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Self-Portraits and Gravity Bodies

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Self-Portraits and Gravity Bodies

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

Self-portraiture allows for the rapid fruition of ideas. An analysis of the work of Francesca Woodman and Ana Mendieta shows how the artist’s body can be variably used in photography. David Wojnarowicz’s memoir establishes a connection between gravity and the human condition. My practice has been informed by this connection.
**Introduction:** What does it mean to disappear?

I have employed primarily photography, video and performance to investigate the above question. Disappearance is not limited to the physical act of being gone because there is an instantaneous distancing between the living subject and the subject represented from the moment a person is recorded onto a light-sensitive plane. Disappearance can simply be achieved through the removal or distortion of identity, gender, and other characteristics from the body.

Disappearance can also be achieved through the illusion of being in two states simultaneously, suggesting that the photograph is depicting a shift from one form to another. Disappearance can be physical, metaphorical, digital, elemental, and entropic. Ultimately, I have sought to explore the multiple ways that I can make my body disappear in order to illuminate issues regarding gender, queerness, social institutions, the subject/object relationship, and the human condition.
Section 1:

“I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed.” – Garry Winogrand

Recently, I have developed a new method of disappearance that is achieved through the marriage of physical, performative gestures, and digital technology. These video performances are designed around Photoshop’s content-aware fill tool. With this process, a performance or an action is recorded on video with the intention of selecting a particular area to use the effect. The selected area is usually distinguished by color, paint, clothing, material, and objects. The video is edited and exported into its individual frames. Those frames are then batch-processed in Photoshop where the content-aware fill is applied. The fill works by first selecting a particular area. The software analyzes the image and then samples the area outside of the selection in order to fill it in.

![Figure 1](image1.png)

*Figure 1, Untitled (Gravity Act #2) (video stills)*

In the still above from a video performance, the use of the fill-effect is apparent. Due to the artificial placement of the subject, complexity of the image, and the large selection area, the result is an obvious distortion. The content-aware fill was designed to be used on small details in

1 Grundberg.
visually simple images; it was not intended to be used for video. It is only by using workarounds in the Photoshop program that allow me to apply this effect to video.

The peculiar and aesthetic nature of the algorithmic distortions demands a critical investigation. It is also reminiscent of the Surrealist methodology of using chance processes. Additionally, the effect speaks to the deceptive nature of digital media. Green screen technology is typically used to create a false reality, like placing a person in an artificial location. There is significant effort to hide the illusion so the viewer is oblivious to the trick and sees the image as genuine. The content-aware fill does the exact opposite; the stuttering and glitchy algorithmic process makes it obvious that an effect is being used. Thus, the viewer is confronted with the fact that they are presented with a manipulated image and denied visual information. It asks the viewer to look at still and moving images with a critical lens and to unlearn their trustworthiness.

Ultimately, there is no way to know how the content-aware fill tool will react unless you actually go through the steps and test it out. The exploratory and experimental nature of this approach is important to my working process. It was experimentation within Photoshop that originally led to its discovery. Beyond the nature of the algorithm, the conceptual implication of bodily disappearance is a central theme to my work. Due to the faulty, erratic visual quality of the erasure, the figures in these performances are simultaneously present and absent. When the body is shifting from presence to non-presence, it creates a captivating and peculiar visual experience.

In the video “I AM A FAGGOT” (fig. 2), the performance begins with me clothed. I reveal myself smiling and looking at the camera from behind a green screen that is removed/distorted from the content-aware fill effect. I quickly sigh and change my expression. This action is meant to designate a shift between the ideas of ‘performance’ and ‘performative
actions;’ the jovial reveal and expression are the most performative parts of the video. Next, I begin painting the canvas. However, the paint is not shown because the effect samples the black canvas; anything I paint is absorbed by the darkness of the void. Next, I remove my clothing and transform from a public to a private body. I begin painting my body and its erasure and distortion becomes more obvious over time. By my own hand, I remove any indication of gender and mass and transform into a being that is simultaneously there and not there. The video ends with the erased figure covered in the cloth, entirely removed and the erasure illusion complete.

