

Dialogues with Diagrams: Francesca Woodman's book, *some disordered interior Geometries*

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Abstract

This article presents a close visual reading of Francesca Woodman's photographic book *some disordered interior Geometries*. The work comprises a complex system of interventions to an antique (c.1900) source text, an advanced geometry manual for Italian students entitled *Esercizi Graduati di Geometria*. The article focuses on selected pages from the book, demonstrating the ways in which Woodman confronts issues of memory and identity through the tight narrative framework of her studio interior, herself and personal and family objects. On an aesthetic level the superimposed images work to construct a series of responses to the geometric forms illustrated and described in the source work. Woodman re-creates or references them through the imaging of her own body, as well as by using the spaces between furniture and wall and floor divisions in the enclosed space. Her response is to the givens of printed diagram, printed text and printed formulae. In her interventions she adds a specially made or chosen photographic image, often annotating it in her own handwriting or making a written aside to the page's instructions, as well as sometimes re-drawing a diagrammatic form for emphasis or delight.

The photographer Francesca Woodman was born in Denver, Colorado in 1958, into a family of which her mother, father, brother and a cousin were, or became, practising artists. It was and is a family which spent a regular portion of its time in an Italian house they owned, with the consequence that arguably Francesca spoke Italian before she spoke English. Despite her early death, by suicide, at the age of twenty-two, she has left a body of work (five to six hundred prints), predominantly using herself as both subject and object, that is remarkable for its maturity, focus and technical mastery. Woodman pays homage to the first wave Parisian surrealists in her work. Having vowed to emulate André Breton's experiments in the interface between text and photographic image and the re-alignment of the balance between them, in his work *Nadja* of 1928, it is through her photographic books that she best realises this aim and indeed turns both

image and text into space for inflection. This paper analyses selected images from Woodman's photographic book *some disordered interior Geometries*, which contains a complex system of interventions by her to an antique (c.1900) source text which is an advanced geometry manual for Italian students entitled *Esercizi Graduati di Geometria*.

Woodman made six photographic books in her lifetime, five of which used a 'found object' as a base. *Portrait of a Reputation*, believed by Chris Townsend to be from her mid career in 1976 – 1977, is the exception and for this reason and because it uses image without text, it is not central to my project.¹ *SdiG*, probably made at the RISD (Rhode Island School of Design) between 1977 and 1978, is the only one to have been published to date, by the Synapse Press, a small alternative press in Philadelphia specialising in artists' books, in January 1981, the month and year of her death.² The *Angels, Calendar* book, dated 1978, contains some of Woodman's best known prints, often in different versions from the gallery prints, all or most of which were made in Rome, as the book may well also have been. It has a base of handwritten French poetry onto which Woodman places her images in a manner that sometimes conceals the text and sometimes reveals it. Her own annotations, in her larger, natural handwriting, interrupt the original's copperplate flow and sometimes respond to a line of poetry. *Equazioni* or *Portraits Friends Equations* (sic) uses a maths textbook as its base and in it many photographs, made in Rome, respond directly to the printed equations. The two books *Dettati e Themi* and the shorter *Raffaello* were probably worked on in New York late in her career, 1979 – 1981. In both these books Woodman adds transparencies to the densely copper-

plated written pages, again addressing an interaction between revealing and concealing. No annotations exist in the longer *Dettati e Themi* and many of her annotations to the shorter book are written at a right angle to the base text in Woodman's mock-copper plate. This shorter book consists, uniquely, of a sequential narrative. It is no coincidence therefore that the book published in Philadelphia in 1981 and offered for sale at nine dollars by Synapse Press, used Woodman's found *Esercisi Graduati di Geometria* as its template.³

The published edition of *sdiG* measures six inches and a quarter in width with a height measurement of exactly nine inches. Its soft card front cover (fig. 1) is a pale purple in facsimile, with the original title *Esercizi Graduati di Geometria* in large Art Nouveau-Baroque decorative print.⁴ *SdiG* is described by Giuseppe Casetti, dedicatee of *sdiG* and joint owner of the Roman *Libreria Maldoror* in which the turn-of-the-century school books were found by Francesca, as:

... fifteen photos that Francesca had applied onto two pamphlets, joined by her...entitled *Exercises of Geometry*, the first Triangles and Equilaterals and the second *Surface Areas and Volumes of Solids*.⁵

Throughout the book, Woodman confronts issues of memory and identity through the tight narrative framework of her studio interior, herself and personal and family objects. On an aesthetic level the superimposed images work simultaneously and audaciously to construct a series of responses to the geometric forms illustrated and described in the source work by re-creating or referencing them through the imaging of her own body, as well as by using the spaces between furniture and wall and floor divisions in the enclosed space.

Her response is to the givens of printed diagram, printed text and printed formulae. In her interventions she adds a specially made or chosen photographic image, often annotating it in her own handwriting or making a written aside to the page's instructions, as well as sometimes re-drawing a diagrammatic form for emphasis or delight.

