



THE MARTYRDOM OF THE ANGEL'S BODY
THE FEMALE ARTIST AS NAKED SIGNIFIER

ROBERT SMART



Monika K. Adler, *On Being an Angel*, 2014, UK, Film Still

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In one of the most emblematic photos of the late photographer Francesca Woodman's photo sequence *On Being an Angel*, the model assumes a physical posture and a position in the frame suggesting that she is in flight or at least attempting to become airborne.

In her new film, *On Being an Angel*, photographer and filmmaker, Monika K. Adler recapitulates and reconfigures Woodman's iconic image as part of an intense six-minute ritualistic contemplation of Woodman's attempts to achieve artistic and psychological liberation and analogically the attempt and profound struggle of those who follow in her wake, including Adler herself. Habitual modes of thought, confining gender roles, aesthetic conventions, obscurity and the need for recognition, perhaps all of these and more are the conditions that cry out to be surmounted.

Woodman, the film's inspiration and subject, in both her life and work wrestled with melancholia, isolation, alienation and ambivalence about identity and her relationship to others.

She frequently used her own nude body (In addition to the nude bodies of other women) as simultaneously subject, object, and vehicle for self-expression in a series of images informed by Greek myth, gothic literature

and surrealism, made more effectively unsettling because of their raw immediacy of the images, at once otherworldly, minimalist and starkly concrete.

Like many female artists of the modern period Woodman's own body and experiences became the explicit subject matter of the work presented to the world. Yet, Woodman preferred to conceal or obscure the faces of her models, eschewing the overt and elaborate self-portraiture of artists such as the painter Frida Kahlo or the explicit confessional mode of someone like Anais Nin. Woodman's strategy of camouflaged candor might simultaneously be an attempt to hang on to a residue of anonymity even in the midst of profound self-exposure as well as a bid for universality by avoiding the reduction of the image to any single identifiable woman, since in the past such reductions led to the dismissal or diminution of art work by women as unimaginative or possessing insufficient intellectual abstractness.

Like Woodman, Adler's work as a still photographer frequently featured the artist as subject or protagonist. As she moved into her short film work her position as lead performer became more central, even as she also continued to feature models with their faces obscured or concealed. In contrast to Woodman's work, males are much more present in Adler's work, ambiguous and imbued with the potential for violence. Born in Poland, steeped in the region's history of invasion and subjugation and masculine authoritarianism, Adler's films are permeated with a profoundly corporeal anxiety.

Consequently, Adler's kinetic re-imagining of *On Being an Angel* enacts a dark and visceral ritual, performed by Alexandra Unger, an avatar for the artist (Woodman, but possibly Adler as well) who, while assuming the still photographs angelic posture and struggle to take flight, embodies aspiration, suffering and transfiguration. In place of a static image however is a moving picture and in that medium the process of becoming an angel is presented



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as a series of a metamorphic phases; a painful striving toward some ultimate transformation.

The film begins with "Woodman" standing in a cemetery in a white gown, making wing-like movements with her arms, then after a couple of dissolves the upper part of the gown is gone and "Woodman," breasts now bared, continues her obsessive pursuit of flight. Her ascent thwarted or frustrated, or perhaps simply desperate from the exertions, she takes up a piece of chalk from the cemetery and begins to roughly and frenetically scrawl across her upper chest and arms a tangle of rough black lines, scoring her vein-like lines from her arms to her chest and from her upper chest over her neck to her mouth, tracing the lines again and again, a visceral performance reminiscent of another body-based artist, Marina Abramovic. Her body thoroughly marked, the aspiring angel's ritual finally culminates in etching the name Francesca Woodman across her upper chest, a gesture that suggests a bid for identity or more saliently a demand or plea for recognition. Thus disfigured with black lines, she arches her back and looks heavenward, resumes her wing-like arm movements, body tense, suffused with suffering, then suddenly lunges forward. This is followed by a cut to an open apartment window, evoking Woodman's suicide by jumping from a loft window. Here she either ends or achieves her pursuit of liberation, achieving a transmutation into the immortality of the realm of pure idea, the individual suffering self, giving way to the universal figure of her highly charged images, that have survived and ultimately transcended the transitory being, Francesca Woodman. The body of the female artist undergoes a painful ritual of martyrdom in the pursuit of both self-revelation and transcendent meaning.



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