Figure 2, I AM A FAGGOT (video stills)

I classify this video as a performative action. This speaks to the nature of gender performativity. By presenting my body with as little modification as possible, I am showing you my body as the subject of performance, not the object for completing the performative task. The distance here is slim between my physical self and the represented version of myself.

Any moment in front of a camera is a performance, but when the script demands — ‘reveal oneself’, create the painting, remove clothing, paint self, closing action/end video —
where is the room for a performance? While in my other works I hide behind effects, high-heeled shoes, or the guise of performance, in this piece nothing is hidden until the body starts to vanish. Often, I present my body as gender-neutral. Particularly when the figure is entirely removed and only the outline or form remains, the trace of my body can only be interpreted as human with no male or female signifiers. In this case, my body is nude and uncensored — a gendered, male body is depicted — but the action of making it disappear undermines those labels.

It was only by going through these many steps and making this work that I was able to see the result; each work/experiment serves as a data point for future work with self-portraiture as the central tool for visual exploration.
Section 2:

“If I had been born 100 or 200 years ago, I might have been a sculptor, but photography is a very quick way to see, to make sculpture.” – Robert Mapplethorpe

Since my practice pivots upon ideas, experiments and exploration, photography is advantageous due to its rapidity. An idea — before the pitfall of forgetfulness or self-censorship — can go from thought to finished product over the course of an afternoon. Even an aesthetic venture can lead to conceptual discoveries. For example, first, I pursue the phenomenological, visual look, then apply the conceptual framework afterwards. Though photography is merely the indexical recording of light on a photosensitive plane, what a photograph can accomplish goes far beyond what merely occurred before the lens. With self-portraiture, I am able to explore the subject of bodily representation without the obstacle of requiring others and subjecting them to compromising, revealing, or hazardous conditions.

What is important to indicate with photographic self-portraiture is the difference between the object and the subject and how this dynamic may be utilized. The object is what appears and what is physically represented in the photograph. The subject is the idea, theme, or what the photograph speaks to. Because the artist is using his self or body, it does not mean that they are the subject. Depending on the body’s use, the artist may be acting as an object in order to convey the subject or accomplish a task. We may feel as though self-portraiture “promises to convey the artist to us directly: the maker … becomes the subject/object … [and] we may be tempted to feel as though we have unmediated access to the artist as the origin of the work.” However, self-portraiture actually points to the limits of representation. There is no way to convey weight, 

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2 Hoberman.
3 Jones, 258.
physicality, and aliveness through a photograph. It points to the immediate distancing that is created between the photographed and the photograph. A photograph will never give you a fully formed, accurate representation of a living being. There is a gap between the actual self and the version of the self that is created, which expands even further depending on the performativity and bodily distortions in the work. The more performative the body or the action, the greater the distance (between the human and photograph) and the more the body acts like an object. The self-portrait promises the viewer a comprehensive look at the “unified, coherent, originary, and immortal” artist-subject. However, through self-representation, we only “perform and expose our own contingency and mortality.” I take advantage of these innate properties of photography, using my body like an object to convey the subject of the work. That subject might be a reflection on mortality, gender, disappearance, the nature of artistic creation, and the queerness of the body.

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4 Jones, 265.
5 Ibid.
Section 3:

“It’s a matter of convenience, I’m always available.” - Francesca Woodman

The above quote is Francesca Woodman’s response to why she frequently utilized self-portraiture. Self-portraiture allows for immediacy and the instantaneous exploration of concepts. It enables a reduction in the distance between idea and artistic product. Each self-portrait artist utilizes the medium/method for various reasons and to speak to different issues. My work is often aligned with the imagery and methodology of the work of Francesca Woodman and Ana Mendieta. My appreciation for their work goes beyond their use of self-portraiture. It is how they use their bodies that is significant for me.