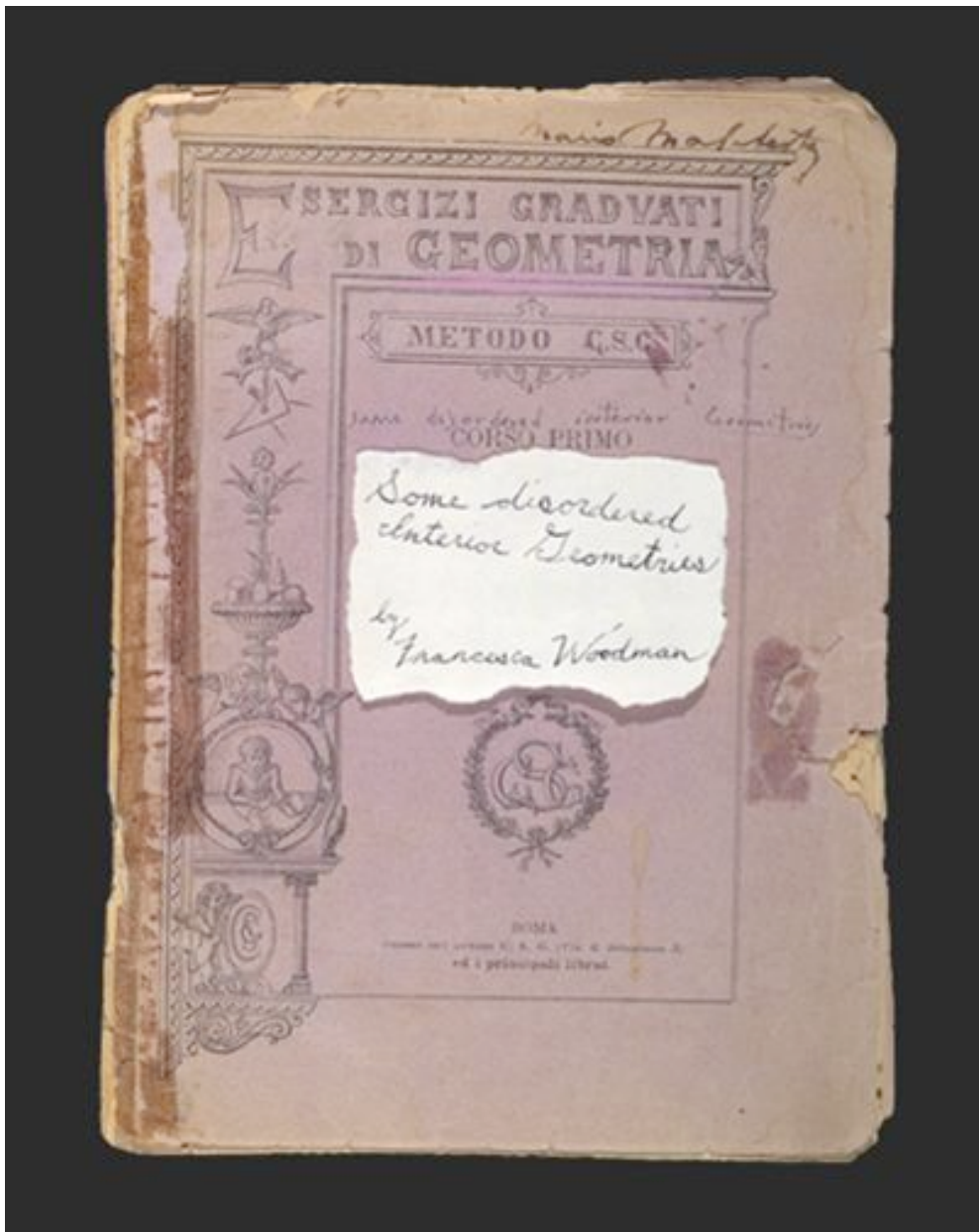


Fig. 1: Francesca Woodman, cover from *some disordered interior Geometries*, 1980-1981, artist book, 16.5 x 22.85 cm. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

Within the book format of *sdiG*, Woodman deals with an inter-play of a text in two languages. These are manifest in the original base in Italian in printed text form as in the printed instructions to the original student, the printed labelling of geometric diagrams, and some tables of numerical formulae in the form of axioms and sub clauses. Interventions by the original geometry student are rare, confined to a hand-written name on the cover of two pamphlets and a light pencil marking with a diagonal cross on selected diagrams. Woodman's own authorial annotations are in English and vary between a mock early twentieth century joined copperplate, in her dedication on the inside cover and in her first annotated page, under her second image, for example, and her natural late twentieth century hand script. These annotations often act as a bridge between the demonstration of formulae of geometry in the early twentieth century text and the late twentieth century intervention, surely only possible in quite this way (a female photographer photographing her own body) after the European sexual revolutions. The annotations are arcs of absent poetry disguised as descriptions of geometry exercises. The poetry is deliberately absent in the words themselves but present somewhere in that space between the annotations and those printed instructions and printed formulae for that long-ago student, as in, for example:

L'area d'un parallelogrammo e uguale al prodotto della base per l'altezza (from page six of original pamphlet, text above Woodman's annotation 'These things arrived from my grandmother's they ...// *quadrate considerate quai rombo he per superficie il semiprodotto d'una diagonal per se stessa* ...make me think about where I fit in the odd geometry of time.

At this point it might be relevant to provide a definition of geometry as:

The science which investigates the properties and relations of magnitudes in space, as lines, surfaces, and solids. (At first regarded as a practical art, and mainly associated with Architecture.)⁶

Woodman's stuck-on images concisely stretch the old geometric meanings into an impossible possibility of human interpretation. Her walls, cloths and mirrors and primarily her body make an astonishing and ambitious simulation of geometric forms throughout the book.

The emotional resonance of the images gains maximum potency for having been squeezed out of one sphere of the formal, the tight grid of the graded exercises in geometry, and into the visual formal. Woodman's quest both intervenes in the staged exercises of the base work and operates alongside it in a separate process of enquiry. The courage and complexity of Woodman's self-imposed challenge is clear if we think about the size of the cultural and academic space between the disciplines of geometry and visual art. Woodman meets the challenge with energy. And throughout, the project's seriousness is interlaced with a surrealist play. The success, albeit an awkward success, of the *sdiG* project is in its coalescence of diverging dimensions and disciplines and in their several intricate reverberations.

George Woodman, Francesca's father, has testified to the extent of his daughter's planning of an image in both a conceptual and a technical sense. Woodman's understanding of logic and mathematics was comprehensive. I

would speculate that without that knowledge the subtlety and precision in photographing her own body, seen as form, and its interaction with the surrounding space could not have been mastered to the sophisticated degree she achieves specifically in *sdiG*.⁷ Body seen as form: a fine word-play here exists in the Italian language since *corpo* simultaneously means both form and body. The word has an immense flexibility in Italian (a language in which Woodman was fluent), running through the sciences and law, and can be earthly *corpo materiale* or beyond matter *corpo celestiale* through to *corpus delicti* (famously used in graphic experiments by the Paris surrealists in the 1920s), meaning ‘material evidence’ or ‘delectable body.’ There is no doubt that Woodman responds in depth to these variations in meaning and sometimes she engages directly with the language of geometry as exemplified in such a phrase as *The extension of a body/form is that portion of space occupied by the body* and *In the extension of bodies there are three dimensions: length, width and height*. The work confronts and indeed relishes that diachronic and trans-lingual context addressed in all but one Woodman’s Books (arguably all five which use the found object can be placed during and after her period in Rome in 1977-1978) and in the case of *sdiG* focuses in depth on an enquiry into an inter-textuality of geometric and human form.⁸

Clearly her extensive technical knowledge, especially of the chemical development process of her medium, informs both the results and challenges of her practice.⁹ Woodman’s mathematical understanding of form and its mirrored reflection in space through geometry sustains a developed awareness of how these forms and part-forms can be translated into the visual. Her aim in *sdiG* is

to construct varying geometric forms from her self-photographed body, both clothed and nude and from its relationship with interior architectures. Martha Gever observes, in a contemporaneous review of *sdiG*:

The section headings do not describe only problems in calculating areas and volumes of geometric figures; they also can be read as posing problems of picturing the enigmatic spaces of introspective perception and unconscious reality.¹⁰

She alludes, of course, to Woodman's book title and its primary assumption that the body's form can represent the mind's state. I think, however, that though any psychological and diaristic elements arising in the photographic images through content and sequence are ongoing concerns, they are not primary to the revelation of the formal through these elements in the book. Woodman confronts an exposure of vulnerability throughout her work and possibly even desires a creation in her images of the undifferentiated state of self theorised by Lacan in his (pre) Mirror phase concept.¹¹ Although she does not abandon these enquiries in this book, I would suggest that her overriding enquiry is to construct a parallel formulation of the axioms of geometry within it through her portrait and body, quotidian objects and architectural interiors. George Woodman believes many critics of Francesca's work have underplayed or misunderstood the rigour and exactitude of the investigations she makes into the formal aesthetic field.¹² I hope to be able to redress this balance somewhat and would argue that a formal aesthetic is the ground for every image she makes.

