

“I Never Recognise Myself in a Picture”

Body, Image and Identity in *How to Play Francesca Woodman* by
Toneelgroep Maastricht

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Francesca Woodman (1958-1981) was an American photographer whose black and white photographs, mostly of her own body, gained great acclaim, particularly after her death—she committed suicide at the age of only twenty-two. Not much is known about her life or her motivation to end it. In *How to Play Francesca Woodman*¹ (2014-2015), performed by Toneelgroep Maastricht and written by Erik-Ward Geerlings and Anne Vegter² after an idea of Arie de Mol, there are four Francescas on stage: actors Jessie Wilms, Lore Dijkman, Nadia Amin and Nina Fokker³. In this theatrical fiction of Woodman’s life, they each embody aspects of what kind of person they believe she might have been: ambitious, talented, manic, depressed, sensual, or everything at once, immersing themselves “in Francesca’s questions, doubts and desires, in a time that is characterised by the pressure to perform and the longing for perfection” (*How to Play Francesca Woodman*). After performing in hometown Maastricht throughout 2014, Toneelgroep Maastricht toured the rest of the Netherlands in the Spring of 2015.

The performance explores themes prevalent in Woodman’s own photography, especially the tension between presence and disappearance or death, and the corporeal and the visual. This article will research the ways in which *How to Play Francesca Woodman*⁴ complicates the apparent discrepancy between corporeal and technological representation, while at the same time reflecting on the impossibility of representing Woodman’s identity. By considering the oppositions of exhibitionism and disappearance, death and liveness, representation and presence in relation to the various media used in the play, the performance frustrates the concept of ‘liveness’ to the point of deconstructing it altogether.

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At the beginning of the performance, the four women are seated on chairs in a line on the stage; each has her own spot with a table, a lamp and a camera. There are toilet rolls, cables and other electrical supplies strewn around the floor, and at the back of the space are three large projection screens, each connected to one of the cameras on stage. Four groups of dresses are hanging from the ceiling, and are

dropped down in between scenes so that the Francescas can change clothes. Next to the curtains on the left and right of the stage are black panels on which rows of small, printed photographs are attached, presumably Woodman's. During the performance, these photographs are filmed on stage and projected on a screen behind the actors. Most of the videos shown on the three screens are created during the play—for example, when Nina films herself from the side and the spectator can see the close-up directly projected behind her. The performance is a mishmash of text, movement, and scenes from Woodman's life interrupted by music, videos and projections. The theatre text consists of short lines that almost look like poetry on the page and switch constantly and quickly from performer to performer, so that a plurality of voices emerges.

Throughout the play, the performers try to characterise Woodman by stating what she likes (shade, heat, fights, lies, sleeping (FW 4)) and what she hates (her memory, nature, art, love (2)). However, as they start listing her likes and dislikes, quite a paradoxical picture emerges: "Francesca hates herself", but also "loves herself" (3), "Francesca hates art" (2), but "Francesca loves painting" (4). As the enumeration continues, the actresses seem to run out of words to describe their object of interest, repeating "Francesca loves", "Francesca loves" (5) as if there is nothing left to suggest. Just like the different dresses that the four women try on during the performance, all is just an attempt to settle on *something* that relates to Francesca, to figure out anything at all about her identity. As (2) ironically remarks: "every similarity with reality is coincidental"⁵ (FW 20). The audience is warned from the outset that the play is a fiction.

This idea is enforced by the self-reflexive use of a number of different media and technological devices. There are multiple panels on stage with photographs, printed too small to make out from the audience, as well as four cameras, each of which is linked to one of the three screens at the back. At certain points in the play, an actress will point her camera at one of Woodman's photographs, which is then projected. For instance, in the scene in which Wilms describes Francesca's break-up with her boyfriend Benjamin, an alleged picture of the two is shown behind the performers. The photographs are thus remediated with the use of technology and projected for all to see.

The technical equipment used in *Francesca Woodman* is not covered up, but rather openly displayed, as much part of the performance as the actors and the other props. Hans-Thies Lehmann seems to generally appreciate this co-presence of image and actor in postdramatic performance in his seminal *Postdramatic*

Theatre. However, rather conservatively, he also warns for “the magic attraction that seduces the gaze to follow the image when given the choice between devouring something real [the theatre] or something imaginary [the image]” (170). While his distinction between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ seems overly simplistic, more troubling is the fact that he so strictly opposes theatre to the image. The latter he considers “nothing but representation” (Lehmann 171), the image signifying only emptiness. At the same time, however, the electronic image “lacks lack” (171; original emphasis) and is too fulfilling for any curiosity to remain. In other words, the presence of bodies in the theatre is of a different order than the presence of objects:

What we encounter is an obvious presence but it is of a different kind than the presence of a picture, a sound, a piece of architecture. It is objectively—even if not intentionally—a co-presence referring to ourselves. (142)

As we will see later, this presumed hierarchy of live bodies over mediatised images has been a prevalent discourse within theatre and performance studies, one that contemporary theorists such as Philip Auslander have attempted to deconstruct.

