

The Passing of a Shadow: Art and Entropy

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As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper. A strip about as high as my head and half around the room...¹

Consider the scene as a young woman emerges from the wallpaper. She stands there, inconspicuous, statue-like and nude, aside from the faint papery shroud that enfolds her. Francesca was prone to concealing herself among the fixtures. Photographing herself obsessively during her short lifetime, she documented a 'continuous performance' in which she inhabited the stark architectural features of derelict buildings.² Doorways, window frames, corners and fireplaces became hiding places, escape hatches or places in which to linger, lodge and contort. She orchestrated self-contained melodramas in these ruined places, the wild radiance of her soft contours refusing to conform to the sharp angles of her containment. In these enigmatic black-and-white images, the house appears as both prison and refuge. Her figure is gradually absorbed by the surroundings, as if she is anticipating her own disappearance. These experiments in self-eradication often involved long exposure times. The moving figure is obliterated, causing her transubstantiated flesh to vapourise in front of our eyes. The supernatural bodies featuring in these 'ghost pictures' are often transparent, out of focus, and neither present nor absent. At times, the slow shutter speed causes a spectral light to emanate from the skin, in contrast to the darkness pooling around her. In this soul-state, she hovers at the threshold between worlds. Among the particles of white dust, we consider the erasure of precious things.

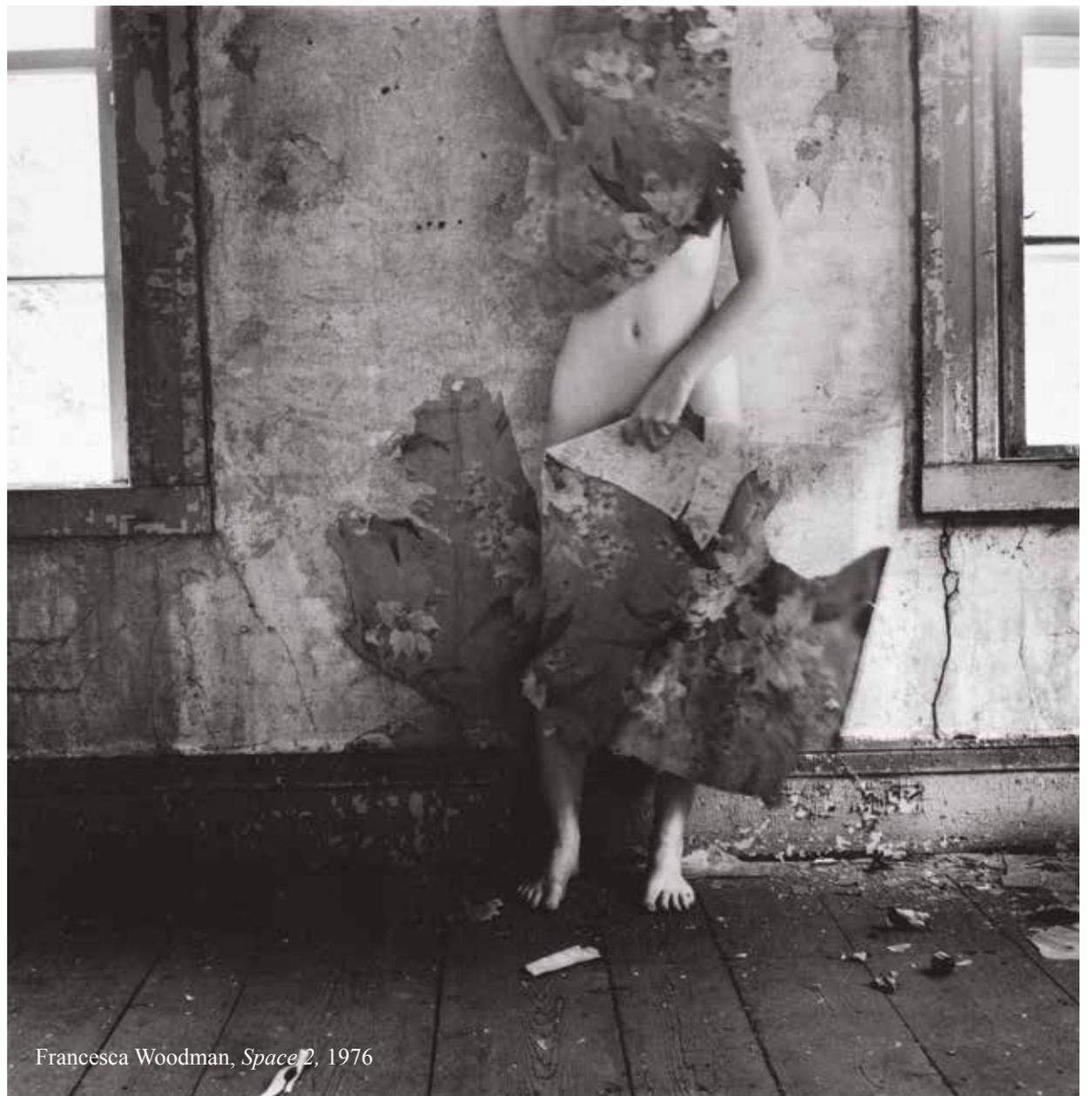
My body, still too heavy with sleep to move, would endeavour to construe from the pattern of its tiredness the position of its various limbs, in order to deduce therefrom the direction of the wall, the location of the furniture, to piece together and give a name to the house in which it lay...³