But how disordered are Woodman's interior geometries? Could it not be argued that some of the disorder present is just the natural consequence of the unnatural conjunction she makes between the testing of Euclid's axioms and an analysis of human form that is as cryptic and ingenious a quest as it is intimate and self-searching. A poet acquaintance of the family, Peter Davison, who received a copy of *sdiG* in 1981, described it as 'a very peculiar little book indeed', also reacting to the contents thus:

There was a strangely ironic distance between the soft intimacy of the bodies in the photographs and the angularity of the geometric rules that covered the pages (...)¹³

In the same paper he quotes Woodman as having said the following, the inherent idea of which is perhaps most clearly realised in her *Space* series,

Me and Francis Bacon and all those Baroques are all concerned with making something soft wiggle and snake around a hard architectural outline.¹⁴

In *sdiG* Woodman uses tropes: a chair, a mirror, gloves, a stool, a shell, a pane of glass and a selection of vintage clothes in sections of a repeated interior (her studio) in a constant process of re-selection and re-ordering. Their repetition works to disturb, not to reassure. She changes depth of field, angle, reflection, light source and magnification to 'make strange' our perception.¹⁵ Specifically in this notebook, mirrored and transparent glass is used to construct new and surprising geometric forms from part/s of her own body, in particular in the first and the last image of the book.

It is highly probable that Woodman would have been familiar with Robert Smithson's *Nine Mirror Displacements*, particularly feasible since his account of making the works in the Yucatan was published in the Autumn of 1969 in *Artforum*, (a copy of which was most probably available in her art school's library) and *The Writings of Robert Smithson* had been published just one year before Woodman made the currently discussed book.¹⁶ Smithson's declarative statement that 'Light is separable from color and form' of his *Map of Glass* built in New Jersey in 1969 has many resonances in Woodman's work. Woodman's contention, wrapped inside what is at first reading a 'musing' in her longest annotation, to the image pair on pages six and seven of the Italian pamphlet in which she dresses in her grandmother's 'things' is apposite: 'This mirror is a sort of rectangle although they say mirrors are just water specified'. In this double image sequence Woodman answers the geometry book's axiom '*L'area d'un parallelogrammo e uguale a prodotto della base per l'altezza*' by placing a mirror flat on a floor photographed at a steep angle, in the manner that Smithson placed his mirrors flat on the landscape in his *Mirror Displacements*. Woodman's mirrors, part-covered with cloths and garments reflect the interior environment as Smithson's reflected the exterior. They also form parallelograms partitioned by the cloths into rhomboid and triangle forms. Like Smithson's mirrors, Woodman's are placed where water always is in the natural environment because of gravity, low and horizontal: *water specified*.

Another influence on her explorations of glass and mirror use is Marcel Duchamp, whose passion for the tricks glass could play in rendering three dimensions two probably infected Woodman. We encounter her investigation

into the flattening capacities of glass specifically in her *Charlie the Model* series of eleven images, made in Providence, at RISD, between 1976 and 1977.¹⁷ In this series glass serves as a metaphor for the flattening capacities of the photographic image. As Krauss observed in her analysis of the series 'Everything that one photographs is in fact "flattened to fit" paper, and thus under, within, permeating, every paper support, there is a body.'¹⁸ Krauss argues, too, that in using her body as a site to inscribe, Woodman allows the subjectivisation of objective enquiry and that she uses this approach to counter the emphasis on objectivity in the 'problem sets' directive she first encountered at RISD and which Krauss suggests is Woodman's *modus operandi*. Townsend develops this idea and cites it as an indicator of Woodman's ongoing defiance of the temporal and spatial confinements of the photographic medium.¹⁹

Duchamp's imaginative identification of glass as an agent of both time and philosophy, as embodied in his concept of *delay in glass*, was a testimony to the forcefulness with which photography had entered the field by the beginning of the twentieth century's second decade. As postulated by Dawn Ades, Duchamp arguably conceived his *Large Glass* project as a *giant photographic plate*.²⁰ Woodman's project in *sdiG* sustains an intriguing empathy with Duchamp's *Ready made malheureux* (1919), which, in Arturo Schwarz's description, 'combined allusions to geometry, psycho-physical states, and natural physical forces'.²¹ Duchamp too acquired a geometry book, which he sent to his sister Suzanne, asking of her that she create the *ready made* according to his instructions. Clearly he wanted to remove his participation though not entirely his control. He asked her 'to hang a geometry book from the balcony of her

apartment so that the wind would tear through its pages'.²² The photograph she returned as documentation showed the book's pages rain-washed into blankness and wind-crumpled. In a much later print (fig. 2), made in 1940 and included in his *Box in a Valise*, Duchamp added text and diagrams to give the book an identity absent in his sister's former image.²³



Fig. 2: Marcel Duchamp, *Ready made malheureux*, (in *From or By Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy*, Series E, 1963), 1919, printed 1940, collotype with pochoir colouring on tinted card, 16.2 x 10.5 cm.

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SdiG is the most cryptic and stratified of Woodman's six photographic books. Its rich concourse, however, holds many satisfactions for an analytical appraisal. The descriptive paragraph on *sdiG* written to accompany the double page reproduction of the whole book in Chris Townsend's recent monograph on Woodman is written with concision and a lyricism that merits a full quotation:

Some Disordered Interior Geometries is the most complex book, a three-way game that plays the text and illustrations for an introduction to Euclid against Woodman's own text and diagrams, as well as the geometry of her formal compositions. This tripartite balancing act has the magical dexterity of a fugue.²⁴

Printed geometric forms such as cylinders, rhomboids and cones surround the title on the outside cover and in case they are not sufficiently decorative, cherubim, garlands, a scholar at a desk, flying birds and a Greek urn containing a set square form more decoration, in a panel down the page's left hand margin. Unopened, it struck me that this book is very similar in size, colour, format and decorative genre to the London-based *International Surrealist Exhibition* catalogue. The 1936 catalogue, printed by The Women's Printing Society, measures six inches by nine and a quarter inches and has a pale orange-pink soft card cover on which a composite nude male figure by Max Ernst, an engraving, has been reproduced. It is possible that Woodman saw this catalogue at the New York Museum of Modern Art exhibition, curated by William Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage* in 1968.

SdiG also has printed on its cover two explanatory subtitles, *Metodo Corso Secondo Geometria* and *Corso Primo* and records its place of publication as

Rome. It is above the second of these that Woodman has written, in her natural, slightly untidy hand, her second generation title, in a distinctive combination of lower and upper case, *some disordered interior Geometries*. And under *Corso Primo* she has over-painted with white a rectangle with a scalloped edge, here repeating her written title, this time in her best upper-case 1900s-in-1970s copperplate. On the rectangle she has written *by Francesca* in the same script. The original student's name *Mario Malatesta* (?) is written on the top left.²⁵ The same signature and page position is repeated on the double page spread bearing the application of Woodman's second image. Perhaps her decision to capitalise only the original word shows a reticence about her own project or this may be self conscious, even contrived. A defiance of letter case rules was fashionable in the 1970s, as, for example, in the poems of e e cummings. Several typographical errors occur in the critical field when transcribing her title's case discrepancies, but I imagine their inconsistency might be favoured by Woodman in order to achieve a maximum awkwardness, that highly ordered *disorder*. George Woodman describes the influence of Gertrude Stein's non-syntactical writing experiments of the early twentieth century on Woodman:

By the time she was in her eighteenth year, she acknowledged Gertrude Stein as the model for (journal) entries that, taken out of context, might seem bizarre in diction, logic and orthography. These affectations of style she referred to as her *Steinwriting*.