Francesca Woodman’s use of her body is closer aligned to object than subject. The subject of her work is the juxtaposition or diffusion of her body within a harsh environment. She explores self-representation, photographic presence, and the subject/object relationship.

Figure 3, Francesca Woodman, House 3, Providence, Rhode Island
Figure 4, Francesca Woodman, Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island

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6 Rankin, 35.
In figure 3, it is not important that it is her body. Of importance is what is happening to the body. Its semi-presence and disappearance into the dilapidated space — the human/spatial amalgamation — is the subject. The image on the right is significant because it obfuscates the relationship between subject and object. We see Woodman sitting in a chair, nude (except for a pair of shoes). She is facing the camera, and there is a human outline on the ground. This outline was created from a photographic powder that turns white when exposed to light. In other words, she is using her body as an object to accomplish that task. To complicate the subject/object relationship, she is posing for and looking directly at the camera. This points to the awareness of representation as subject. She knows that we are looking at her, and thus, she is also looking at us. I suggested before that a performative body is closer to using the body like an object. Likewise, the opposite is true: the simpler or more direct the action, the closer it is to representation as subject. There is paper on the window in order to soften the light. This is a photographic decision. By leaving it in, she is deliberate in showing her steps in the creative process. It is a small detail but it is meant to point back to her, the artist.

Ana Mendieta uses the body, in conjunction with the natural world, to create allegorical and symbolically charged imagery. Within her work, there lies a beauty of contradiction: disappearance/preservation, “birth/death, nature/culture, female/male, and time/timelessness.”

Critics of her work tend to overemphasize the significance of her personal biography. I would argue that this critical interpretation is limiting and constitutes a severe disservice to the artist. To privilege the author over the reader, is “an outmoded modernist ideology rooted in capitalism and positivism” — and is already well articulated in Roland Barthes’ Death of the Author. Additionally, claims of narcissism are often leveled at women artists when they use their

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7 Blocker, 66.
8 Ibid., 9.
own bodies in their work. Interpreting the work of Woodman and Mendieta on autobiographical and narcissistic terms diminishes the power of their imagery and the statements they are trying to make.

While it would not be accurate to call Woodman and Mendieta Surrealists, their dynamic visual imagery can be read within the Surrealist tradition. Some of the ideas of Surrealism are still present in my current work. The Surrealist movement represented a significant achievement in the arts, particularly in film, due to its development of a unique visual language and methodologies. However, it was a male-dominated, heterosexual movement whose images often projected heteronormative and misogynistic ideals. Though there were gay and female surrealists at the time, they were often sidelined. The most celebrated Surrealists were exclusively heterosexual men. Woodman and Mendieta offer a much-needed reprieve by incorporating Surrealist ideas and visual language while utilizing photography and performance to speak of the body, death, displacement, and femininity.

Sigmund Freud’s writings were crucial to the Surrealists, but also speak to Mendieta’s work as well as my own. Regarding the concepts of mirroring and the “Uncanny”, Freud explains that an uncomfortable sensation is caused by a disruption to the familiar: “It is precisely the sense of familiarity perceived in regard to the double that for Freud causes our discomfort.” 9 When we are presented with a double — situations that might seem familiar or objects that emit or duplicate human-like qualities — this causes a conflicting sensation. Mendieta’s work employs the uncanny by building bodily structures and utilizing the human shape or silhouette,

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9 Blocker, 71.
but perverting it through its material construction or through performative actions: “the piece is meant to duplicate a living body; it is, therefore, a ghostly double, an object that is [uncanny].”

In the above images, though her body is not physically represented, Mendieta uses her body to create these uncanny doubles. This relates to my performances that include a figure that is entirely erased but where its outline and trace is still present. In both works, the viewer is confronted with the disappearance and distortion of the body. It is apparent that it is the artist’s body that is creating this form but the viewer is denied that visual connection to the artist.