How does *How to Play Francesca Woodman* play with the perceived notion of theatre as concerned with the live, ‘real’ presence of bodies, as opposed to the ‘imaginary’ quality of the (electronic or photographic) image that, according to Lehmann, can function merely as representation? In focusing on disappearance and death as opposed to liveness and immediacy, I will demonstrate that the performance manages to deconstruct the notion of liveness altogether, in its many mediations and remediations, by showing that *all* of these manifestations are concerned with liveness, namely with the materiality of the media themselves.

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Many of Francesca Woodman’s photographs feature bodies or body parts, often in some state of nudity. The object of the photograph is not easily recognisable, even when it is Woodman herself, because the pictures are often blurred. Woodman’s photographs thus seem to incorporate both animation and (the anticipation of) death. The close association with death is exactly what connects photography and the theatre Roland Barthes claims, because both mediums are concerned with life and death at the same time: “We know the original relation of the theatre and the cult of the Dead: the first actors separated themselves from the

community by playing the role of the Dead (...) *as a body simultaneously living and dead*" (Barthes 1981: 31, my italics). In Woodman's work as well as in Toneelgroep Maastricht's performance, disappearance seems to entail some sort of transformation, a merging with the background:

(1)
I hide behind a couch
behind newspapers
behind wallpaper
groping for an opening
I replace arms with branches
a torso with a trunk
I let them hide behind décors
so they become décors themselves
transition spaces
walls, floor, ceiling

(4)
how to disappear (*FW 9*)⁶

As (3) mimicks her therapist: "You want to show me something, Francesca, but you're hiding yourself on every photo." It is true that in Woodman's photographs, both the subject and the object (often both Woodman herself) seem to slip from the picture, in the process of disappearing completely. The click of the camera "simultaneously ends the real presence of the object and the presence of the subject" (Baudrillard, 1999: 3). Peggy Phelan considers Woodman's photographs rehearsals for her later suicide, a negotiation of Woodman's relationship "with her own developing and vanishing image" (1987). While I believe it to be quite dangerous to identify the artist's art with her mental state or tragic end, the concept of disappearance is recurrent in her work, and by extension, in *How to Play Francesca Woodman*. However, the disappearance does not seem total-- Woodman, or a trace of her, still seems to exist somewhere outside or beyond the space of the frame:

(2)
it is razor-sharp
it is blurred
everything occurs outside of the frame
(*FW 13*)⁷

The photograph emphasises the *trace* of something or someone that was once present but is now gone. This trace is reminiscent of Roland Barthes' description of the attempt to recognise his recently deceased mother in a photograph in *Camera Lucida* (1981: 63). He fails; he is able to recognise her "only in fragments" (65), only "differentially, not essentially" (66). In this sense, photography is always concerned with death; there is always a discrepancy between the moment the photograph was taken and when it is viewed afterwards. In Barthes' words, photography represents

Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print. (1981: 92)

The only way in which Barthes can find something in his mother which he might recognise is in a picture taken of her as a little girl. By seeing an image of the life that she lived before the one that they shared together, Barthes is able to imagine himself as a survivor of his mother's death, and to picture the way in which his own life may extend beyond hers (1981: 76). However, this also necessarily spells his own death (93).

Although Jean Baudrillard considers the click of the camera to end "the real presence of the subject", he opposes the idea that a photographic image is mere representation (1997: 2), since "photography brings the world into action (...) and the world steps into the photographic act. This creates a material complicity between us and the world since the world is never anything more than a continuous move to action" (1997: 2). This means that the image is anything but passive or still—rather, it signifies "a continuous acting out" (1997: 2), even if that acting out involves disappearance. And in *Francesca Woodman*, the trace that is left, "a thing that leaves a trace / naked in space" (FW 12)⁸ or "floating body parts in rooms with dark corners" (FW 13)⁹ can be registered by the camera after the object and subject have disappeared. The camera testifies to the movement of the once-present body:

(3)
the camera is recording a movement that is still in this space
while the body is long since gone
it has left a movement
in which it has dissolved (FW 13)¹⁰

In other words, the subject and object (both Woodman in this case) can only attain a kind of presence through the existence of these photographs, the camera's testimony. There is a continual reclaiming of the self as well as an extermination, a making-disappear—a process “by which one simultaneously expropriates and eradicates oneself” (Baudrillard 1997: 31).