An example of a journal extract is:

'Maybe I like Thursdays the way I used to hate baths.'²⁶

The quality of reproduction achieved by Synapse Press in their photolithographic printing of *sdIG* was not high.²⁷ Precious and rare edition that it increasingly (and ironically) has become in the twenty five years since it was made notwithstanding, I was struck by its textural distance (a reverse of intimacy) and mass reproduction feel. On handling it, a light and delicate object, in its cradle of foam rubber cloth-covered triangles, the full experience of texture contrast between page, photograph and hand-writing were absent.

It is claimed by Rosella Caruso that the early twentieth century student books Francesca acquired and (as I have previously argued) *found*, had been given to her by the owners of the Libreria Maldoror (a double find this, as the owners became influential and stimulating friends and the books).²⁸ For Woodman this was a very different endeavour from the display of her prints on a gallery or studio wall, which allowed a simultaneous viewing. Her choice of a small, thin, soft-covered volume brings an intimacy and an image separation to the viewing process. Already an original piece of ephemera that had survived the century before the artist began her appropriation, Synapse's print run of perhaps three hundred copies both freezes the object's deterioration through time and imbues it with a second period in which to become a piece of ephemera.²⁹ Synapse's method of reproduction results in a considerable reduction of the definition of the original's texture, (visible in the original scanned to compact disk). Several ironies emerge here. Did Woodman have the intention in publishing the book of making it available to a wider audience, in a kind of mini mass-production or commercialised form, or did she want the publication to construct its identity as a specialist artist's book?

I would speculate that both aims are relevant. According to Gever in her summary of the development of the artist's book as genre, a split or, more accurately, a development point between these two arenas as aims for artists' practice had occurred at around this time.³⁰ It was in 1973 that the term artist's book had first been used, suggesting a heyday for the form, in a catalogue from an exhibition of the same.³¹ Harriet Riches stipulates that the conceptual possibilities of the photographic book format had by this point long been recognised, citing Walker Evans' *American Photographs* from 1938 as a prototype of the photographic sequence format.³² Yves Peyré, though prioritising painting over photography in his analysis of the development of the *livre d'artiste* into and alongside the artist's book in the twentieth century, describes the nineteen seventies as rich, creative years when (his term) the book of dialogue appears to reach its climax.³³ This recorded split was articulated in part as a response to Ed Ruscha's mid-sixties interview with John Coplans soon after the publication of his now iconic *Various Small Fires* book, in which Gever quotes Ruscha as desiring wide distribution of this work:

Above all, the photographs I use are not "arty" in any sense of the word. I think photography is dead as a fine art ...One of the purposes of my book (*Various Small Fires*) has to do with making a mass-produced object. The final product has a very commercial, professional feel to it.³⁴

It must be remembered here that Ruscha had a printing/typography background which surely influenced his knowledge of the distribution field. Ruscha's first

book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* shares a 'verbal/visual recipricocity' with Woodman's *sdiG*, though an important difference between them is Woodman's use of found and given text and diagram in addition to her own hand-written annotations.³⁵ Ruscha makes and controls his own text completely. The difficulty in achieving a balance between the visual and the verbal, in these two cases the photograph and the text, ensures a certain tension is present in the enquiry of each.

Woodman's verbal and visual dialogue intersects with the book's primary context by following and leading, sometimes erasing, sometimes emphasising the symbols and usually obliterating the spaces for the original student's answers in her self-imposed quest for some different answers.³⁶ These work in tangent and in tandem to the original ones. The answers, which can be more questions, these solutions to problems set, *problems to resolve*, emerge most coherently through her photographic inventions, the investigation of the chosen site that is the construction and deconstruction of her own form: her *body* and *corpus*.³⁷

In this book the printed text font is small and grey, small that is, in comparison to Woodman's hand-scripted annotations which are often between four and six times as large.³⁸ All diagrams are printed in the same grey tone as the text and quite often have a printed shaded surface to simulate solidity. Once (opposite the first annotation '*almost a square*') the artist has filled a given diagram with colour, carefully applied and chosen to answer and repeat the puce and buff harmony of the two pamphlets' pages. Twice, she has underscored the

template text. Firstly she underscores the capitalised printed title *Definizione Preliminari*, on the page of her second photographic image, in a pink blocking which both separates and combines the Italian phrase and her English translation of it. The translation is written in a small italicised black script underneath. The second instance is a kind of highlight of lemon yellow underscoring of the original sub-title *Problemi da risolvere* and of its specification *superficie dei triangoli e dei quadrilateri*, under which is her translation, written in her own contemporary script. The size of the diagrams varies but these visual embodiments of the theories are giants to the pygmies of verbal text font. Woodman's written words are middlemen in size between printed font and printed diagram.

In the pre-publication *sdiG* original, Woodman has underscored the title word on the front cover, *Geometria*, several times with a deep purple pencil (fig. 1). The book has a small hand-written circled c: (copyright mark) next to her name, in her own writing, on the base of the back inside cover, whereas the Synapse edition has expanded copyright details together with a small paragraph of acknowledgements on the original pamphlet's page three.³⁹ This page is now the first inside page *recto* or frontispiece of the new work. It is pale buff ochre in colour as are all those following, with some variations of fading, inside the book. Woodman has twinned her dedication, in her best copperplate writing, with the dedication of the original pamphlet, which is: *for Paolo Missigoi, Cristiano Casetti and Sabina Mirri of the Maldoror Bookshop, Rome.*⁴⁰ This twinning is achieved by placing her dedication exactly in the same position on the page

opposite the original's inscription: *Al venerato F Dr. Michele, omaggio di rispettoso affetto dell'Autore.*

Over the page, the original pamphlet's page four (verso) has as its title *Table of abbreviations....* Woodman has covered most of this by sticking her square photograph over it. This is her first photographic image (fig. 3).⁴¹ She leaves visible only six examples from which we may take special note of the small decorative pause marks separating each base text abbreviation as a result of the formal twinning she conjures between them and the neck decoration she wears in the image. Her own abbreviations are surely the hands and neck, an accentuation used historically in portraiture, as in the fine example in Rembrandt's *Portrait of Margaretha de Geer* from 1661.

This photographic image is a direct foreground self-portrait shot, from the waist up. Though aping the self-portrait genre, she has exactly chosen the area to accentuate for the focus of an enquiry into the formal, conceptual and psychological. Wearing a black dress, she is sitting surrounded by a black background from which her form both emerges and by which it is submerged. A natural emphasis is the area of her dress's shiny neck pattern in its high tonal contrast to the dominant black. It is an embroidered and beaded motif of paisley design in white and forms the lower apex of one triangle at its downward point. Superimposed, probably during the development process, is a thin glowing tube (possibly jello) intersecting formally with the neck pattern in its gentle double convex/concave loop, its concave part echoing the same triangle's apex. The neck area links tonally, in its high tone, to the high-lit fingers of the glass-

flattened hands. The next area of focus is that of the hands. White and dramatic, they are placed on her lap in perfect symmetry, each hand identically opposite the other, her fingers meeting to form the apex of another, natural, triangle. But Woodman has cleverly shot the finger-joining area behind a square pane of glass which highlights and magnifies three fingers of the hand on the viewer's left and two of that on the right. A small light square, the right angles of which are disrupted by her fingers is formed from these triangle sections of the hands and a new non-symmetric square is created by the geometric intersections.



