 'elasticity of the almost'. She also activates this concept in her engagement with Marey's 'movement machines' (Manning, 2009: 111).

[7] Epistemologically speaking Irigaray also asserts that in 'our autonomous epistemology' the link between physics and 'metaphysics' or 'the physical sciences and thought' has been cut. (Irigaray, 1993a: 72).

[8] I would like to note here that this conceptualisation of the difference between a desire 'constituted through lack' and an 'intermediary' wonder based on 'encounter' also brings to mind photo-theory. Photography has often been thought in terms of the past and a desire or mourning for that which is lost. However, I favour a more future directed and generative photo-thought that lends itself in part to wonder and encounter as opposed to loss, disappearance and lack.

[9] Deleuze argues that Bacon is not fascinated by 'movement' as such but by 'its effects on an immobile Body' and with 'interior' and '*invisible forces*' (Deleuze, 2003: xi and 41).

[10] Irigaray herself uses the term 'shell of air' (Irigaray, 1999: 152).

[11] Batchen has suggested that we think 'photography *as* power' rather than 'photography and power' (Batchen, 2003: 1999: 189).

[12] Tamsin Lorraine (1999) also pays attention to observations about play made by Irigaray.

[13] Townsend (2006) has made a similar suggestion.

[14] Jane Simon suggests that Woodman's work produces an 'intimate mode of looking' (Simon, 2012: 28-35).

[15] See Massumi (1997), Ettinger (2006) and Guattari (1995) for a consideration of the 'part-subject'.

[16] Kent also points to this photograph and writes that 'a pair of sheets hover Wing-like to suggest angelic presences' (1999: 53).

[17] See Manning for a similar conceptualisation of the 'imperceptible' in relation to Marey's 'movement machines' (Manning, 2009: 111).

[18] The feminine is here understood in Ettinger's terms as involving a 'relational difference in co-emergence' not reducible to the experiences of 'women only' (Ettinger, 2006: 72; 69 and 139).

[19] Deleuze, Manning and Massumi have all drawn on William James to develop an understanding of this kind of empiricism. Manning has discussed 'radical empiricism' in an exploration of the 'tension between radical empiricism and positivist science' in Marey's work and photographic images (Manning, 2009: 102-103).

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