Interestingly, Baudrillard distinguishes between photographs and “synthetic” images, holding that the former still incorporate the moment of disappearance, whereas in synthetic images the ‘real’ has already disappeared (1997: 30). Indeed, it is film in particular that Lehmann, too, seems to dislike, because it is “watching death at work”¹¹. Performance, on the other hand, “becomes itself through disappearance (Phelan *Unmarked* 146), allowing for the *transformation* of performers’ and spectators’ bodies. As Lehmann phrases it,

[The theatre,] consisting of a shared time-space of mortality, articulates as a performative act the necessity of engaging with death, i.e. with the (a)liveness of life. Its themes are (...) the terrors and joys of transformation, while film is watching death at work. It is basically this aspect of the shared time-space of mortality with all its ethical and communication theoretical implications that ultimately marks a categorical difference between theatre and technological media. (Lehmann 167)

Performance is often directly contrasted to mediatised images, because this “time-space of mortality” shared by performer and spectator is allegedly impossible to reproduce and distribute. However, as Philip Auslander notes, it is not feasible to main that live performance “can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media” (45). After all, the notion of the ‘live’ has come into being only when possibilities for recording and reproducing media were developed, and is necessarily always defined in opposition to these terms (45-47). It is thus already embedded in the cultural economy that it is often assumed to oppose, any qualities of ‘liveness’ or ‘presence’ being historically contingent rather than ontologically determined (57).

Auslander proves his point by demonstrating that television and image can be said to hold exactly these qualities of disappearance that are often bestowed on theatre, as “the televisual image is always simultaneously coming into being and vanishing; there is no point at which it is fully present” (48). The image thus

becomes itself through disappearance as much as performance does (49). In *Francesca Woodman*, this would mean that the actors' bodies and their performance is no more 'live' than the mediated images and videos of Woodman's work. A closer look at a key scene will reveal that neither photography, nor film, nor theatre can offer something outside the cultural economy that Woodman's narrative is inevitably encapsulated in; all are as 'live' or 'real' as any other.

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About halfway through the play, one of Woodman's photographs is projected onto the middle screen. It is an image of three fully naked women standing next to each other, facing the camera. The women on the photograph each hold up a different portrait photograph in front of them, so that their faces are covered by photographs of other faces. Three of the actors move to stand between the projector and the screen, so that the bodies from the photo are projected onto their own white dresses. What is more, the actors themselves are holding white sheets of paper in front of their faces, so that the photographed faces from the image are projected onto their own.

Woodman's photographs are remediated on camera as well as on the actors' bodies in various ways, and the focus is shifted from the actors to the screen and the projector, the apparatus itself. The theatre becomes, as David Jay Bolter's and Richard Grusin's logic of hypermediacy proposes, "a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as "windowed" itself—with windows that open on to other representations or other media" (33). These multiple levels of mediation and remediation do not function to represent a 'real' Woodman that existed in the past, they are simply representations of the reality of these media themselves; the viewer is encouraged to "acknowledge the medium as medium" (41), which *is* the real, live, immediate experience (48). A multiplication of the signs of mediation hereby serves to attempt and "reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience" (33).

This "multiplication of frames" (Lehmann qtd. In Bleeker 44) is a quality that Lehmann ascribes to postdramatic theatre specifically, as opposed to the fixed dramatic frame of modern theatre. As theatre scholar Maaike Bleeker phrases it, in postdramatic theatre

the spectator *is* granted a more direct access to the things as they are in themselves; that the source of the confusing experiences is located firmly

in the thing as given over there. Seen this way, the effect of multiplication of frames seems (...) to equal the absence of frames. (Bleeker 2008: 44)

This multiplication of frames is coupled with “not the occurrence of anything ‘real’ as such but its *self-reflexive* use that characterises the aesthetic of postdramatic theatre (Lehmann 103). This does not seem so far removed from Bolter and Grusin’s ideas on remediation, hypermediacy and immediacy; but it is doubtful whether Lehmann would attribute this self-reflexive character to all media equally, rather than to theatre’s over-arching ‘liveness’. Still, it seems that Bolter and Grusin’s theories might be consolidated with Lehmann’s views after all, if a multiplication of frames can be interpreted literally, as effected through the particular media that offer these frames.