Fig. 3: Francesca Woodman, details from some disordered interior Geometries, artist book, 1980-1981, 33 x 22.85 cm. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

Facing this image, on the right hand page, the original text has a page heading: *Definizioni Preliminari* and is subtitled *Poliedri*. Examples of regular polyhedrons are printed from drawn diagrams in a line at the bottom of the page. Woodman's correspondence with this geometry is coaxed from her own body with technical mastery and an eloquent imagination. Her figure sits with dignity amongst the busy spread of symbols and diagrams on and around this 'page stage'.⁴²

Whereas the first image's base-text page was sub-headed *Tabella delle abbreviazione*, Woodman continues her investigation of these same 'Preliminary Definitions' on the next double page spread by sticking her photograph opposite a page of printed diagrams which are examples of prisms and pyramids (in the subsequent sub-section with the same heading) (fig. 4). She underlines the Italian section title with a pink crayon close in colour to the base book's covers. She then translates the printed title into English in an untidy and large version of her own 1970s 'antique' script. She has part-scored through this phrase in black ink, placing it in between the visible and the invisible in its partial ineligibility. At this stage we clearly realise her hesitations, heading to that interior disorder. This is in direct contrast to her intellectual command over the display of interior states in this book, which is why its title is at once intentionally ironic and daringly self-exposing. She had first written her own descriptive title 'I: a sort of round' at the page's top, under both the printed given title and her annotative handwritten title, but then changed her mind and part-erased it in a high-toned white Tipp-Ex, in another gesture of deliberate confusion.

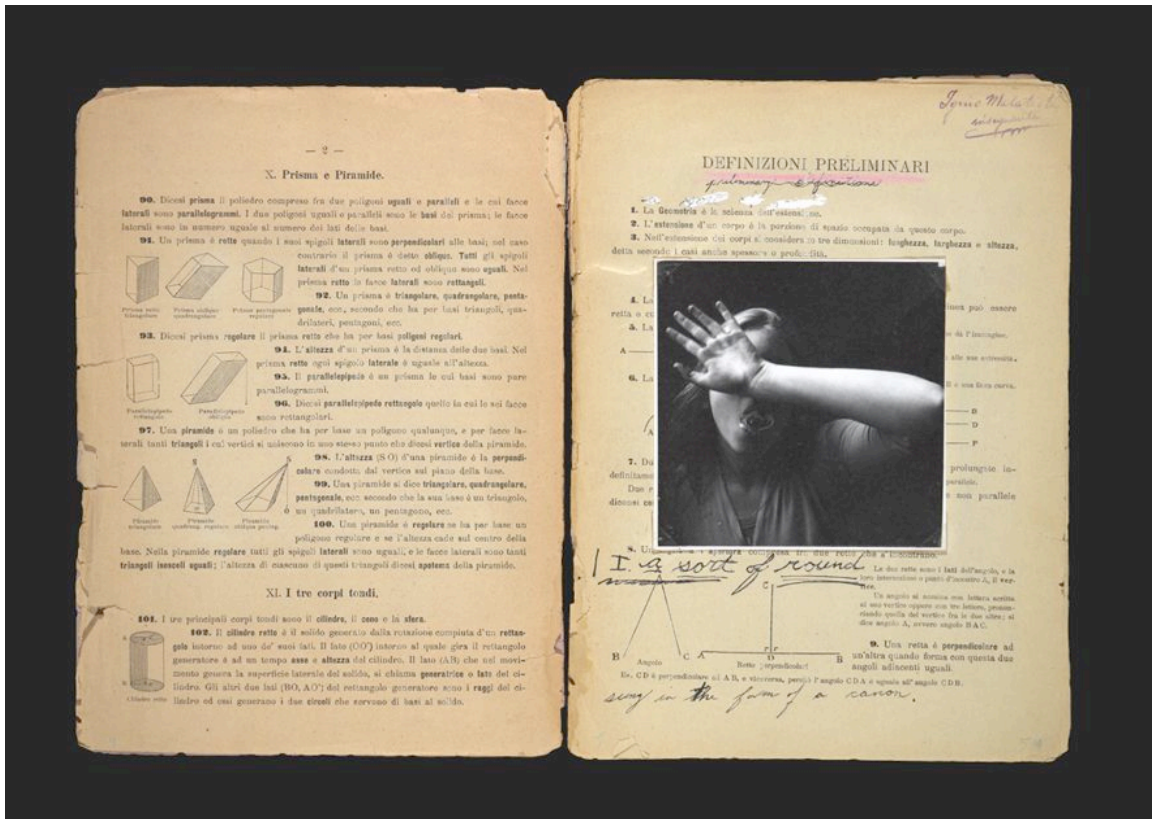


Fig. 4: Francesca Woodman, details from some disordered interior Geometries, artist book, 1980-1981, 33 x 22.85 cm. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

In this image Woodman covers her face with her hand so that her nose and eyes are invisible. In her mouth is a round object, a bubble made either from gum or jello.⁴³ The opposite page, with its heading *Prisma e Piramide* lists the occurrent variations of these forms, which are most pertinently triangular, quadrangular and pentagonal, and provides explanatory diagrams with shaded areas to create a three dimensionality. This section is followed by a new section with the heading *I tre corpi tondi*, followed by a description of the three principle examples of cylinders, cones and spheres. Her image visually demonstrates a cylinder form, her arm and a sphere, the exaggerated 'O' of her mouth: Woodman as Cyclops.⁴⁴ Above her image appear the base text's printed *definizioni preliminari*:

1. *La Geometria e la scienza dell'estensione*
2. *L'estensione d'un corpo e la porzione di spazio occupata da questo corpo*
3. *Nell'estensione dei corpi considerate tre dimensioni: lunghezza, larghezza et altezza, ditto second casi anche spessore o profondita*⁴⁵

Underneath her image she has written a response to the sequence: '1. a sort of round.' Underneath two linear diagrams at the bottom of the page and her image she has written 'sung in the form of a canon,' a pun on the other use of *round* in English, as Townsend has observed, and perhaps too in a response to the intrinsic lyricism in the rhythms of the Italian language.⁴⁶

In the pair of images over a double page spread (Fig. 5), she consciously shadows the given text by repeating her version of its axioms, 'another rectangle' and 'a circle and a parrallegram' [sic] as annotations. The first image, placed on the left page, has at its page base Woodman's hand written annotation 'another rectangle' on a background of over-painted original student's notes. This over-painting is shaped into white cloud-like blobs. Woodman's photograph shows a window sill, on which are a variety of objects, including a centrally placed conch shell viewed through a square blank glass transparency held in her hand. This shell becomes a triangle in magnification. At least eight other rectangles appear naturally or are visually constructed in this composition; her title is clearly a humorous under-statement. The window above the sill is composed of rectangular panes and a balcony constructed from a metal grid structure is visible outside it. These panes are splattered with white

blobs of pigeon shit, (linking to the over-painting blobs) or, in Guiseppe Casetti's reading, snow.⁴⁷ The inside sill, too, is splattered with black blobs. In his description, 'water outside and inside the room,' Casetti refers to the shell as a water symbol. Woodman links a visible part of a shaded triangle from the base text, just outside the border of her photo on the left, to the curve of an upturned vase: cylinder and circle with triangle.

