

Acephala, Acephala!

Headless Figure in Francesca Woodman's Work

Monika Kędziora*

Acéfala, Acéfala. La figura sin cabeza en la obra de Francesca Woodman.

Abstract

The aim of the article is to demonstrate one of the most characteristic and at the same time most overlooked qualities of Francesca Woodman's photographs – decapitation, or more specifically auto-decapitation of picture's subject. The act of beheading by the picture frame cannot be interpreted as a technical aspect or as the artist's lack of control over the shooting process. Neither should it be comprehended as a project of anti-biography. A more convincing interpretation can be founded on the association of Woodman's work with such surrealist dissidents as Michel Leiris, André Masson, and Georges Bataille. The act of auto-decapitation for Leiris is obligatory in order to address oneself since one is never able to see him- or herself fully. For Bataille decapitation represents the human revolt against one's form, viewed as an act of liberation. Woodman initiates the inter-textual play with the figure of the *Acephalé* (headless) known from the surrealists' writings and art (Masson). She perpetuates the revolutionary message while modifying it by implementing the female body. But the result is opposite to the straightforward critique of women's decapitation as an act of men's oppression. Woodman's *Acephala* break up with conventional representation and uses of the body – in this way her art becomes familiar with affirmative reflections on the hysterical body by authors including Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva.

Keywords

Francesca Woodman, *Acephala*, Georges Bataille, Hélène Cixous, Feminism

Resumen

El propósito del artículo es demostrar un aspecto poco estudiado de las fotografías de Francesca Woodman –la decapitación, o más específicamente la autodecapitación del modelo en sus fotografías-. El acto de cortar la cabeza en cada disparo no puede ser interpretado desde un punto de vista técnico o de carencias en el control artístico durante el proceso de las tomas. Tampoco este aspecto debería ser analizado desde la perspectiva de un proyecto autobiográfico. Más convincente resulta la interpretación que asocia su trabajo con autores surrealistas disidentes como Michel Leiris, André Masson y Georges Bataille. El acto de autodecapitación realizado por Leiris se dirige hacia sí mismo dado que uno no puede verse completamente a sí mismo. Para Bataille la decapitación representa la revuelta de lo humano contra sí mismo, entendido como un acto de liberación. Woodman inicia su juego inter-textual con la figura de *Acephalé* (sin cabeza) conocida desde los escritos y el arte surrealistas (Masson). Francesca continúa este mensaje revolucionario modificándolo de alguna manera al implementarlo en un cuerpo femenino. Sin embargo, el resultado es contrario a la crítica que refiere la decapitación de las mujeres como un acto de opresión masculina. La *Acéfala* de Woodman señala los beneficios de la decapitación: rompe con la representación convencional y habla a través del uso del cuerpo –en este sentido su obra tiene relaciones con el concepto de cuerpo histérico que han aportado autoras como Hélène Cixous y Julia Kristeva.

Palabras Clave

Francesca Woodman, *acephala*, Georges Bataille, Hélène Cixous, feminismo

Acephala, Acephala! Headless Figure in Francesca Woodman's Work¹



“One striking fact was common to nearly all the photographs: the body seemed associated with no face. Either the face was blurred in motion while the body stood or lay still, or the body was beheaded by the frame, or, most often, the head twisted away from the camera as though allowing the image to take form behind its back” (Davidson, 2000). With the above words, Peter Davidson points at one of the most characteristic and at the same time disturbing features of Francesca Woodman’s oeuvre. Nonetheless, similar to a handful of other scholars, who have made a similar observation, his argument, after a few brief opening remarks, comes to an end. The recurring decapitation of a subject constitutes something dismaying to the extent that it cannot be rationally explained, and as a result, becomes rashly reduced to a simple constatation of the artist’s lack of control over the framing. The idea that Woodman is incapable of controlling the technical aspects of making photographs becomes undermined by an almost obsessive replication of the act of cutting off the head. Decapitation or even auto-decapitation is undoubtedly a purposeful activity.

