

of nature replication vis-à-vis photographic repro, with sets of historically manufactured aesthetic regard. Some nice rocks on a proper old salt print, *mmm* they are nice, the globular effervescence is akin to the mineral glisten subverted through a glaze of dreams.

Don't criticize, positively describe. All perusal subsumed under this nodding duck paperweight, where photographic lineage is a stylistic tradition of consumption and safety-valved voyeurism. Produce something a *Tit's Nice That* intern can wrap their panglossian Ace Hotel-issued wank claw around, because the endless reproduction of late capitalist society is a gift, a sublime gift.

42

43 Francesca Woodman's Precarious Architectures

Hannah Gregory

I tend to live in other people's houses, to temporarily appropriate their shelter.

- Peeling paintwork, a bricked-in fireplace, triangular shards of plaster in a trail over bare floorboards. Gaping holes expose the walls' insides. Like many of the photographs from Francesca Woodman's 'House' and 'Space' series, the artist is cornered by her camera, so that the gaze of the viewer is also made to corner her. A long exposure makes her crouching frame ghostly beneath light from the window that she might have flown in through. Half there, half not-there, she is surrounded by debris, from torn paper to dust... All our houses are falling down, she seems to be saying. And, in whose body should I feel at home?

Woman, she, has long been associated with house, home, space, chora. For Plato, *khôra* was a receptacle, a spatial designation with maternal associations.¹ For Derrida, *khôra* represents a pre-signifying state, one that is neither present nor absent, that disrupts its own boundaries.² Kristeva's interpretation of chora is an expansive rather than an enclosing possibility for woman, for it evades language, is situated before patriarchal his-story.³ The etymological tract also defines woman first as a sheltering container, returning her to her womb. But if we think of *khôra*, we do not need to think of her name, of woman, but only of a certain space, 'which is not like anything, not even like what it would be, itself, there beyond its name.'⁴ *Khôra*, as Derrida and Kristeva tell us, precedes its own signification.

A friend (woman) described Woodman's work to me as characteristically 'feminine' – mirrors, breasts, bare limbs, fabrics; a relationship with Narcissus that is hard to escape. But what does that 'feminine' even mean, if we were to talk not in terms of gender, but of structure?

In a discreetly smart building near Savile Row, centuries-old and far from my home, it was the falling-down structures that struck me. I had wound across town to arrive there, sky grey and bleeding, counting the smiles of my journey (three, meagre, over four postcodes; me in Heatwave lipstick to try to beat it.) I look at the small square images in small square frames, and I want to listen with my body to these bodies – at times reclined in repose as the history of art shows the nude *should* be, but mostly, disorderly.

I only buy meat once a month, and when I do, it is six thin slices of cured beef, purple-red like my blood will be.

1 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, 1994, p.5

2 *On the Name*, David Wood trans., Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995, pp.94–5

3 Jui-Ch'i Liu, 'Francesca Woodman's Self-Images: Transforming Bodies in the Space of Femininity', in *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 25, no.1 (Spring - Summer, 2004), p.27

4 Derrida, *On the Name*, p.94

The poet Lisa Robertson reminds us that we must listen to bodies – and not in a self-chastising way, in corporeal recognition. ‘We can’t free bodies without listening to bodies, including our own.’⁵ Freedom of the body is something Francesca Woodman seems to aspire to. If she feels trapped in the world, through the lens of her camera, some kind of self-objectification or acting-out liberates it. Even as she traps her body of her own accord; beneath a door off its hinge; behind a fireplace, hiding. Sometimes her body is yearning and piqued, head arched back (*In being an angel*); sometimes it is calm, curved, resting. The body contains geometries, even if it doesn’t conform to them.

Like Woodman’s self-made artist’s book *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, which glued photographs to the aging pages of an Italian maths exercise book, the ‘body’ of this work possesses corners and diagonal lines. The premise of the exhibition ‘Zigzag’ is to focus on the formal aspects of Woodman’s work, its architectural interiors, asymmetric composition, furnished situation. The photographs’ formats are regular, 8 by 10”, but their framing is wonky, off-kilter... an umbrella’s nose spears the lines of perspective laid down by the floorboards, and in the foreground, the almost zig-zag of two breasts are obstinate before an open mouth. A series of conjoined Vs: splayed legs jumping mid-air, the shape from hand to elbow to shoulder and back again. V-necks, shoulder blades, cone hats, holding hands. In *Zig Zag Study*, New York (1980), a long chain of limbs is formed from print to print, and unlike other of the compositions, there is a happy solidarity between the bodies.

I saw a girl in a hot Brooklyn with what looked like symmetrical love bites on her inner thighs – and how beautiful, still to be showing them off.