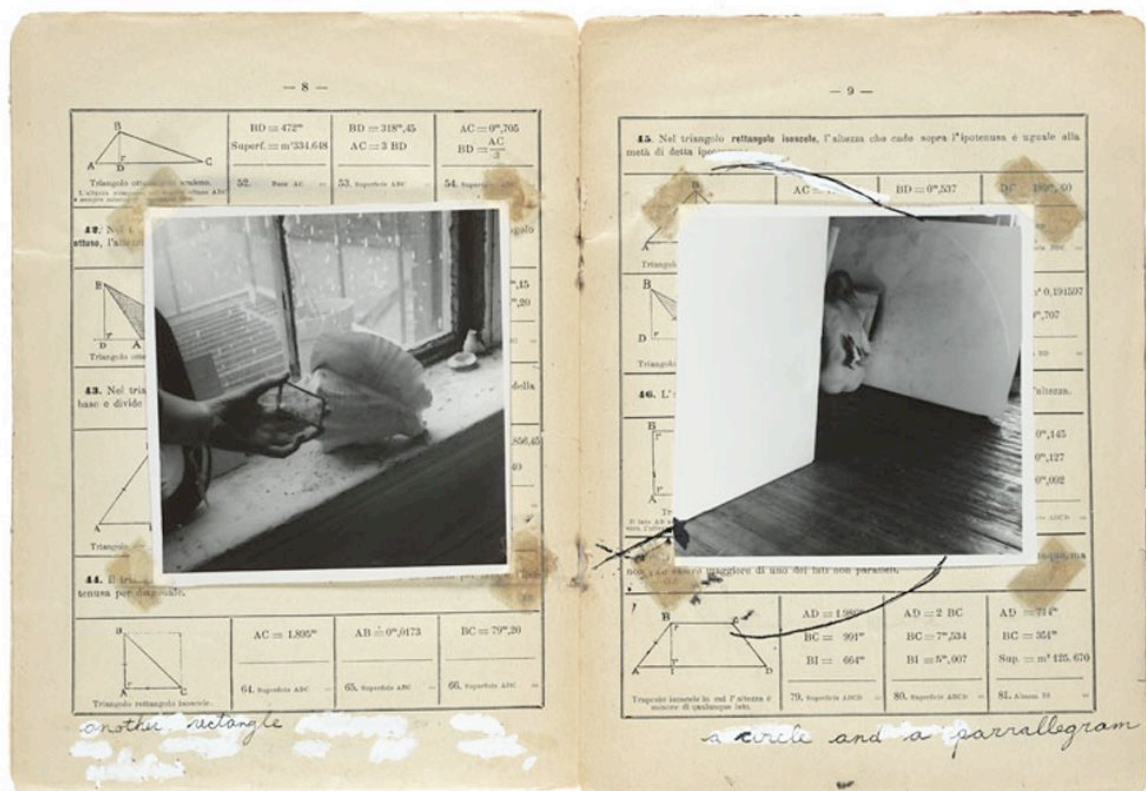


Fig. 5: Francesca Woodman, detail from *some disordered interior Geometries*, 1980-1981, artist book, 33 x 22.85 cm. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

At the bottom of the opposite page on which Woodman has placed her photograph, she has written 'a circle and a parrallegram' [sic]. A segment of a circle is superimposed on the parallelogram at the top right of her photograph. She has extended the curve in black ink right out of the image, above and below its borders, out through the formulae in their boxes and through the

words that block the slightly shakily drawn curves. Part of the circle's centre is constructed by the division between the very dark toned area of floor and where it diffuses, on the lower right image section, into a blurred black and white parallel line section. She extends, too, the straight line at the base of the bright, white, angled rectangle that occupies the left third of the composition. This makes the parallelogram behind which Woodman's crouched and huddled figure is seen, in rear view, before a mirror (a reference to the *Self Deceit* series made in Rome in 1978).⁴⁸ Another parallelogram is constructed, in an unusual connection across both images of the pair, by the sill line of the left image forming an exact parallel with the base line of the white rectangle in the right image. In a trick of proportion across the double image spread, Woodman's crouched figure registers as smaller than the conch shell opposite. Woodman brings the tension between curve and straight to its maximum pitch by accenting with light the added parallelograms of the floorboard lines at the bottom left of the image square.

Arguably one of the most inventive single images in this book is Woodman's first interpretation of the base work's section on the square and rectangle, investigating their classifiable components, such as ways of measurement and ratios of sides. On the original document's page ten the sequence of exercises demonstrates the recapitulation of a triangle into a rectangle and back again (fig. 6).⁴⁹ This image, the first of two with her hand-written annotation 'almost a square' under the photograph, depicts the artist in front of a large, thick and white textured piece of material (either some primed canvas or a quilt) pinned to the wall in and out of tension, an 'almost...square'.⁵⁰ Woodman stands on one

leg; she is trying to become, has almost become, will become, a triangle. An impossible, absurd task this, in which she almost succeeds. She adds a wooden pole where the other should have been (two human legs would detract) and the pole's straight edge enhances the effect of the triangular form made by the thick primed canvas triangle garment she wears. She covers her face with her hands in a symmetry that makes another triangle between her forearms, the apex of which is in between her joined fingertips: almost a triangle. Linked in tone and texture, these two *almost* forms visually transform the base text's first enquiry into a surrealist absurdity: almost a square and almost a triangle. Her interpretation is a transmutation into the human through a serious parallel enquiry containing a comic and self-mocking edge, a simultaneous surrealism. The base page investigates how a triangle can evolve into a rhombus. Woodman's image draws poetry from this evolution.