The absence never amounts to nothingness. Quite the opposite, it constitutes a strongly distinguishable semantic area in which the definition can only be made by creating juxtaposition with its ontological opposite. The creation of such juxtaposition predominantly involves a strict hierarchization of opposites². The condition of absence is seen as inferior, as a form of degeneration which implies loss, derivation, and a step backwards from the original or natural state. It hardly goes unnoticed since the absence produces a longing for fullness.

A question then arises, namely, what purpose does lie behind an obstinate auto-decapitative practice in Woodman’s works. Harriet Riches suggests that this awkward mark on her photographs enables to refute the claims of those who interpret her work solely through autobiography, because “Woodman’s project of self-representation is habitually subverted by her attempt to evade photographic capture” (Riches, 2004, p. 97). Undoubtedly, the act of blurring or removing essential parts of the depicted subject

indicates Woodman's doubtful attitude to the status of self-representation. On the other hand, I would be cautious in overestimating the claim that lies in opposition to autobiographical understanding. This potential precaution stems from an association with the writings dedicated to the act of decapitation by some of the surrealist authors, including Michel Leiris or Georges Bataille, whom Woodman could have read in the Libreria Maldoror during her stay in Roma. For Michel Leiris, for example, the very practice of producing an autobiography is linked to losing one's head. Denis Hollier explains Leiris' idea as follows: "an autobiography produces the same effect as Judith – it detaches the head from the body, distances from himself the one who undertakes to represent himself" (Hollier, 1997, p. 109). Leiris, by invoking a biblical story, identifies himself with Holofernes; Woodman does something even more interesting and altogether confusing. On the photo *i could no longer play...* (1977) she invokes the same story, but does not opt for any of the sides. Instead, by framing herself with a knife and without a head she links both Old Testament characters together. By combining the one who beheads with the one beheaded, she personifies Judith and Holofernes all at the same time. The blade of knife held in her hand is eventually pointed against herself.



The act of decapitation according to Leiris, is inherently tied to the process of speaking about oneself. As one could never apprehend oneself in totality, what he or she gets is no more than dispersed fragments. In an attempt to look at oneself the autobiographer must take a third-person stance, performing at the same time personal auto-fragmentation (Hollier, 2007, pp. 59-63). Mieke Bal points out that while constantly using the first-person form, Woodman never actually employs it in a full meaning of "I" (Bal, 2009, p. 116). In fact, even in her diaries, she uses both "I" but also "Francesca", jumping from the internal to the external notions of herself. On *i could no longer play...* she seems to combine both of these subjective pronouns together. Looking from within she attempts to see through. It is not an easy situation, as the photo's commentary illuminates; pointing towards some kind of creative uneasiness she writes: "I could no longer play i could not play by instinct". At the same time however, this work suggests a solution – to deprive oneself of a head. The head, understood as a centre of thoughts and location of reason, stands against instinctive drives. Giving away of one's head therefore, and taking the side of body instead, can be seen as a solution towards resolving the state of creative impasse, as a way to liberation.

The rebellious character of auto-decapitation was also indicated by Georges Bataille, who viewed the figure of Acephalus (gr aképhalos <a - without + kephalē –

head>) as a personification of freedom and transgression from the rigid and externally imposed norms. In his essay on architecture, he provides a telling association between the human form and the prison. According to Hollier:

(...) man's revolt against the prison is a rebellion against his own form, against the human figure. And this is precisely what, in Bataille's view, the mythical figure of Acepheus was intended to show: the only way for man to escape the architectural chain gang was to escape his form, to lose his head. (1992, p. xii).

Rejecting such artificial architectural constructs like the prison constituted an important part of Francesca Woodman's project. She attempted to tackle the breaking down of form at multiple occasions; in fact, the prerequisites towards such an interpretation can be found in almost all of her works.

