

# Refusing the Gaze: The Comparison Between Francesca Woodman and Cindy Sherman's Photographic Strategies During the 1970s–1980s

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This essay focuses on two female photographers in contemporary period, Cindy Sherman and Francesca Woodman in the 1970s–1980s and will do a comparing study of the visual strategies of their photographs. Though this comparison, the essay argues that both of them used a number of visual languages to represent their bodies in order to refuse male gaze. Simultaneously, their works reversed the masculine culture with a series of strategies such as a juxtaposition of subject and object, showing the absence of subject and exploring the space construction. Their photographs used women's bodies as metaphors or cultural icons to express women's anxiety or confusion of their social roles, as well as their struggle for social identity.

*Keywords:* subject, object, feminism, Francesca Woodman, Cindy Sherman

## Introduction

Classical artworks frequently display women's bodies according to male gaze. This situation did not change until the feminist movements in the 1970s. Simone de Beauvoir published her book, *The Second Sex*, which became a manifesto and main theoretical source of the feminist movement in the 1960s–1970s. As Beauvoir said, woman sees herself and makes her choices in accordance with man's definition of her, and her body is made a passive object of man's possession (Grosenick, 2005, p. 34). Under the influence of *The Second Sex* and other related feminist theories, a number of female artists used their bodies as a medium in their creative process. In performance art some of the feminist artists hurt their bodies and then took photographs. They believed that their actions could demonstrate women's harm by male gaze. These artists, on one hand, criticized the authority of male discursive power; on the other hand, they argued for women's social rights.

This essay focuses on two female photographers in the 1970s—Francesca Woodman and Cindy Sherman. Both of them used their own bodies as an artistic medium. Although they photographed their own bodies in different ways, both of them showed their refusing attitudes towards male gaze. In order to make comparison and contrast between the two photographers, I will focus on three topics, which are “Subject and Object”, “Absence of Subject”, and “Space Construction”. Thus, through analyzing and comparing their different visual metaphors, the author will do a series of visual analysis to reinterpret their works. The author attempts to answer three

questions: What did their works look like? As female artists, how did their visual metaphors refuse male gaze and what did their artistic strategies imply? And how did they construct these visual metaphors in feminist context?

### **Subject and Object**

In the 1970s, feminist movements aroused women's self-awareness. A great number of women wanted to project their independent identities into social and public activities. More and more artists portrayed the human body or used their own bodies as their art strategies. In feminist artistic practice, body was often used as a malleable image, an idea, an issue, or an artistic medium to display women's arguments. They claimed that: "women could become makers of meaning as opposed to being bearers of man's meaning" (Grosenick, 2005, p. 34). Cindy Sherman and Francesca Woodman were active during this period. They frequently used their bodies as a medium to create artworks. Their works shared some common features, and differed in visual strategies.

They posed themselves as their own models when they were taking pictures. This juxtaposition of the object (the model) and the subject (the photographer) can be easily found in both of their works. However, this juxtaposition leads to a paradox. According to Mary Kelly, this paradox exposes feminist dilemma. The woman who is an artist sees her experience in terms of the feminine position, which is as object of the look, while she must also display the feeling she experiences as an artist as subject occupying the masculine position. How to negotiate this fundamental contradiction? Mary Kelly suggests focusing on ways of either re-picturing or refusing the literal figuration of the woman's body (Kelly, 1996, pp. 123-129). Therefore, in both of Woodman and Sherman's works, we can see that they refuse literal figuration of their bodies by their subject absence.

### **Absence of Subject**

Woodman's methodology to create a sense of subject absence can be divided into three aspects. The first one is her body's movement before the lens with the long time exposure. Woodman creates a blurred image of the subject contrast to the clearness of the surroundings. This working method is shown in her work *Space<sup>2</sup>* (Providence, Rhode Island, 1976) and *From Angel Series* (Rome, 1977). She undertakes a performance for the camera by adopting a variety of gestures, such as kneeling, skipping, stepping, and jumping. All of these movements are blurred by Woodman's long time exposure (Townsend, 2006, p. 48). These blurred and obscured images of her body showed her indetermination of her subjectivity, so it could be interpreted as a sense of subject absence. Woodman's second strategy involved covering or hiding her body. In the work, *From Angel Series*, created in 1977, Woodman hid her body under the wallpaper in her studio to leave only one of her arms, two feet, and her belly outside. These fragments of her body symbolize her absence. Woodman's third way of creating absence is using mirror. The use of mirror in classical paintings was extensively themed in her works. According to Leo Steinberg, the old masters painted mirrors in their paintings in order to represent the real world in full scale from the mirrors (Steinberg, 1972). Using mirror in the painting overcomes the limitation of two dimensions and creates a three dimensional perspective. influenced by the traditional painting method, Clementina Lady Howarden, who was one of the best female photographers in the 19th century, usually posed her models in front of mirrors (Armstrong, 2000, pp. 101-139). Both the classical paintings and Howarden's Victorian style photographs showed the subject presence, as the spectators could see their subject of their images entirely through the full-scale perspective created by the mirrors.