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10 Blocker, 72
Section 4:

“Of course, those in power count on the fact that we are stuck inside these gravity vehicles called bodies.” — David Wojnarowicz

David Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* contains several poignant passages regarding queerness, grievances and sharp political commentaries on the United States, the AIDS epidemic, and the oddity of existence. There is one passage in particular that has significantly supported the conceptual frameworks of my performances:

“I lay in a hotel room one night … and I wished I had a motorcycle and that I was in a faraway landscape. I saw myself riding this machine faster and faster and faster towards the edge of a cliff until I hit the right speed that would take me off the cliff in an arcing motion. At that instant when my body and the machine cleared the edge of the cliff and hit the point in the sky where I was neither rising nor falling … in that exact moment, I would suddenly disappear, and the motorcycle would continue the downward arc of gravity and explode into flames somewhere along the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. And it is in that sense of void — that marriage of body-machine and space — where one should most desire a continuance of life, that I wish most to disappear… Even though gravity will drag us back to the earth again, it is in [this] moment … that we experience true freedom.”

Wojnarowicz had already expressed how the arrival at a destination is similar to death and how he could be in a state of perpetual freedom if he could figure out how to remain forever in transition. I see disappearing in that apex moment, of neither rising nor falling, as the ultimate in-between state. Gravity will inevitably pull us back down; wanting to disappear in that moment is wanting to defy the inevitability of being pulled back to the Earth. To disappear is to be forever in that moment and to stand in opposition to reality where you would be joining the motorcycle at the bottom of the cliff.

11 Wojnarowicz, 60.
12 Ibid., 41.
So, how does one disappear? In photography, a person’s image — when indexically transferred onto a light-sensitive plane — is already distanced from their actual self. Therefore, any alteration to the portrayal of that individual is a disappearance. Under these presuppositions, I have investigated this question by numerous approaches. I have obscured my body with various physical, inorganic and naturally occurring matter (foliage, fabric, mirrors, water, smoke) and other objects that act as signs such as flags or books. On a more metaphysical level, the disappearance has also been achieved by the removal or distortion of identity, gender or aliveness from the body. When the body is perceived as a mannequin, a statue, or an inanimate object, it creates a disappearance from the physical, living body and the represented object. Additionally, disappearance has been affected by the marriage of physical, performative gestures and digital technology: the content-aware fill effect. The underlying purpose of each photographic performance is dependent on the means, methods, and locations of the disappearance. Works that utilize nature indicate an inseparable, existential relationship between human existence and natural order, entropy, and the cycle of energy and matter. In the below examples (fig. 7), the placement and inaction of the corpse-like figure is meant to give the illusion of a body overwhelmed, engulfed, imprisoned by foliage, and sinking back into the Earth.
Figure 7, Denial

When the disappearance is caused by inorganic matter, the content of the work can be seen by examining the physicality of the disappearance and the relation between the body and its surroundings. For example, in the photograph below (fig. 8), the figure is interacting with a broken mirror that is angled upward. Visual references can distinguish the body and object relationship: the curved, blurred line of the glass, the texture and object attached to the ceiling. However, given the difficulty in distinguishing the body’s placement, the location should be interpreted as psychological space, symbolic of a mental state. This is achieved by presenting the figure in a claustrophobic space with few indicators of a physical location. In the photograph, the body is manipulated into an uncomfortable position, bending over and revealing the muscle and bone of the subject. The fracture of the glass severs the figure through the chest and the edge of the image’s frame splits the subject through the upper thigh. Using the processes and optical
limitations of photography, the figure is reduced to merely a torso. The depiction of the body, black and white, smoothed skin, and musculature, is intended to be reminiscent of Mapplethorpe’s photographic approach that depicts bodies with the stoicism of Grecian sculpture. When the figure is divided by the glass, an illusion is created as though light burst out of the subject. It indicates the forward progression of the body, from physical matter into light matter; the body transforms from one state to another. The light also acts as a metaphor for mind and body; the body is grounded and restricted while the ray of light, the mind and ideas, expands infinitely outward. This presence and absence is intended to suggest that our bodies are transient containers in a transitory state while our ideas and creations have the potential to exist endlessly beyond our physical selves.