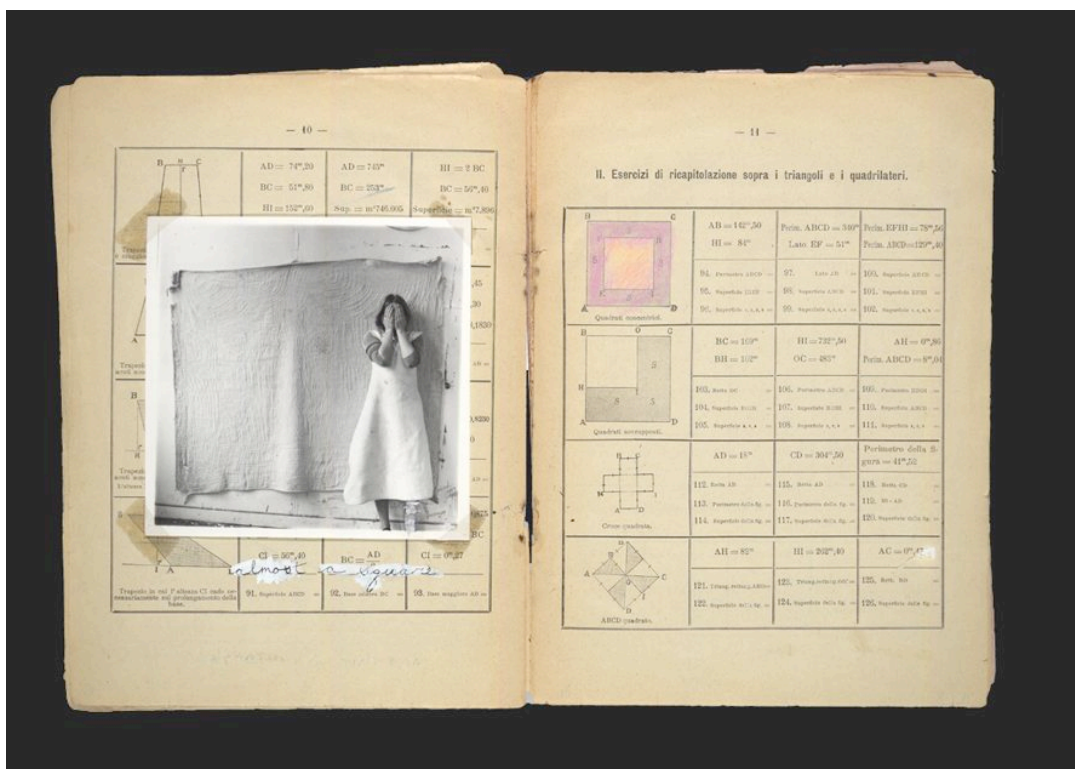


Fig.6: Francesca Woodman, details from *some disordered interior Geometries*, 1980-1981, artist book, 33 x 22.85 cm. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

The final image of the book can be viewed in relation to the first (fig. 3), with which it forms a direct visual sequence. On the right-hand page, we read the original text's sub-heading *Superficie e volume dei tre corpi tondi*. Woodman has also left a sub-clause legible: *La superficie laterale del cilindro circolare retto e uguale all'altezza moltiplicata per la (circonferenza della base)*. She has here shot herself in the same pose as in the earlier image, wearing the same dress and with the same cropping of her head and legs, all of which are photographed from the same angle. A similar white triangle is established at the neckline with its focus, again, on a shiny bead decorative collar motif. Once again creating and analysing the triangle form, this time she makes her similarly symmetrical hands into one of several discernible triangles. But in this image the hands are held more closely together and the wrists that touch each other are magnified to about one and a half times their size by that same clear square of glass from the first book image; in this image the glass is held almost vertically. The magnified area is printed by Woodman in negative and blurred to make it extraordinary, in a possible reference to the vagina. We think of an x-ray of the two cylinders of her wrists, joined to make a new form that is uncanny, *unheimlich*, disturbing. Woodman has written 'almost a square' in her "neat" semi-copperplate script on the top left of the page. This is a repetition of her caption for the image of herself as triangle in front of an 'almost square' (fig. 6) and seems a simplified problem in comparison to the base text's problem on this page. It provides the solution to her separate inflexive enquiry however. Spaces are left at the bottom of the page for the earlier student's precise

answers to the problems set, for example: *lateral surface area* = ; *total surface area* = ; *volume of cylinder* = . Woodman has most carefully blocked out selected clues and answers, perhaps to leave her audience the impression that her image will provide the answer. And it does, if her audience can make the imaginative leap and the poetic juxtaposition, that rearrangement of thought that surrealism demands.

Although her photographed square containing the composite wrist and hand area is here given an emphasis by her annotation, those more complex problems of the base text are addressed visually in a cryptic layering of meanings waiting to be revealed. For example, her seated position in this photograph can be read as alluding to her height being equal to the base measurement of her body/form: *corpo* in Italian (which double meaning she relishes throughout the book). Two more contrasted *bodies* than the cylinder's *corpo*, left just visible though stabbed with Tipp-Ex marks at the underneath border of this image, and Woodman's body, the omnipresent vector of her life's work, would be hard to find.

Woodman's choice of a geometry student book works as a device parallel in rigour to her own artist's practice both in form and content. It is just such contrasts, surrealist word-plays and anamorphic resemblances which both delight Woodman continually and inform the complex nature of her enquiry. Her estimable knowledge of and implementation of the Bretonian theory of 'convulsive beauty', in particular both the 'veiled erotic' and the 'circumstantial magic' components, is visible throughout her oeuvre.⁵¹ It is a natural, if

demanding choice for an artist able to plan and execute her project through a Euclidean sphere of logical precision, which acts as a tight grid from which to emanate into the domain of the conceptual and perceptual: the volatility of a high-flying imagination. The emotional sphere, too, can become its most potent in the context of a strictly graded learning system, the axiomatic development into logically derived theorems that is Euclid's Geometry. Parallel investigations and tangential leaps, adverse conclusions: a play between verbal and diagrammatic text as visual backdrop and the text as container of meanings and as inspiration to diversion.

The value in *sdiG* is in the meaning and rhythm of Woodman's dialogue with the original: poetic and humorous, analytical and reflexive. The diagrams and symbols used in the first context to illustrate theories of geometry evolve their givens through Woodman's intervention into a second context as primary visuals. These are hard-edged diagrams moulded by logic to necessarily lack human presence and essence: they are the static codifying of an ancient system of understanding, monographic symbols in use by engineering students probably in Rome, almost a century earlier. Woodman's last quarter of the twentieth century project complexly intervenes in the base template they provide. Her books are containers of found text, diagram, explanation and proof, a compression of their era into a piece of ephemera. In common with all found objects, they are dispossessed, separated from a first owner and from a first function by time, death and a resurrection of purpose.

¹ For an excellent analysis of *Portrait of a Reputation*, see Harriet Riches, 'A Disappearing Act: Francesca Woodman's *Portrait of a Reputation*,' in *Oxford Art Journal* 27.1, 2004:95-113.

² *some disordered interior Geometries*. The full title is hereafter abbreviated to *sdiG*. The combination of upper and lower case is Woodman's own, taken from the outside cover of the published book. Many variations occur in the discursive literature, probably from the corrections of editors.

³ I owe the knowledge of this fact to the review of *sdiG* by Martha Gever in her essay 'Artists' Books: Alternative Space or Precious Object?' in *AfterImage* (May 1982): 6-8.

⁴ My analysis is based on the scrutiny of one copy of this alternative press edition in the Special Collection of the New York Public Library. I had a brief look, too, at the digitally photographed original book on compact disc, which was made available to me by the Woodman Archive to the International Center for Photography in New York in Spring 2006.

⁵ Guiseppe Casetti, 'La nuvola mediocre', in Achille Bonito Oliva (ed.), *Francesca Woodman. Providence, Roma, New York* (Rome: Castelveccchi Arte, 2000): 13-21. I am indebted throughout this document to Casetti's reading of *sdiG*. Casetti's nickname for Francesca was *La Nuvola* possibly in reference to Raoul Ubac's photograph from 1939, entitled *La Nebuleuse*, in English rendered *Woman/Cloud*.

⁶ Shorter OED, Third Edition, reprinted 1990: 845.

⁷ Russell Joslin, 'Francesca Woodman', in *Fotophile* (Spring 1998): 40-43, quoting George Woodman: 'I think sometimes there has been an insufficient appreciation of the formal focus of Francesca's work; she would have certain themes that would be developed throughout a series of works, which are quite elaborate on a formal level'.

⁸ The exception to this is *Portrait of a Reputation* (undated, Townsend dates it 1976/7, op.cit. p51). This text is from the *Woodman Books* CD, by Rosella Caruso (translated by Debra Werblud) 'Woodman probably conceived of the idea of a diachronic correspondence between two different linguistic codes while in Rome...'

