

Female self-portraiture: imprisoned spaces and minds¹

Autorretrato femenino: espacios y mentes encarcelados

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Francesca Woodman and Rebecca Horn's oeuvre, establishing connections between their work, their work and their biographies, their artworks and their selves. In their art practices, they create prison-like and claustrophobic environments that reflect their inner selves, their traumas and their anxieties. Through the embodiment of space, they portray themselves, thus, blurring the limits between inner self and outer world, between body and space. By closely analysing their work and their lives, this article sets forth the idea that their work can be read as a dynamic and visual autobiography, as kinetic and psychological self-portraits of these two female artists.

KEYWORDS: Francesca Woodman, Rebecca Horn, body, space, performance, photography, identity, phenomenology, abject

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina la obra de Francesca Woodman y Rebecca Horn, relacionando el trabajo de ambas y estableciendo conexiones entre sus creaciones y sus biografías, entre su obra y su "yo". En sus prácticas artísticas crean entornos claustrofóbicos que evocan cárceles. Estos entornos reflejan su "yo" más interno, sus traumas y su ansiedad. A través de la simbiosis del cuerpo y el espacio se retratan a sí mismas, difuminando de esta manera los límites entre el "yo" y el mundo externo, entre la psique y el lugar habitado. Al analizar en detalle su obra y sus vidas este artículo plantea la idea de que su creación pueda interpretarse como una autobiografía dinámica y visual, como un autorretrato cinético y psicológico de estas dos artistas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Francesca Woodman, Rebecca Horn, cuerpo, espacio, performance, fotografía, identidad, fenomenología, abyección

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Entrapped in being, we shall always have to come out of it. And when we are hardly outside of being, we always have to go back into it.

(Bachelard, 1994, pp. 213-214)

Introduction

By analysing Francesca Woodman's photographs and Rebecca Horn's performances, this article will delve into the spaces these authors create, reflective of their inner being. Despite the differences in the mediums they use (photography, performance art and filmmaking), these artists manage to create places where the inner being and the physical setting collide, thus creating intimate and psychological rooms. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notions of phenomenology, this essay establishes deep links between body and perception, body and space, body and identity. According to him, 'our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 5). This embodied experience of space, this 'haunting' of space, is what takes place in the work of these artists. This phenomenological approach, as Amelia Jones explains, 'interprets and produces the self as embodied, performative and intersubjective' (Jones, 1998, p. 39). The embodiment of the self and of space is fundamental to the understanding of these artists' oeuvre.

The works that will be analysed evoke feelings of constraint, repression and torment. There is a recurrent presence of cages and prison-like environments, as in Woodman's ghostly rooms, or Horn's restrictive straps and harnesses. These artists reflect on the effects that these cage-like, threatening environments have on people and find different ways of coping with and expressing the anxiety they feel. Moreover, these repressive environments stem from the imprisoned and repressed minds of the subjects. Therefore, trauma, psychology and emotions become intertwined with space and the physical body, and this intimate relationship is expressed through movement and body language. The kinetic aspect of their work can be seen in Woodman's long-exposure photographs with blurry female figures that blend with the walls and through Horn's mechanical and convulsive movements in space.

The ubiquitous presence of the female body throughout their oeuvre becomes vital to its understanding. There is a deep and complex relationship between the female body and female identity and the boundaries between self, body and space are constantly trespassed. In many of their works, the female body is presented as a fragmented, tormented and wounded body, which corresponds with

Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject. To her, the abject is considered a place where 'the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and [where] even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 141). Abjection is related to notions of horror, sickness, and madness, all of which are present in the works of these artists. Among the mental illnesses linked to the female gender, hysteria was known to be the 'female disease' par excellence, the female 'being as ill-being' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 140). Theorists like Kristeva and Hélène Cixous 'celebrated the hysteric's tics and silences as a radical gesture, a feminine language outside patriarchy', whereas Elaine Showalter argued that 'to label women's writing "hysterical" is to denigrate it as art' (Kennedy, 2012, p. 241) (Showalter, 1993, p. 33). In the cases presently analysed, hysteria, in the form of spectral visions and convulsionary movements is seen as a form of release and rebellion, but also as a form of repression and entrapment.