Woodman, on a series of thumbnails showing her dancing (Untitled, 1976), conducted minor yet telling manipulations -attempts to inscribe the subject into pen-drawn geometrical figures, such as: rectangles, rhombuses, pentagons, or squares. In each case, however, it becomes evident that the complete inscription of a body into the geometrical figure remains unfeasible- the subject escapes formalization.

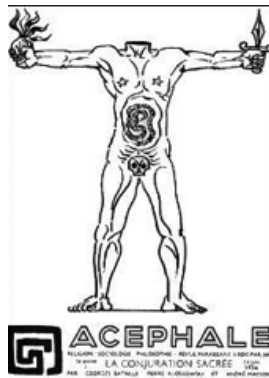


A similar issue is undertaken in Woodman's book *Some disordered interior geometries* (1980-81). Here, using as a background the pages from an old geometry notebook *Esergizi Gradvati de Geometria. Corso Primo*, discovered in the *Libreria Maldoror*, Woodman places her photos against the old graphs and sketches (Janus, 1998, p. 28). On the subsequent pages of the book, she tries to find a correspondence between the clear and straightforward language of geometry and the structure of the world with its place and capacity dedicated to the subject. So, for example, the figure of the rhombus is represented by a mirror lying on the floor seen at an angle. Two squares, one inscribed into the other (colour-marked by the artist), become illustrated with the help of a wall-hanged blanket whose outline corresponds to the zoomed out picture frame. The analogy for the pentagon was found in framing the room's angle from a bird's eye perspective.

Despite the willingness to uncover the correlations and hidden measurements of the universe, it ultimately turns out that the world forever escapes rational formalization. In this project, Woodman engages herself in "aggression towards this exactitude of spatial structure and scientific description" (Townsend, 2006, p. 52). As the handmade

comments to the altered photographs suggest, the ideal geometrical forms do not subdue the chaos of reality; on two pages dedicated to the figure of the square Woodman merely notes: "almost a square". Geometrical figures exist only in the realm of abstraction and cannot be transplanted onto the concrete subjects. In her early essay "Problem sets" (1986), Rosalind Krauss noticed one of the most crucial and characteristic features of Woodman's works - her attempt to confront the challenges created by the abstract aspects of photographic language, like verticality, horizontality, luminosity, through the individual bodily experience; to name this practise, Krauss coined a phrase "subjectification of the objective language" (2000, p. 162) that is ultimately founded upon breaking with the pervasiveness of cognitive concepts. Two similar photographs placed inside the book *Some disordered interior geometries*, the one opening the series and the one closing it, both depict a woman beheaded by the picture's frame, or what is more revealing, by the artist's purposeful act, since the very same photos appearing in other contexts depict full human figures. The head-depriving of these two figures at the beginning and end of a book that deals ostensibly with geometry refers us again to Bataille.

The Acephalus was a recurring motive in Bataille. He even established a secret society and periodical under that very name. The first issue of the *Acephalé* magazine was published July 24th 1936 with a drawing by André Masson on the cover; Georges Bataille's caption underneath read: "Man will escape his head as a convict will escape his prison" (Hollier, 1992, p. xii). Masson's drawing precisely corresponds to Bataille's statement. It shows a male figure standing astride evoking Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (1490). Just as for Bataille/Masson, also for Leonardo the form of the human body retains a close relation to architecture; Masson's drawing even illustrated Vitruvius's treatise titled *On Architecture*. Nonetheless, there is a telling difference between the former and the latter accounts. For da Vinci this relation is an expression of a perfect human body, for Bataille/Masson it is an epitome of prison. The main differences between Masson's graphics and Leonardo's drawing are as follows: in the former, the figure is missing his head, there is an outline of intestines, and the genitals are veiled with a skull. These changes are not secondary as they undermine the fundamental conception of the Vitruvian Man. They disclose the limitations caused by the workings of form, and at the same time, reveal the hidden interiority of the human body that normally escapes representation. Implemented alterations also indicate that human body is not asexual, and finally, with a skull hiding the genitals, sexuality gains a quality of obscurity and gloom.