Figure 8, Ascension / Acceptance
Section 5:

“The pressure that gravity sustains on our bodies keeps us crawling around in this preinvented existence with the neighbors split-rail fencing preventing us from crawling out.”

— David Wojnarowicz

My performances, even before coming across Wojnarowicz’s memoir, have utilized gravity. The reason these passages are so moving to me is because gravity is a constant just as death is to the human condition. While death has a semi-visible presence, gravity is invisible, despite being universal and persistent. In addition to their constant nature, gravity and death are strongly interrelated. Whether through age or illness, gravity becomes increasingly difficult to bare. Additionally, gravity can be a factor in many types of untimely death. These two concepts are metaphysically related; the resistance to gravity can act as a symbol for trying to obtain freedom over the human condition.

Wojnarowicz uses the term “gravity bodies” to suggest that power structures take advantage of our mortality in order to keep us inside of their oppressive systems. Government entities and religious groups have demanded control and censorship of women, queers, and people of color. Gender and sexuality can be constricting systems in a societal/social context, just as gravity is a restrictive force in human existence. Thus, in my recent performance work, I have used gravity and visibility as metaphors for the constricting aspects of gender, sexuality, and human experience. This content is to show the struggle against gravity as an allegory of trying to obtain freedom over oppression.

13 Wojnarowicz, 60.
In the performance work above (fig. 9), a nude male is suspended from the ceiling and a partially invisible (cloaked) figure struggles to lift him. The visible male is restricted by the arms or ankles and cannot move from the central point of the image frame as the invisible figure controls and manipulates them. The viewer sees the struggle of the cloaked figure and the physical distress of the suspended figure. It confronts the viewer with the weight of the body as the suspended male is pained by his own weight and the cloaked figure struggles with it. The imagery is meant to be reminiscent of The Crucifixion and the Pietà where the Virgin Mary cradles the body of Jesus Christ. The religious implication alludes to the relationship of gravity and the oppressiveness of Christianity. In this performance, the “Virgin Mary” is invisible and distorted, suggesting that Mary, a Christian symbol for moral purity, is absent. In addition, “Christ” is a queer male and the semiotic relationships to Christianity are intended to subvert this power structure. The invisible figure is cloaked by the content-aware fill effect and the ropes that suspend the male are also concealed. Due to the nature of the effect and the close and direct
interaction of the performers, Photoshop samples from the suspended figure, making it look as though the male is morphing into the environment and into the other performer. The ropes are well hidden but the illusion is imperfect. Their removal would suggest weightlessness but from the obvious distress of the performers from the weight of gravity, a visual juxtaposition is created.

Gravity can serve as an antagonist. The performer may be tasked with achieving a goal despite gravity's pull or tasked with relying on physical strength to temporarily oppose its force. Gravity can also serve as the collaborative vehicle for a performative action. In the video work pictured in Section 1 (fig. 1), gravity facilitates the dripping of paint. When paired with the content-aware effect, gravity causes the disappearance. This dripping, the focus of the red channel, also creates the form of a skull, a common symbol of death. This alludes to the mortal body, where the skull, normally hidden by flesh, is revealed through this act and is juxtaposed with the adjacent living body. This highlights the connection between gravity, disappearance, and mortality. The background video is taken from the film Koyaanisqatsi (1982). I chose this film because of its themes of the chaotic human condition. The sequence is an emphatic depiction of gravity and entropy as oppressive, destructive, and ineluctable forces.
Figure 10. *Gravity Collaboration (Photograph dropped from Six Feet)*