Occasionally she dresses like the heroine of some nineteenth-century gothic novel, within more macabre scenes involving graveyards.

In other photographs, her figure is partially shrouded with layers of fabric or plastic sheeting. This impulse to conceal points to a desire to evade, subvert or redirect the male gaze, which traditionally dominates the art historical canon. On one occasion, she places a mirror between her legs, perhaps in denial of Gustave Courbet's provocative painting, *The Origin of the World* (1866). While her body was her subject, recorded by the camera, some suggest that Francesca's medium was actually time itself. Just as time punctuates the female body through cyclical and temporal experience,

analogue photography is dependent upon the alchemical fusion of time and matter. Displaying a Proustian sensibility, the artist explores the interplay between past and present – between distant memory and the childhood unconscious. Leaping to her death, she discovered that the beauty of all past experience is eternally alive.

The place became crater on each side, sank down to its first skull, shedding forests, oceans, dried bones and neons, as it fell through time like a forgotten pitted stone...⁴



Francesca Woodman, *Space 2*, 1976

Falling objects – mattresses, buildings, bodies – came to signify a collective decent into the void. Anticipating the moment of impact and physical disintegration, Patrick’s films chart the free-falling, entropic nature of our journey.⁵ Replayed in slow motion, falling becomes a momentarily dislocated action, occupying the similarly alienated spaces of grief, trauma and existential crisis. The settings for these films fluctuate between vaguely familiar interiors and vast, unknowable landscapes. Each scene is tinged with an aura of imminent trespass,

as if these environments will soon be devoured by some untameable force – flooded by watery torrents, ravaged by wild animals, engulfed by flames or petrified by freezing winds. His black-and-white photographs also draw us into ominous landscapes, often rendered elusive and ungraspable through their perpetual shrouding in fog. On a material level, 16mm delivers both clarity and grit, while the imperfect lo-fi grain of 8mm exudes the nostalgia and precious urgency of someone’s last-known photograph.

*Film is chemistry: chemistry that has produced the miracle of the moving image [...] My films are depictions of their subject and therefore closer to painting than they are to narrative cinema [...] This is why the film image is different from the digital image: it is not only emulsion versus pixels, or light versus electronics but something deeper – something to do with poetry...*⁶