In an image from her time at the Rhode Island School of Design, Woodman holds two pieces of torn wallpaper over her upper body and legs, an interrupted diagonal traced between her arms; a belly button giving away the fact that the flesh between does not belong to the wall. Absorbed into her surroundings, the boundaries between body and house begin to dissolve. Like in Charlotte Perkin Gillman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, where the protagonist’s retreat into the room’s interior is at once a reassurance to and an accentuation of her inner mental spiral. It dwells in my mind so! I lie here on this great immovable bed – it is nailed down I believe – and follow that pattern by the hour. (...) The sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror.⁶ **It’s the way you look at rooms after you have spent too long in one, and you start to notice all the cracks. A past art tutor in the documentary *The Woodmans* comments: ‘Francesca was not trying to disappear as a representation of her state of mind when she was hiding behind a scrap of wallpaper.’ She was trying to ask: ‘How would it be to be that peeling paint or wallpaper? How does the human form relate to it? You put yourself in it.’**

Girls have an awareness of ‘being *in*’, remarks artist and poet Etel Adnan, a strong sense of ‘the idea of the outside and the inside.’⁷ Francesca Woodman would not be a container, though she would represent her self enclosed. Sealed inside dilapidated spaces or the transparent cases of her ‘Space2’ studies, she chose to ‘come of age’ in front of her

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camera, and therefore, in some way, outside the masculine forward-pull of time. ‘Father’s Time, Mother’s Species’ was the way Joyce framed it, in another making-feminine of space.⁸ But within the space of the image, time does not pass. Once these images had been developed, the artist would own that space, if no other. Rosalind Krauss considered this more coolly, ‘the instinct to register the formal within the “support” of the body,’ whereby Woodman transformed her supposedly objective college assignments, and studies within the medium, into an embodied kind of ‘problem set’.⁹ With the presence of the artist’s body as a ‘field of inscription’,¹⁰ you (/I, the critics, the writers) keep returning to the artist herself, after death, because her form is still there within the work.

Then at one point I did not need to translate the notes; they went directly to my hands. FW

In a self-portrait from 1976, she looks down at her pelvis, covering her vagina with a rectangular mirror, arms bent into a diamond shape, holding it symmetrically. The mirror’s angled corner seems chancy and sharp, almost digging into the thigh flesh. Someone’s standing opposite her so that their reflection is superimposed onto her own, ‘a space of illusion’ that reveals the rest of reality to be illusory too.¹¹ For Woodman, mirrors are not (only) a reflection of narcissism, but a revelation of self in space. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not (...) I am over there, where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent. **This is Foucault’s heterotopia, an-other space that, in common with the unplaceable characteristics of *khōra*, may be imagined or material, absent as well as present. Both chora and heterotopia lay out the possibility of an alternative residence away from the rest of the world. Kneeling atop a mirror or curled in a foetal position, Woodman’s work acts heterotopically, both for herself, and for her viewer – should they choose to enter into it. She’s engaged in a game of absence and presence, and – unlike her art’s influence on the Sad Girls – you can tell that she’s having fun there.**

Heterotopias may also provide a space for deviating bodies, or bodies in crisis – menstruating women, the mentally unstable – for those excluded from normalized space by their physical or mental state.¹² Woodman would not allow herself to graduate from girl to woman – she would opt out, rather than lean in. Her end to herself, and conscious leaving behind of her body of work, stands as tragic heroine inspiration for Audrey Wollen’s Sad Girl Theory and self-objectification, which embodies how, in performative exhibition and declaration of

5 Interview by Brecken Hancock, www.cwila.com/an-interview-with-lisa-robertson/

6 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1952/1952-h/1952-h.htm>

7 In conversation with Lisa Robertson, *BOMB* 127, Spring 2014, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/10024/etel-adnan>

8 Alice Jardine, *Gynesis*, Configurations of Women and Modernity,

Ithaca, Cornell University, 1985, pp. 88-89, cited in Jui-Ch’i Liu, 2004, p.28

9 *Bachelors*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2000, p.172

10 *Ibid.*

11 Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias’, Jay Miscowiec trans. www.web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf

12 *Ibid.*

tristesse, liberation might be found. Girls need other, non-suicidal role models, but an acceptance of experienced sadness – especially in contradiction to capitalism’s imposed positivity – can also be affirming. Wollen thinks of sadness as an act/art of resistance, but how much resisting can be done with tears in your eyes? In her work, Woodman was not vulnerable, but powerful (just as Plath was). It was the world outside of the work whose walls were crumbling down.

Where are the cracks now? I find none.