There is yet another element that must be taken into consideration: the link between the biographies of the artists and their oeuvre. Although it is possible to read the artworks without considering the artists' background, in these cases, biographies are valuable sources of information. The connections between the artists' physiological and/or psychological illnesses and the expressiveness of their works establish even richer narratives and meanings. The biographical components impregnate each of their works, which can be interpreted as self-portraits, even though they may not be presented as such. They are self-portraits in that they 'reveal intimate aspects of [their] physical and psychological being to us;' they are rooted in their own experiences (Chadwick, 1998, p. 157). On the one hand, Woodman's melancholic tendency which culminated in her suicide at the age of twenty-two can be read throughout her photographic work. On the other hand, Horn's lung disease, her long stay in a sanatorium, and her isolation from the world translate to her cage-like works which create images of confinement (Sleeman, Kent, Rawes, Dezeuze, 2007). In relation to this, the following question arises: are these works healing and protective or do they reinforce this sense of isolation, illness and imprisonment?

To delve into these complex issues, these artists employ surrealist techniques of doubling and fragmenting, and explore the limits of the human body and mind in extreme situations. As Whitney Chadwick indicates, 'many current images of the body as unfamiliar, uncanny, grotesque, unbounded, transitional, etc. owe much to Surrealism's collapse of interior and exterior reality,' and such images are recurrent among these artists' work (Chadwick, 1998, p. 15). This unfamiliarity can be related to Sigmund Freud's notion of *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny, which will be analysed throughout this

article.² As can be seen, their work emphasises the interrelations between different disciplines (psychoanalysis, philosophy, art history, literary theory, and feminism), all of which must be taken into consideration.

Francesca Woodman (1958-1981): Rooms of Hysteria

Woodman's photographic images adopt the features that Freud identifies as indicative of a hysterical text: 'symbolism, ambiguity, and overdetermination; interruption and disjunction; condensation and displacement; repetition; [...] with rapidly shifting, overlapping layers of memories and dreams' (Kennedy, 2012, p. 254). In Woodman's long-exposure photographs, one sees fragmented, blurry and dynamic bodies which merge with the setting, the torn wallpaper or the floor. Layers of memories, of different moments overlap in one photographic instant, making movement and fragmentation visible in one single photograph. Despite the static quality of the photographic medium, Woodman manages to instill movement into the images. Chadwick also mentions this 'hysterical' blurring of the limits between body and architecture, arguing that there is a 'lack of distinction between inner self and outer reality' (Chadwick, 1998, p. 158). As the artist herself stated, 'I am interested in the way people relate to space [...] The best way to do this is to depict their interactions to the boundaries of these spaces' (Francesca Woodman in Conley, 2013, p. 152). Woodman's work depicts 'the body and the psyche in relation to time, space, and movement' (Kathryn Hixon in Lux, 1992, p. 31). In this regard, we see female figures crawling around the floor, recoiling in a corner of a room, tearing the wallpaper and moving spastically, which can remind one of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's well-known short story 'The Yellow Wall-Paper'.³

Woodman's images can be interpreted as self-portraits that portray her unstable and melancholic mind. Through the nudity of her female models (usually herself), we are cast in the role of voyeurs, spying into domestic spaces with decayed interiors that evoke abandoned and haunted houses.⁴ It seems that the destroyed and empty rooms mirror the instability and fragmentation of her own tormented self. In Woodman's work, 'bodies and body parts swell, mutate, dissolve, double, and decompose before our eyes as the body registers cultural, as well as personal fears and anxieties'

²For an elaborated account regarding this subject, see: FREUD, Sigmund (1976), 'The Uncanny', *New Literary History*, 7:3, pp. 619-645.

³See: GILMAN, Charlotte Perkins (1892), 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', *New England Magazine*, pp. 647-656, (pp. 654-656).

⁴For an elaborated account regarding the topic of the spectator's gaze, see: RICHES, Harriet (2004), 'A Disappearing Act: Francesca Woodman's Portrait of a Reputation,' *Oxford Art Journal*, 27:1, pp. 97-113.

(Chadwick, 1998, p. 14). Once again, this leads us to Kristeva's notions of the abject, 'an embrace of the unbounded, permeable body that leaks and dissolves,' an embrace of the monstrous and ghostly body, a body that elicits horror (Chadwick, 1998, p. 20). Woodman explores the female body as an in-between space, between movement and stillness, 'between exposure and disguise', 'between an assertion and a corresponding denial of self' (Chadwick, 1998, p. 158). This tension is also seen in the way she constructs space. The rooms she creates have healing and cathartic qualities but are also threatening and uncanny sites where the limits between life and death are blurred.