Woodman performs a kind of intertextual game with Masson's work. Her photo (Untitled, 1976) shows a woman, or more precisely only her trunk, with a womb being veiled by a plaster mask. It is to some extent a re-make of Masson's *Acephalé* but with a few significant changes: in Woodman's photo the body is feminine and the skull is replaced by a mask. As it was already shown by Masson, *Acephalus* is not a hermaphroditic figure, and a consequent decapitation, which is an allegory of transgression of, and liberation from, form, implies a sexualisation of the human being.



Francesca Woodman in fact uses not the figure of *Acephalus* but rather *Acephala* (my alteration of the word follows the grammatical rules of Latin, where the suffix -a points to the feminine gender). *Acephala* literally means a 'woman without a head'. The phrase - 'woman without a head' - evokes a recurring association with the feminist deconstruction of neutral linguistic forms in which there is a dualistic split between the male's realm of the mind and the female's realm of the body. For Woodman, therefore, *Acephala* personifies a woman who opposes the artificiality of a form in which she is enclosed. Furthermore, the mask veiling the womb on the aforementioned photo hides sexuality and conceals femininity (of course the breasts mark the body as that of a female, but the woman's genitals are kept out of view; as a feminine semiotic realm, in contrast to male phallus, it is deprived of symbolising ability). Masking femininity suggests that there is a degree of intricacy in representing femininity, to use Julia Kristeva's words: "(i)n woman I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies" (Ives, 2007, p. 61).

Looking at Woodman's works, one can observe that the process of representation is equally drawn into transgression. *Acephala* resists entanglement in the bonds of formal manacles and entrapment by the image. Painting or photography are not capable of representing her since representation is limited to portraying the essence of a subject only from a restricted point of view, e.g. the camera lens. Between the two opposite perspectives, the mind and the body, Woodman chooses the latter. Photography in such understanding ceases to be exclusively ocularcentric and becomes an area of possible reunion of the body with its trace. It facilitates the body to write with meanings emanating from the body itself, not from the mind.

In her text *Castration or Decapitation* (1981), Hélène Cixous tries to demonstrate that the idea, employed by Sigmund Freud and developed by his intellectual successors (among others Jacques Lacan), of an assumed castration fear, in fact, does not apply to women's fears. Employing irony, Cixous (1981) explains:



What psychoanalysis recognizes as defining woman is that she lacks lack. She lacks lack? Curious to put it in so contradictory, so extremely paradoxical, a manner: she lacks lack. To say she lacks lack is also, after all, to say she doesn't miss lack ... since she doesn't miss the lack of lack. Yes, they say, but the point is "she lacks The Lack," The Lack, lack of the Phallus. And so, supposedly, she misses the great lack, so that without man she would be indefinite, indefinable, nonsexed, and unable to recognize herself: outside the Symbolic. (p. 46).

Woman cannot be castrated but she might be decapitated, taking the tongue away results in depriving her of the ability to speak: "Silence: silence is the mark of hysteria. They are decapitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard because it's the body that talks, and man doesn't hear the body" (Cixous, 1981, p. 49). For Woodman there is another possibility to speak, in which, the tongue is not an essential organ. Language, as Kristeva argues, stems from the body and through that body, not the head and tongue, Woodman sends her messages (Ives, 2007, pp 114-115). In all of three French feminist writers: Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray, one can find the figure of the hysteric or the harridan, who represents wildness but in a positive sense; wildness as an act of liberation from the rigid patriarchal discourse. Just as auto-decapitation, the hysterization of a subject also has a revolutionary meaning. In Woodman's work these two notions are coexistent and coalescent.