Later, I read that a writer I know from online, Christine, based in Colorado, had driven out to Francesca’s childhood home in Boulder. She had captured a still from *The Woodmans* of a hand-written envelope with the address on it. I was interested in this kind of artistic pilgrimage – what did she hope to see at that house? A hint at the pregnant space of the artist’s previous world? ‘Boulder is a very wealthy town,’ Christine wrote to me, ‘and the house on Marine is super contemporary/arty. Woodman clearly grew up with economic privilege. And the house has been well-maintained.’ Of course, it wasn’t falling down at all. It’s easy to appropriate dilapidation if it’s not what you come from... It’s easier to turn your back on shelter if you come from within it. Woodman’s settings resist conventional homeliness, but are they *unheimlich*, un-homely, in the Freudian sense? They are not so much about the return of a haunting past, but of a precarious present – one that destabilizes the foundations of a future.

All architectures are precarious because that’s the way things are in general.

That’s Jesse Darling, who’s nothing like Francesca Woodman, though Darling’s work does deal with precarity.¹³ I’m reminded of the phrase amongst the detritus of these images, fragments of dust and a dirtied floor. Elsewhere, says JD in interview: So that’s what’s inside a fridge. That’s its skin and guts. This is what’s inside most of the built world. Skin and guts.¹⁴ Structural elements contain their own fleshly interiors; buildings and objects fall apart as much as bodies and lives do. The idea of permanent shelter is false, or at least, anachronistic – this feels more real than that woman-as-receptacle idea. More than a longing for return to the maternal body, Woodman enacts the fallout from it. The spaces of her images are unstable shelters, resistant to the pressures of ‘reality’. The world is made corporeal; the house is no longer living, but its entrails spill out, beyond death.

13 ‘Precarious Architectures, Queer Materiality and the Slippage of the Phallic Modern Subject’, in *How to Sleep Faster #4*, Tom Clark & Rozsa Farkas eds. London, Arcadia Missa

Publications, 2013
14 ‘The Making of Same-Same’, Jean Kay, <http://www.aqnb.com/2014/10/25/the-making-of-same-same/>

She says something about bad feminism before I turn the recorder on. I tell her that I should really record more conversations; that good writing can come out of recording and transcribing. She says she thought I did that already.

It’s October, and Marianna has just got back from a trip to Northern Albania, where she filmed scenes for her new work, currently titled *BLOOD*. Everything was precisely storyboarded but it all fell apart when she got there. Well, kind of. ‘I mean, my version of falling apart probably isn’t the same as everyone else’s,’ she says.

BLOOD features Isabel, a ten-year-old girl, and Lali, an Albanian *burrnesha*, or ‘sworn virgin.’

We talk in her studio for a while. She skips through the edit on her laptop but the playback is fucking around. Lali and Isabel are outside, standing in the wet. The young girl asks the old woman, who has lived as a man her whole adult life, a question: Why do you have to be a virgin to be a man?

We skip through the timeline to a lunch scene. Men sit round a table. Lali has taken Isabel in as her guest, but Isabel has run away. Marianna asks them to start the scene again. One of the men starts talking in Albanian (the subtitles are currently rough estimations): Where is the girl?

Lali responds: The girl is in the tower. She tired me out. She is part of the family. You should forgive her.

The men keep saying the word *besa*, among all the other words I wouldn’t be able understand without the subtitles. *Besa* is an untranslatable word, meaning – ‘I’ll try but it’s not possible’ – at times loyalty, honour, promise and truce. According to Marianna, you can give someone your *besa* and you can be in someone’s *besa*.

Besa is integral to the Kanun, an oral code of conduct established by Lekë Dukagjini in the 14th century. The Kanun is patrilineal: only men can inherit and buy land; only men can smoke, or own a gun; a woman is worth half a man. You can’t kill a man when he’s with a woman. As her guest, Isabel is in Lali’s *besa*. If anything should happen to Isabel, Lali is obliged to revenge on her behalf: *she is part of the family*. Lali honours *besa* as if it was a kind of law.

‘It’s just so conflicted,’ says Marianna. ‘They see it (the Kanun) as part of the olden days. At the same time they are subsumed within this Albanian identity that they just want to keep hold of.’ She starts laughing. She laughs several times during our first conversation, not because what she’s talking about is conventionally funny, but because it’s so hard to get to grips with, the law of this strange land, its traditions and customs. Laughter seems like a totally appropriate way of expressing this strangeness, overcoming it. I think of Catherine Clement writing on Medusa’s laugh in *The Newly Born Woman*, the way ‘Laughter breaks up, breaks out, splashes over;’ ‘petrifying and shattering constraint.’

Albania shares its Southern border with Greece and its Northern border with Montenegro and Kosovo. The North is mountainous and wet (there was torrential rain during their shoot). It is also notoriously isolated. Anthropologist Michael L. Galaty describes Northern Albania