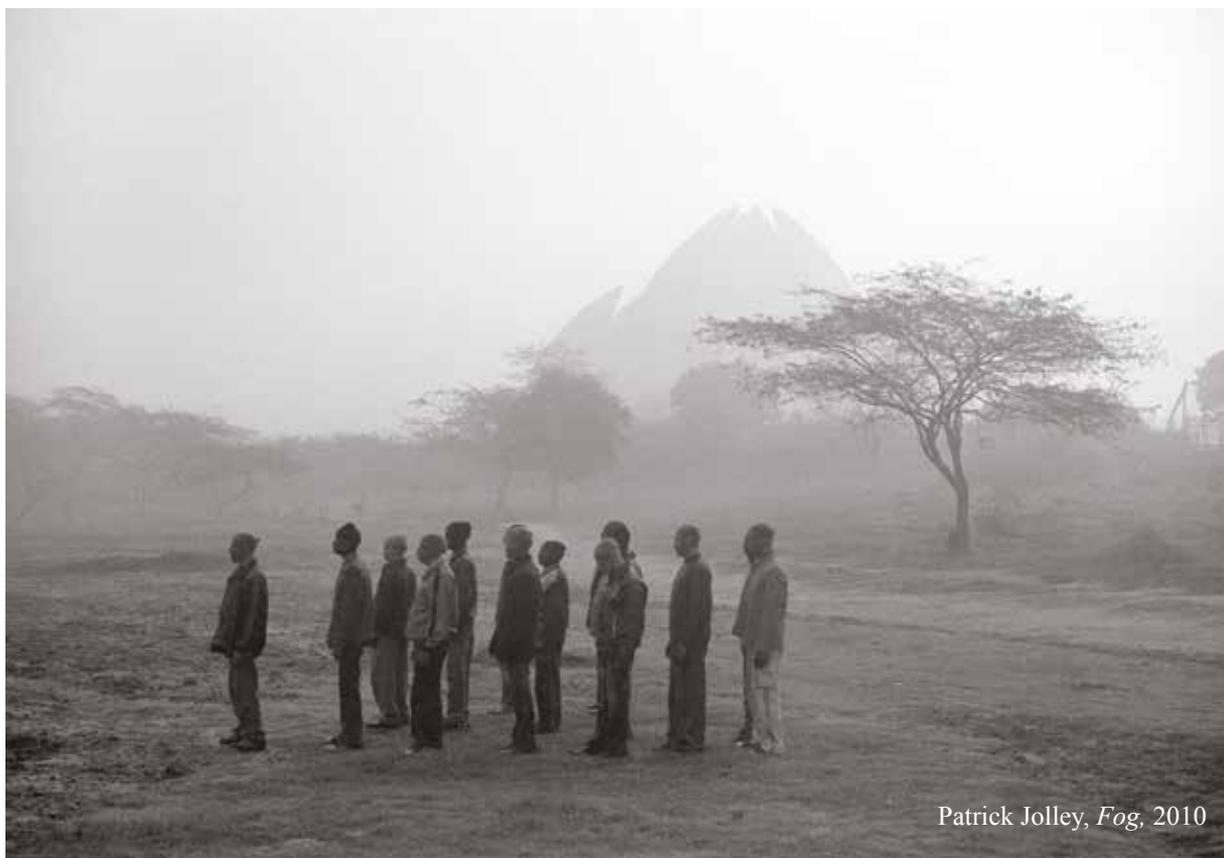
A montage of found video footage from British nightclubs documents the impact of musical subcultures.⁷ However, it also charts the ways in which technology has infiltrated the body over time. Filmed on cutting-edge equipment throughout the ages, these anachronistic fragments of grainy footage – often usefully annotated with video dates – serve to highlight these technological shifts. *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* was created in 1999, at the cusp of the new millennium that ushered in the digital age, despite the potentially catastrophic threat of the Y2K bug – a computer glitch which augured widespread systemic failure at the start of the twenty-first century. Ironically *Fiorucci* has now accumulated its own archival momentum, attesting to shifts in how footage – untethered to time and place, chronology and narrative – is now disseminated via digital platforms. With the internet, the scope for assembling one’s own coming-of-age soundtrack has increased exponentially. Even more problematic than the separation of this archival footage from its distinctive cultural history, is the reality that it can be instantaneously downloaded and consumed without any obvious sense of this anachronism.