In Woodman's photographs, the theme of the spectral, which can be observed through the vanishing images of herself, can be related to the experience of the uncanny (Bronfen, 2010, p. 7). Woodman constructs uncanny atmospheres, 'capturing the inexplicable way that familiar places can seem haunted,' making the familiar unfamiliar and strange (Conley, 2013, p. 153). In this regard, Abigail Solomon Godeau argues that 'the woman's body is physically devoured by the house', turning the domestic into a threatening place that imprisons and consumes (Abigail Solomon Godeau in Bronfen, 2010, p. 12).

The uncertainty, dynamism and constant metamorphosis of the body reject the notion of the fixed body/self in relation to space. In Woodman's images there is a tangible link between the convulsive movements and the blurring of boundaries between self and outer world. This too can be related to Freud's theories, according to which the ego was originally inseparable from the external world, but then 'the boundary lines between ego and outer world become uncertain' (Freud, 1946, p. 11). In relation to this idea, Chadwick explains that the distinction between the self and the world 'remains dynamic [...] through the mechanisms of projection and introjection' and that 'in psychosis, these boundaries disintegrate' (Chadwick, 1998, p. 159). This psychotic element permeates Woodman's construction (or destruction) of spaces and bodies.

The photographic series called *House* and *Space2* (1975-76), shot in Providence, Rhode Island (USA), and *Self-Deceit* (1977-78), taken in Rome (Italy) are the most representative of these notions. They convey the feelings of 'entrapment, engulfment, or absorption,' as well as feelings of deep melancholia and suffering, reflecting Woodman's inner experience (Abigail Solomon-Godeau in Chadwick, 1998, p. 169). The female figures seem to emerge from and vanish into the walls; as Katherine Conly argues, 'the body could *be* the house, or could be escaping *from* the house' (Conley, 2013, p. 155). The overall aspect of ghostliness of these photographs is accomplished, to use

Woodman's words, by creating 'ghost pictures, people fading into a flat place,' a prison-like place from which the figures cannot escape (Francesca Woodman in Conley, 2013, p. 152). In this way, she manages to create a spectral series of self-portraits of herself.

Rebecca Horn (born 1944): Entrapping Performances

Horn's oeuvre also presents these common themes of entrapment, the uncanny and the blurring of boundaries. The masks and prosthesis Horn employs allow her to embody the space around her and create kinetic, spatial and psychological performances. Throughout her work she manages to intertwine movement, space and body. Her spatial performances are read phenomenologically, since Horn experiences space through her body and explores her body through space. One notices surrealist, robotic and erotic undertones which are presented in relation to the female body. She thus creates living body sculptures, automata that combine human and mechanical movements.

On the one hand, the use of body extensions, masks and prosthesis allows Horn to project herself onto space, augmenting her bodily possibilities and extending her reach. On the other hand, those prosthetic elements restrict and inhibit any movement or action, so they become objects of confinement, captivity and restraint, as well. This creates threatening and violent environments that evoke BDSM scenes. In Madeline Schwartzman's words, 'though the performer remains intact, the prosthetic acts upon the body by binding it, centring it, or hindering motion even as they facilitate a new motion' (Schwartzman, 2011, p. 45).

This article centres on her works made in the early 1970s. One cannot avoid establishing links between her biography at that time and her work. She suffered from lung-poisoning and had to remain isolated in a sanatorium for almost a year, which is why these early works seem 'at once nurturing and toxic, peaceful and foreboding, liberating and torturous' (Schwartzman, 2011, p. 45). Throughout her life, she became used to solitude. The artist herself recalls her time in the sanatorium as being 'completely cut off from the outside world, no one was allowed to visit me, [...] isolated like that in a room, unable to escape my own nightmares' (Rebecca Horn in Zweite, 2005, p. 189). Consequently, this permeates her work; as she states, 'all of my early performances came out of my experiences at this time' (Rebecca Horn in Krens, 1993, p. 15).