In the work above (fig. 10), the image was mounted to a mirror and dropped. The shards were then collected and mounted to a glass and framed. The image itself is a nude self-portrait with flowers covering the genitals. The daffodils (or Narcissus) and the mirror allude to the story of Narcissus from Greek mythology. The purpose of the direct gaze is similar to that of Woodman’s (described earlier); the simplicity of the action reflects that this is closer to representation as subject. The dropping of the glass (even without presenting it with the video of its breaking) suggests that this work is both a photographic work and a performative action. The feet are distorted because the stool I was standing on was removed from the content-aware effect; the photograph creates an imperfect illusion of defying gravity. The purpose of the piece is to challenge the subject/object relationship and to confront the narcissistic assumptions of self-portraiture by presenting a contradictory image of self-love and self-loathing through the destructive action.
In the two works described above, gravity acts as a collaborative force, designating the location/timing of the drips and the fracture pattern of the glass. This randomness is meant to be reminiscent of Surrealism’s use of chance/automatic methods and of action painting, an approach that first exemplified how the artist’s body is integral to the manifestation of the work. Jackson Pollock placed his canvases on the ground, meaning that gravity was a key factor within the work.
Conclusion:

“Pollock [is] present in his work through the gestural trace of paint and thus through the viewer’s perception of [him] having moved in … such a way to make such a trace.” – Amelia Jones 14

Though the use of the body is most easily visible in performance and photographic media, the artist’s body has become increasingly more present and pivotal to many practices since the inception of action painting. The body’s movement and performance was fundamental to that work, even if a painting was the result. Since then, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age and other bodily signifiers have been explored extensively in performance and photographic media. Many artists have put their bodies on the frontlines to create visual experiences and to explore ideas that painting and traditional media alone could not. My work stands as a continuation of that history and those practices: to explore the possibility of how bodies can be represented. I have utilized methodologies and visual languages similar to other practices but have incorporated my own particular interests and approaches into this bodily exploration.

How much can one take away and still have the human subject present? How much must be removed until the subject is gone entirely? It is in these interesting moments, where the human and bodily signifiers have been distorted to the degree that the human is no longer there, but the trace of their existence still remains. They are both here and not.

My interest is centered on the exploration of the distance between the subject and the film plane. I explore how and to what extent the subject can disappear or become an object when transferred to an image. This photographic distance is created instantaneously and will only grow over the passage of time. Roland Barthes describes this passage as the “that has been” quality of

14 Jones, 258.
a photograph. This is easily identifiable in a body because it has aged or has perished since its documentation. A photograph is always an image from the past. However, the subject is fixed in that version of the present and its recollection keeps it alive for the future. So much can be lost or distorted through the lens, but it is this timelessness that can be gained. Though you cannot escape the “that has been” quality of a photograph, as long as it continues to exist and is not forgotten by time, then it truly has a life of its own.
Bibliography


Thesis exhibition work list

**Shoe Mod #2**, 2019, high-heeled shoe, nails, epoxy putty  29

**Shoe Mod #3**, 2019, high-heeled shoe, foam board, wood glue, fiberglass mat/resin  30

**Shoe Mod #1**, 2017, high-heeled shoe, epoxy adhesive, wood block, bricks  31

**Gravity Collaboration (Photograph dropped from Six Feet)**, 2019,  32

photograph mounted on mirror/glass in frame, 36 x 48 in

**as long as i’m here, i’ll never hit the ground**, 2019,  34

multichannel video installation, 23 min 43 sec (loop)

video link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-EQxggZUNU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-EQxggZUNU)
Thesis exhibition images

i. Shoe Mod #2 (detail), 2019
ii. **Shoe Mod #3** (detail), 2019
iii. **Shoe Mod #1** (detail), 2017
iv. Gravity Collaboration (Photograph dropped from Six Feet), 2019
v. installation view
vi. as long as i’m here, i’ll never hit the ground (detail), 2019
vii. as long as i’m here, i’ll never hit the ground (detail), 2019
viii. **as long as i’m here, i’ll never hit the ground** (detail), 2019
as long as i’m here, i’ll never hit the ground (detail), 2019
x. as long as i’m here, i’ll never hit the ground (detail), 2019
xi. installation view