While the different levels of corporeal and electronic mediation and remediation are quite incomprehensible and dazzling, the spectator learns next to nothing about the people portrayed on the image—she cannot even make out their faces, since these are already covered up by photographs of other faces. And neither does she *really* know anything about the actresses present on stage, simply that they might each portray a different character trait that Woodman might have had. Their story might be theirs alone or everyone’s—there is no way to tell. In fact, they themselves seem confused:

(3)

I never recognise myself on a photo
only half of me is on there
it’s not about me anyway (FW 47)¹²

(1)

‘this can’t be you
on this photo’

(2)

it is me
it’s not me
this is every girl (FW 33-4)¹³

(2)

which story
every story (FW 53)¹⁴

As much as they are “every girl”, the Francescas seem to be able to comprehend themselves only through their art. They are completely and *only* these photos, as Francesca (1) notes:

(1)
my face is a photograph
a photo of a photo of a photo
my eyes are photos of eyes
my legs are photos
my belly is a photo
I am my photos (*FW 51*)¹⁵

The Francescas only exist within the reality of the media that are remediating their work, conflating their bodies with the photographs. In this sense, they are *only* ‘live’, present, the materiality of their media that attempt to represent them. The emphasis is on the experience of seeing the performance and experiencing the reality of what these media remediate: the work of a woman whose life and identity remain a mystery. What *can* meaningfully be experienced is the dilemma that young people may face, between exhibiting and concealing themselves, “in a time that is characterised by the pressure to perform and the longing for perfection” (*How to Play*). Woodman’s pictures are projected forwards onto the bodies of a current young generation, her plight recognisable and applicable to “every girl”. While the four performers do imagine different possible future for Francesca throughout the play, these scenarios are extremely ironic—most spectators will know how Woodman’s life, and thus the play, will end:

(3)
in two years I will be approached by a trendy talent scout
here, in New York
and he will feature me in two group exhibitions
the photos I hang there will be sold immediately
with the request to show more work
my first solo show will follow
and it’s a great success
I’ll sell nearly everything
museums will show interest
Boston Philadelphia Providence
and then – bang! – New York (*FW 48*)¹⁶

(3)
maybe you will make big colourful paintings
or you'll go to Europe and start a clothes shop
or you'll be a poet
or a war reporter
or you will join a jungle commando
or you will start a cooking show on TV
or - (*FW* 59)¹⁷

The first lines constitute Francesca (3)'s reply to her therapist's request to imagine her own future career. The second part is uttered near the end of the play, in a quite desperate and frantic manner, as if in the knowledge that none of these options will be realised. In other scenes, the actors imagine death, as "the grey of the future (...) my mourning card" (*FW* 11)¹⁸. They play being dead by suddenly dropping to the floor, saying:

(2)
it is just as if I'm dead don't you think
I am daddy I'm dead
I'm incredibly dead
aren't you relieved
just admit it
you'll be so relieved when I'm no longer here (*FW* 30)¹⁹

The last lines of the play represent the last photo that Woodman will take. One by one, the Francescas 'die' by raising their arms in the air and pulling up their legs on the chairs they are sitting on, resembling angels. They envisage the last picture that Woodman might have possibly taken:

(2)
take another photo
panorama
open diaphragm
insanely long exposure time
incredibly unfocused
angel's wings
flags of light
whiter and whiter

merely a glimmer
blurred linings
fog (*FW 60*)²⁰

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Summing up, *How to Play Francesca Woodman* considers and plays with significant themes in Woodman's photography: the tension between exhibitionism and disappearance, life and death, liveness or presence and representation. In this way, it foregrounds issues that are especially relevant for Woodman's peers today: the pressure to be perfect in a society where everything is or should be visible and can subsequently be recorded and judged.

However, as we have seen, any representation of *Woodman* fails—there is only the materiality of the apparatus and the resulting work: Woodman's photographs, the remediation of these photographs and the remediation of the actors' bodies who attempt to explore her life and work. This does not mean there is a lack of liveness; rather, one could consider there to be an excess of liveness in all the media that are used on stage. In other words, the focus is not on the liveness of theatre or the (bodies of the) actors that are supposed to represent Woodman, but the point is that these actors are *just as live* as the excess of media that are used in the performance.