*And finally, above all else, it is about leaving a mark that I existed: I was here. I was hungry. I was defeated. I was happy. I was sad. I was in love. I was afraid. I was hopeful. I had an idea and had a good purpose and that is why I made art...*⁸

A shallow mound of silver-foil-wrapped sweets shimmers like forgotten treasure.⁹ Elsewhere, white and blue swirled candies, individually wrapped in clear cellophane, form a narrow carpet, fraying at the edges where confectionary is displaced. These perpetually shrinking sculptures echo the seriality of minimalism and its harnessing of everyday materials, conferred with the aura of art. Felix believed that meaning is created through personal experience. Tactility and dispersal are central motifs. Yet beyond this democratic invitation – to indulge in sweets recognised from childhood – there exists a history of oppression and illness, underpinned by a well of vulnerability, anger and sadness. While signifying the sweetness of love, these candies bring forth a bittersweet mixture of pleasure and melancholy. Though it has been reproduced in museums across the world, the artwork was originally developed as a self-portrait of the artist and his long-term partner, who was dying from AIDS related illness.



Patrick Jolley, *Kola*, 2009-2011



Patrick Jolley, *Fog*, 2010

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Lover Boys)*, 1991

The multitudinous confectionary may represent HIV pills, the pandemic's countless victims, or a symptomatic depletion of the body, day-by-day. The glistening mass has an 'ideal weight' of 355lbs but is set to diminish over time – or perhaps even vanish completely – as viewers 'take only one'.

*Our name will be forgotten
In time
No one will remember our work
Our life will pass like the traces of a cloud
And be scattered like
Mist that is chased by the
Rays of the sun
For our time is the passing of a shadow
And our lives will run like
Sparks through the stubble...*¹⁰

Blue Poison. A Blueprint for Bliss. My Blue Heaven. Into the Blue. In the end, with reductive simplicity, he opted simply for *Blue*.¹¹ The film was screened at the Venice Biennale in 1993, four months before the artist's death. Lasting 79 minutes, it comprises a single unchanging frame of Yves Klein Blue, gesturing towards the all-consuming power of colour field painting.

An ambient soundtrack commences with the sonorous chimes of Tibetan singing bowls, later merging with the sounds of medical equipment, nightclub basslines and lapping waves. Against the soundscape and colour field, Derek and his friends recount lived experiences, interspliced with dreamlike sequences. They describe the landscape decimated by war, the body ravaged by AIDS, and the brutal side-effects of treatment, including night sweats, nausea, kidney failure and psychosis. Like *The Wizard of Oz*, the artist's favourite film, *Blue* was shot in Technicolor. A fusion of painting and film, *Blue* is an elegiac journey towards the void. Like many enduring artists, his artworks draw frames of reference around his experiences and ways of seeing the world. His final statement in film is the ultimate alchemical distillation – a plea to be liberated from 'the pandemonium of image'. *Blue* is the deeply personal reckoning of a blind and dying man. For him, the universal blue "transcends the solemn geography of human limits"; it is "the terrestrial paradise" – the "universal love in which man bathes". *Blue* is the silent unseeing void; it is darkness made visible. The longer we look at *Blue*, the more it starts to inhabit us.

1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'The Yellow Wallpaper', *The New England Magazine*, January 1892, p 655.
2. Francesca Woodman, *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* (1981) – Woodman's only artists' book published during her lifetime, only days before her suicide at the age of 22.
3. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Vol I, Swann's Way*, (1928), trans C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D.J. Enright; Modern Library Edition (New York: Random House, 1992) p5.
4. Anne Sexton, 'Venus and the Ark', *The Complete Poems* (Houghton Mifflin, 1981).
5. Patrick Jolley, *Fall* (2008); 16mm transferred to HD, B/W, sound, 11 mins.
6. Tacita Dean 'Save celluloid, for art's sake', *The Guardian*, 22 February 2011.
7. Mark Leckey, *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* (1999); video installation.
8. Felix Gonzalez-Torres interview with Tim Rollins, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1993) p. 10.
9. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Lover Boys)* (1991); candies individually wrapped in cellophane.
10. Derek Jarman, *Blue* (1993); Technicolour film, 79 mins.
11. Ibid.