However, woodman's usage of mirrors is different from the former. Neither the subject in the images nor the subject in the mirrors is complete. That means she attempted to represent reality, but she could not represent it entirely. In fact, Woodman was influenced by the French psychoanalyst and thinker Jacques Lacan. The Lacanian idea of identity originated from his essay *The Mirror Stage* (Wright, 2002). It was constructed in the non-relation between the subject's misconstrued perceptions of its own autonomy. This idea was vital to a number of artists in the 1970s (Townsend, 2006, p. 54). According to Lacan, one signifier can only signify another signifier rather than signify the signified. If we see Woodman's body as one signifier and her body in the mirror as the other signifier, we could see that Woodman created a path from one signifier to the other with mirrors. However, these signifiers cannot signify the signified which is the subject. Consequently, she used Lacanian theory to create her subject absence. Her works could be understood as a linguistic construction of femininity.

In contrast to Woodman, Cindy Sherman presents her subject absence by camouflaging herself in different roles of women in society, and appropriating the images in the mass culture. She staged herself as Hollywood film stars, Renaissance figures, even different kinds of clowns, and then photographed herself in a wide range of costumes (Sherman, 1997, p. 3). Her photographs poses hinted at the influence of the mass media and kitschy culture. In the work, *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman posed herself in different roles and photographed herself in various scenes, such as streets, yards, pools, beaches, and interiors. These scenes are from the Italian neorealist or American film of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (Sherman, 1997, p. 4). Sherman appropriated these senses to challenge the originality of art, and simultaneously, question the subjectivity of artistic creation. Seeing these pictures, viewers cannot get access to Sherman herself. Instead, these roles can lead viewers to think about their own situation, because each of the female roles was a metaphor of different spectators. These photographs raise critical and certain essential questions about the role and identities of women in society.

### **Space Construction**

Both Sherman and Woodman created their subject absence. This absence enables us to reconsider the space in their photographs. Therefore, the questions, how did they construct their spatial order in their photographs and how did these spatial orders refuse male gaze, should be discussed further. In the modern society, space is not only physical, but also social, ideological, and cultural. People's identities could be classified by the space of our existence. Griselda Pollock, in her essay, *Modernity and the Space of Femininity*, classified the bourgeois' social space into public space and domestic space. The former is men's, and the later belongs to women (Pollock, 2007, pp. 56-62). In the 19th century, a number of female impressionists began to classify these two spaces in their artworks by setting a series of "spatial devices", such as Berthe Morisot's juxtaposition on a single canvas of two spatial systems or at least two compartments of space (Pollock, 2007, p. 62).

Under the influence of philosophical theories in the 1970s, such as phenomenology and Gestalt psychology, a number of artists began to explore the space in their artistic creation. Woodman's photographs can also be classified into the genre of Post-Minimalism, who could be seen as the main practitioners of the former theories, because both Post-Minimalist and Woodman emphasized the process and temporality of body's experience (Townsend, 2006, p. 45). The minimalist artist, Robert Morris, put forward the notion of "field" in his essay *Notes on the Sculpture*. Morris mentioned when the viewers see a minimalist artwork, they are not viewing it, but feeling it with their bodies (Morris, 2001, pp. 275-287). According to Michael Fried, this body experience is

called “theatricality” (Fried, 1998). Woodman added the notion of time in her artistic creation, by posing herself with gestures of moving her body. In this way, spectators can feel a sense of theatricality. In her work, *Untitled*, created during 1975–1978 in Rhoad Island, Woodman set a series of blurred images to show the temporality and process. At the same time, she drew crude rectangles to reintroduce depth to the flatness (Townsend, 2006, p. 44). The sense of space created a distance between spectators and images. And thus, this distance also impeded the spectators’ gaze (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, 1975–1978, Rhoad Island.

Cindy Sherman, on the other hand, constructed her spatial order in another way. In the *Untitled Film Stills* and *Rear Screen Projections*, Sherman photographed a group of women. All of these women were focusing on something or somebody outside of the frame. In other words, these women had no eye contact with the spectators. Regis Durand commented that this situation creates a tension of our perception of our status as spectators of a scene that does not concern us (Burton, 2006, p. 246). The figures in Sherman’s photography contain a sense of absence because they do not look at the camera in the usual way when they are photographed. Rather, their gaze seems to be directed towards an indeterminate distance outside the frame (Grosenick, 2005, p. 376). In this way, Sherman created an open-ended spatial distance between the subject and spectators. She dismantled spectators’ conventional gaze on a woman’s body in an artwork. Her works have become unique iconographic metaphors (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Stills*, 1981.

### Conclusion

In summary, this essay focuses on Sherman and Woodman's visual strategies. Both used a number of visual languages to represent their bodies and to refuse male gaze, and simultaneously, they reversed the masculine culture with these strategies. Their works reflected and enforced women's appeals of their social place and power. As Solomon-Godeau commented:

Over the past thirty years or so, the deceptively simple notion of self-representation has come to figure prominently in a broad range of contemporary debates within politics (particularly identity politics), philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, social science and cultural production, the breadth of these debates is at least partly due to the recognition that any consideration of self-representation must at some point also address the prior question of how to think about the nature and terms of the individual self. (Godeau, 2007, pp. 337-345)

Solomon's opinion was embraced by the feminists. The feminist artists represented female bodies to relocate the bodies in political, socio-ideological, cultural, and historical contexts to answer the critical question: how do social systems shape women's roles? The photographs of both Woodman and Sherman used women's bodies as metaphors or cultural icons to express women's anxiety or confusion of their social roles, as well as their struggle for social identity.

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