⁹ George Woodman relates how the master printer of Kertesz's work, Igor Bahkt, who Betty Woodman and he employed to print from Francesca's negatives for the Fondation Cartier exhibition (Paris 1998) was baffled for hours by how she achieved the archive prints he used as reference: 'The amount of dodging and burning and holding back and manipulation of the image is very considerable.' Quoted by Joslin, 'Francesca Woodman': 42.

¹⁰ Martha Gever, 'Artists' Books': 7.

¹¹ For an in depth analysis of both Woodman's confrontation of her vulnerability and her work in relation to Lacan's concept, please see Margaret Sundell, 'Vanishing Points: The Photography of Francesca Woodman,' in M.Catherine De Zegher (ed.), *Inside the Visible* (Cambridge & London: MIT Press: 1996). For examples of the visualisation of the pre-mirror phase undifferentiated state, see Woodman's *Self Deceit* series pp 156/157 in Townsend.

¹² Joslin, 'Francesca Woodman': 42.

¹³ Peter Davison, 'Girl, Seeming to Disappear', in *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 2000):108-111.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 110. Davison reports a conversation with Woodman.

¹⁵ A different *take* on Ellen Dissanayake's concept of 'making special'. Ellen Dissanayake, 'Sociobiology and the Arts: Problems and Prospects' in Bedeaux, Baptist and Cooke *Sociobiology and the Arts* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).

¹⁶ Nancy Holt (ed.), *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations* (New York: New York University Press, 1979). Woodman attended Rhode Island School of Art and Design (RISD) between 1975 and 1978.

¹⁷ See in particular No. 11 of the series. Nos 2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9, and 11 of the series are reproduced in Herve Chandès (ed.), *Francesca Woodman* (Zurich: Scalò,1998): 64-68 (This is the catalogue of the Fondation Cartier exhibition in Paris).

¹⁸ Rosalind Krauss 'Problem Sets' in *Francesca Woodman, Photographic Work* (New York: Hunter College Art Gallery/Wellesley: Wellesley College Museum: 1986): 47. The essay was published in the catalogue of the first major exhibition of Woodman's work.

¹⁹ Chris Townsend, Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, p 53, and esp. the chapter ' A Post-Minimal Photography'.

²⁰ Dawn Ades, 'Camera Creation', in Jennifer Mundy (ed.), *Duchamp Man Ray Picabia* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008): 92. Ades is quoting Jean Clair.

²¹ Arturo Schwarz, 'The Philosophy of the Readymade and of its Editions' in *Duchamp Man Ray Picabia*:128-129.

²² Ibid.:129.

²³ The geometry absent in the geometry book is present however in the surrounding structure of the balcony.

²⁴ Chris Townsend, *Francesca Woodman* (London: Phaidon Press, 2006): 239.

²⁵ Very faint reproduction, so difficult to decipher.

²⁶ George Woodman, 'Seething with Ideas' in Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*: 240. I am grateful to Townsend for rooting her word play and disjointed syntax in Stein and for reproducing the *Journal Extracts*. See Harriet Riches's PhD thesis (UCL, 2004) for further discussion of this subject.

²⁷ Martha Gever, 'Artists' Books': 6. 'In its one-and-a-half year history (...) the founders and directors of Synapse, have produced seven books in collaboration with a number of artists. All these books were published in small, but not miniscule editions; all are priced considerably lower than coffee table art books but considerably higher than comic books; and, to a varying degree...the books share a feature which is primarily conceptual – a concern with visual-verbal reciprocity(...).'

²⁸ Text from *Woodman Books CD*, op. cit.

²⁹ An edition of between 200 and 500 was suggested to me by the archivist of the New York Public Library in 2006.

³⁰ Martha Gever, 'Artists' Books': 6-8.

³¹ In the catalogue of an exhibition held at Moore College of Art in Philadelphia in 1973 was the first use of the term, according to Stefan Klima, in his *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature*.

³² Harriet Riches, 'A Disappearing Act' in *Oxford Art Journal* 27.1, 2004: 109.

³³ Yves Peyré, 'A Glimpse of the Future' in Jean Khalfa (ed.), *The Dialogue between Painting and Poetry* (Cambridge, UK: Black Apollo Press, 2001): 163

³⁴ Ed Ruscha interviewed by John Coplans, quoted by Martha Gever, 'Artists' Books': 6.

³⁵ The term 'verbal/visual reciprocity' is Gever's.

³⁶ As it is the working process of both the artist and the scientist both to create or choose the problem and to find its solution.

³⁷ Rosalind Krauss, 'Problem Sets', in Ann Gabhart et al., *Francesca Woodman, Photographic Work* (Providence: Wellesley College Museum/Hunter College Art Gallery: 1986): 41-51. In this critical text Krauss argues that this student-initiated working method is Woodman's favoured approach into her practice. I agree but hesitate over Krauss's implication of Woodman's immaturity in adopting it.

³⁸ The total page colour is a slight variation, being more grey than puce, to that recorded in the first generation copy of the original that I have viewed in CD Rom format. The photo/litho method of printing used by Synapse Press in 1981 has slightly deadened the original colour, as far as I can tell.

³⁹ Synapse Press edition. Details are given of two grants she was awarded, one from the 'Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Council on the Arts' and one from 'The National Endowment for the Arts', 'And with the help of Daniel Tucker'(Editor at Synapse); 'The drawing in the last chapter is by Jim Johnson'. She has written her name after the copyright sign. All of this acknowledgement section is hand-written in 1970s script by Woodman.

⁴⁰ *Cristiano* was Woodman's nickname for Casetti.

⁴¹ This is the *third pamphlet*, according to Casetti, 'La nuvola mediocre'. I am indebted to Barnaby Lankester-Owen for his translation of it.

⁴² The phrase is Gever's : 'Artists' Books': 7.

⁴³ Strong links exist between this image and *Self-portrait talking to Vince*, made at RISD between 1975–1978.

⁴⁴ The literal Greek meaning is 'round eye' as well as 'one eye.'

⁴⁵ Geometry is the science of extension. 2. The extension of a body (form) is that portion of space occupied by the body. 3. In the extension of bodies there are three dimensions: length, width and height, secondly we shall also consider thickness or depth.

⁴⁶ For an analysis of the differences between the 'round' and the 'canon' and their implication in Woodman's work, please see Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*: 52.

⁴⁷ Casetti, 'La Nuvola Mediocre':19.

⁴⁸ The *Self Deceit* series consists of seven mirror-themed (and 'mirror phase', since Woodman certainly makes reference to Lacan's concept) images made in Rome between May and August 1978 in the cellar of a Renaissance palace. See Chandes, *Francesca Woodman*:105-107 and Sundell, 'Vanishing Points': 437, on Lacan's 'mirror phase'.

⁴⁹ A discrepancy will occur between page numbers and the placing of photographic images as Woodman used the portions of three different geometry pamphlets for her project. See Casetti, 'La Nuvola Mediocre':17.

⁵⁰ The phrase appears again under the last image of the book.

⁵¹ Breton expounds this theory at first in *Nadja* (1928) and advances it in *L'Amour Fou* (1936).

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