The photograph discussed above in the context of an intertextual game with Masson's drawing has multiple modified versions. Each of them shows, in a similar way, a female trunk against a drawn background with some home equipment on it (there is only one exception which shows the trunk on the background of an external wall). Moreover, the mask is replaced in some versions with, for example, laundry clips clasp the skin folds of the belly or a piece of glass framing the central area of the body. In yet another version, the artist clasps the skin folds of her belly with her fingers. I would extend the series by adding another photo from the same period, *Three kinds of melon in four kinds of light series*. Although to some extent different, it likewise uses the motive of a headless figure – but in this case the empty space of the head is filled with a title melon. Furthermore, the strategy of beheading occurs in other parts of Woodman's oeuvre, including her video works (Tejeda, 2009, p. 89). To sum up, all these activities are aimed at attracting attention towards a particular fragment or section of the body like: breast, stomach, or womb, making at the same time clear that



the process of representation can never be complete – subject's full representation is inconceivable through technical means.

Woodman constantly, almost obsessively, throughout her various works goes back to the acephalic motive, nonetheless, some elements are new; sometimes, instead of beheading the picture's subject by the frame, she decides to obscure or blur the face or the whole head. Returning to the controversies around autobiographical aspects of her works and my initial doubts about whether there is any possibility to take either of the stances, that is, either inevitably auto-biographical or completely anti-biographical and formal, I would like to conclude by saying that for me her exploitation of the *Acephala* figure serves as a tool to talk about herself. However, to be clear, this interpretation does not want to read her work in relation to her eventual suicide. Woodman uses the figure of the *Acephala* in a similar way as Bataille, Masson or Cixous did - as a figure of transgressive and hysterical liberation from the confinement of form. *Acephala* personifies the act of revolt, the brake away from the representation's prison towards the free border-spaces in which it is possible to express oneself. Expression and representation are dissimilar, whereas expression is a rebellious, performative act, representation is merely an act of putting the form into a standstill.



↑ *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976

↑ *Space 2*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976

Notas:

- 1 The text below is a part of a thesis titled: "Francesca Woodman i écriture photographique feminine" defended at University of Adam Mickiewicz, Poznań, Poland (June 2009) [Translated by Bartosz Korzeniowski].
- 2 In psychoanalytic theories the female – a subject without penis – is treated as deficient. The lack of penis institutes a hierarchization of sexes. For feminist writers, especially Irigaray, this is one of the crucial points of disagreement with Freudian and Lacanian versions of psychoanalysis. For the rejection of the primacy of the phallus and of psychoanalytic orthodoxy she was dismissed from the Department of Psychoanalysis at Vincennes (Ives, 2007, pp. 23, 88-89).

Referencias Bibliográficas:

- Bal M.** (2009). Marcel & Me: Woodman Through Proust. In I. Tejada (Ed.), *Francesca Woodman. Retrospectiva*. Murcia.
- Cixous H.** (1981). Castration or Decapitation. *Signs*, Vol. 7, No. 1.
- Davidson P.** (2000). Girl, Seeming to Disappear. *The Atlantic Monthly*. Retrieved June 15, 2009, from <http://www.theatlantic.com>
- Hollier D.** (1992). Against architecture. The writings of Georges Bataille, Cambridge
- (1997)**. *Absent without leave: French literature under the threat of war*. Harvard: University Press.
- (2007)**. Nagłówek Holofernesa (notatki o Judycie). *Konteksty*, nr 3-4, 278-279.
- Ives K.** (2007). *Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva. The Jouissance of French Feminism*. Kent.
- Janus E.** (1998). Un séjour romain. In H. Chandès (Ed.), *Francesca Woodman*. Paris and Zürich
- Krauss R.** (2000). Problem sets. In *Eadem*. London: Bachelors.
- Riches H.** (2004). A Disappearing Act: Francesca Woodman's *Portrait of a Reputation*. *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 1.
- Tejada I.** (2009). Portrait of the Artist as an Adolescent. Francesca Woodman, Strategies of the Imperceptible. In M. Pierini (Ed.), *Francesca Woodman*. Milano.
- Townsend C.** (2006). *Francesca Woodman, Scattered in Space and Time*. London and New York