The fact that the emphasis is on the 'now', the present materiality of the media, means that nothing sensible or true can be said about who Woodman was in the past. Lehmann's and Phelan's distinction between performance and mediated image has proved to be ultimately unhelpful in this regard. Live performance does not have a special ontological status when compared to other media; Woodman cannot be represented by the actresses, and nor can any of the images grant the spectator any knowledge as to who she actually was. The only thing that remains is her photography, which grants the spectator at the most a glimmer or trace of who she was. In the end, there is only the frame: a "panorama / open diaphragm / insanely long exposure time" (60). But what did we expect? *How to Play Francesca Woodman* presents merely one possible way in which Francesca can be *played*.

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¹ Although the title of the play is in English, the language spoken in the performance is mostly Dutch.

² Anne Vegter is the former Poet Laureate of the Netherlands.

³ In the theatre text (kindly provided by Toneelgroep Maastricht), each of them is indicated with a number: (1) for Jessie Wilms, (2) for Lore Dijkman, (3) for Nadia Amin and (4) for Nina Fokker. In my analysis I will subsequently refer to them by these numbers.

⁴ My analysis will be based on the performance in Theater Ins Blau (Leiden) on 31 March 2015, and that in Toneelschuur (Haarlem) on 2 April 2015.

⁵ “iedere overeenkomst met de werkelijkheid is toevallig” (FW 20)

⁶“(1) ik verberg me achter een bank / achter kranten / achter behang / op de tast naar een opening / ik vervang armen door takken / een romp door een boomstam / laat ze schuil gaan achter decors/ zodat ze zelf décor worden / overgangsgebieden / muren, vloer, plafond

(4) hoe je moet verdwijnen” (FW 9)

⁷“(2) het is vlijmscherp / het is vaag / het speelt zich allemaal af buiten beeld” (FW 13)

⁸“(3) een ding dat een spoor achterlaat / naakt in de ruimte” (FW 12)

⁹“(1) zwevende lichaamsdelen in kamers met duistere hoeken” (FW 13)

¹⁰“(3) de camera registreert een beweging die nog in de ruimte is / terwijl het lichaam allang weg is / het heeft een beweging achtergelaten / waarin het is opgelost” (FW 13)

¹¹ Although Roland Barthes opposes this idea in “Rhetoric of the Image”, holding that “film can no longer be seen as animated photographs: the *having-been-there* gives way before a *being-there* of the thing” (159). For Barthes, in other words, photographs deal with death, whereas film is concerned with presence (the latter concept Lehmann, again, would associate more with theatre).

¹²“(3) ik herken mijzelf nooit op een foto / ik sta er altijd maar half op / het gaat ook niet om mij” (FW 47)

¹³“(1) ‘dit ben jij toch niet / op deze foto’ (2) dat ben ik wel / ik ben het niet / dit zijn alle meisjes” (FW 33-4)

¹⁴“(2) welk verhaal / elk verhaal” (FW 53)

¹⁵“(1) mijn gezicht is een foto / een foto van een foto van een foto / mijn ogen zijn foto’s van ogen / mijn benen zijn foto’s / mijn buik is een foto / mijn foto’s ben ik” (FW 51)

¹⁶“(3) over twee jaar word ik benaderd door een hippe talentscout / hier in New York / en die bezorgt me een plekje in twee groepsexposities / de foto’s die ik daar ophang worden meteen verkocht / met het verzoek om meer werk te laten zien / dan volgt m’n eerste solotentoonstelling / en die is een groot succes / ik verkoop bijna alles / de interesse van musea wordt gewekt / Boston Philadelphia Providence / en dan – beng! – New York” (FW 48)

¹⁷ “(3) misschien komen er hele grote kleurrijke schilderijen uit je handen / of je gaat naar Europa en je begint een modewinkel / of je wordt dichter / of oorlogsjournalist / of je sluit je aan bij een junglecommando /
of je begint een kookprogramma op televisie / of –” (FW 59)

¹⁸ “(3) het grijs van de toekomst (...) (4) mijn rouwkaart” (FW 11)

¹⁹ “(2) het is net of ik dood ben vind je niet / ben ik ook pappie ik ben dood / ik ben hartstikke dood / lucht het jou niet op / geef het maar gewoon toe / wat zal het jou opluchten als ik er niet meer ben” (FW 30)

²⁰ “(2) maak nog een foto / panorama / open diafragma / idioot lange sluitertijd / uitermate onscherp / engelenvleugels / vlaggen van licht / witter en witter / alleen maar een gloed / vage omlijningen / mist” (FW 60)