Horn also stated, ‘looking back at my first pieces you always see a kind of cocoon, which I used to protect myself’ (Rebecca Horn in Krens, 1993, p. 16). This twofold notion of protection and restriction, which has been analysed in relation to Woodman’s work, becomes reworked in Horn’s art practices. In these artworks, ‘the body is held together with bandages and corsets that make it look like a chained captive, assuming a grotesque appearance through its disproportionately large prostheses, and a disability that clearly betrays a traumatic past’ (Zweite, 2005, p. 14). Horn reaches for intimacy, contact and communication, but remains distant. In *Paradise Widow* (1975), for instance, a female figure is trapped in ‘her own feathered prison, in her second skin,’ in a claustrophobic cocoon (Rebecca Horn in Krens, 1993, p. 17).⁵ Referring to this work, Horn declared, ‘I am completely terrified when I wake up and perceive that black monster’ (Rebecca Horn in Krens, 1993, p. 71). This cocoon caresses and imprisons the female body, which stands in-between and can be either exposed or concealed. There is also an erotic and fetishist undertone in her oeuvre, which seems to be about seeing and being seen, touching and being touched.

In the case of *Finger Gloves* (1972), which consists of insect-like prosthetic extenders that allow the wearer to extend her reach into space, but deny the intimacy of human touch, Horn builds a human sculpture that embodies space. In *Pencil Mask* (1972), in turn, Horn created a grid of black straps with two-inch pencils attached to her face that produced, to use her own words, ‘the profile of [her] face in three dimensions’ (Rebecca Horn in Lomas, 2012, p. 33). In this work, Horn swung her head convulsively from left to right in front of a white wall leaving traces of the pencils corresponding ‘to the rhythm of [her] movements’ (Rebecca Horn in Lomas, 2012, p. 33). This drawing mask had a double-purpose: ‘binding the head and liberating it into its tool-like capacity’ (Schwartzman, 2011, p. 45). Both the mask sculpture and the pencil traces she left behind can be considered physical and psychological self-portraits, dynamic shadows of herself.

Regarding the construction of space, Horn considers rooms as places that are read and constructed as bodies; they are gendered spaces: ‘the walls have, or rather are, anatomical textures. They are somatic divides, layers of skin’ (Giuliana Bruno in Krens, 1993, pp. 81-82). Considering these subjective, corporeal and psychological spaces, Horn writes about the enclosing and isolating walls of a room, which she considers ‘a cage: one in which you could perform the most extreme forms of actions-inspiring you to the highest expressivity of power and isolation’ (Rebecca Horn in Krens,

⁵ In her text accompanying *Paradise Widow*, Horn refers to this work as a ‘million-legged thorny monster.’ See: Horn in Krens, 1993, p. 125.

1993, p. 134). Images of cages permeate throughout her oeuvre: in her writings, her pencil traces, her drawings and her performances, mirroring her feelings, her memories and her life experiences.

Conclusion

These two artists seem to work across disciplines: their work can be read as a text, an image and an action/process. Horn once stated, 'drawings stimulate texts, the texts evolve into film scenes' (Rebecca Horn in Zweite, 2005, p. 191). From her early career until the present day, Horn's work has been multifaceted: from performative or filmic work, to drawings, to a series of poems. Woodman's photographic series, in turn, have a performative quality and are described as 'narrative sequences, in which images function as words' (Conley, 2013, p. 153). All in all, their works are cross-disciplinary and include spatial, literary and psychological references.

Overall, despite their geographical and disciplinary differences, Woodman and Horn have more in common than one would think. Firstly, their work is embedded in the long-established surrealist imaginary: they use doubling/fragmenting techniques and represent horrifying/uncanny/grotesque spaces and subjects. These phantasmagorical spaces lead us to the second element in common: the construction of psychological settings, haunted rooms where architecture and bodies merge, where the boundaries between self and world are blurred. In the work of these artists, rooms and bodies are presented as in-between spaces that are in constant change. This kinetic aspect is highlighted throughout, movement becoming a fundamental aspect of their work. Furthermore, the environments and spaces they create are protective and healing, but also threatening and restrictive, like prisons. These cage-like spaces are projections of their own anxieties, of their inner beings. This healing and imprisoning quality of their work, this twofold reading is what makes their oeuvre so intriguing, so rich in meaning. This in-betweenness, this multi-layeredness allows us to connect their works and highlight their relevance even in today's context.

Finally, the idea of self-portraiture becomes vital when analysing their work, given the strong links between the artists' biographies and their oeuvre. The female body, as a site of distress and release, becomes central to their work. Their works explore the world through bodily interactions, making sense of it through their bodies: the spectral body of Woodman's vanishing figures and the bandaged and corseted body of Horn's kinetic prosthetic sculptures. By delving into these bodies, we enter the space they inhabit and their interior maps. Woodman and Horn thus create subjective ways

of being, thinking, inhabiting and perceiving. Ultimately, their works establish dynamic interconnections between self and world, self and other, self and body.

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