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Francesca Woodman’s BFA Thesis: 
Conserving a Work of Art for An Active Archive

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ABSTRACT

Francesca Woodman attended The Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) from 1975-1979. Her BFA thesis is composed of a light-weight tissue paper support, about 30” x 20”, and twenty-one 3 ½” x 5” inter-positive transparencies attached to the front with pressure-sensitive tape. The tissue paper is heavily annotated with ball point pen inscriptions and was folded multiple times to fit into a 9” x 12” gray mailing envelope with a photographic self-portrait attached to the reverse with pressure-sensitive tape. This piece is inherently fragile and after 40 years in RISD’s Fleet Library archive, the tape had become brittle, discolored and fallen off. Eighteen of the twenty-one transparencies had detached and were lying loose in the storage box and the residual adhesive had locally yellowed the paper support.

Woodman’s thesis is a favorite piece among RISD students and access to the object is in high-demand. In 2006, Andrew Martinez, archivist at the Fleet Library, RISD brought Francesca Woodman’s BFA thesis to NEDCC as it was becoming increasingly difficult to handle and in desperate need of conservation; however, funding was unavailable at the time to pursue treatment.

The thesis conservation project got the green light in early 2015 and the approach was two-fold: to preserve the thesis’ original essence and provide safe access to the object for the researchers and RISD students. Working closely with the archivist, Woodman’s thesis was stabilized by treating the original tapes, tissue support and re-adhering the transparencies. Customized housing was created for the thesis to minimize handling and while remaining easily accessible to RISD students. Detailed digital images were taken and a high quality facsimile print was made to help further increase safe access and display of the thesis. This paper describes our discussions with the archivist, the conservation process, and outcomes of the project, both intended and unexpected.

1. INTRODUCTION

Francesca Woodman’s BFA thesis is held in the Fleet Library at RISD. It is a favorite piece among RISD students and access to the object has been in increasingly high-demand as her reputation continues to grow. Andrew Martinez, archivist at the Fleet Library brought Woodman’s BFA thesis to NEDCC for examination in 2006. It is an inherently delicate object and was becoming increasingly difficult to handle. If the thesis was to retain its original look and feel and continue to be accessed by students and researchers at the library, it needed to be conserved. A treatment proposal was written, but funding for conservation of the piece was not available in 2006.
In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in Francesca Woodman’s work with exhibits at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a 2010 retrospective at Palazzo della Ragione in Milan, Italy. A feature length documentary *The Woodmans*, directed by C. Scott Willis, was released by Lorber Films in 2010. Her oeuvre is made all the more powerful and poignant by its scarcity since she took her own life in 1981 when she was just 22 years old. Alongside this rise in recognition, requests to view her thesis increased and in 2015 funding was finally secured to fully treat and digitally image the piece.

The approach was two-fold: to preserve the thesis’ original essence and provide safe access to the object for the researchers and RISD students. Working closely with the archivist, Francesca’s thesis was stabilized by treating the original tapes, mending the tissue support and re-adhering the transparencies. Additionally, a high quality facsimile print was made and detailed digital images were captured of each of the transparencies.

2. BIOGRAPHY

Francesca Woodman was born in April of 1958 in Denver, Colorado. Her parents were artists; her mother Betty was an accomplished ceramicist and art teacher, her father George, a painter and photographer. Francesca attended public schools in Boulder, CO and in 1972 began high school at the Abbot Academy in Andover, Massachusetts (the oldest private school for girls in New England, which merged with the boys school Phillips Academy during Woodman’s second year). It was here that she began developing her photographic skills and learning about the art form. She transferred to Boulder High School and graduated in 1975. She returned to the east coast for college and attended the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence.

After graduation Woodman moved to New York City in 1979, where she attempted to start a career in photography with meager success. Woodman suffered bouts of depression and mental illness throughout her life. Her first suicide attempt was in the autumn of 1980. She survived, received psychiatric treatment, and moved in with her parents, who were also living in Manhattan. During that year she had a string of bad luck and on January 19, 1981 Woodman jumped from the roof of a building on the East Side of Manhattan.

Woodman was largely unknown during her lifetime. The powerful and poignant body of work she created is made more so by its scarcity, considering she took her own life at the age of 22. Her work was first introduced to the public during a solo exhibition organized by Ann Gabhart at Wellesley College Museum and Hunter College Art Gallery in 1986, five years after her suicide. At the time, much significance was attached to its autobiographical qualities – qualities that continue to intrigue audiences to this day.
3. OBJECT DESCRIPTION

Woodman’s thesis is composed of a light-weight tissue paper support, about 30” x 20”, with twenty-one 3 ½” x 5” inter-positive transparencies attached to it with clear plastic pressure sensitive tapes. The tissue paper is heavily annotated with ball point pen inscriptions (see figure 1). This piece was inherently unstable and after 40 years in RISD’s Fleet Library archive, the tape had become brittle, discolored and fallen off. Almost all of the transparencies had detached and were lying loose in the storage box and the paper support was crinkled and had been yellowed by the residual adhesive from the tapes. Woodman mailed her thesis from New York to her professor at RISD, Wendy MacNeil. The thesis had to be folded multiple times to fit into a 9” x 12” gray envelope, which had a photographic self-portrait attached to the reverse with pressure-sensitive tape and was postmarked February 24, 1979.

4. TREATMENT

4.1. ADHESIVE REMOVAL

The pressure-sensitive clear plastic tapes were an integral part of the piece and Woodman’s placement of the tape was important to the authenticity of the thesis. Unfortunately, the adhesive had cross-linked, become brittle and discolored. As a result all of the tape carriers and transparencies had detached and some tapes were missing. Additionally, the yellowing had disfigured the paper support and transparencies. A variety of solvents were tested to reduce the residual adhesive staining. It was determined a local application of acetone worked effectively, evaporated quickly and did not cause problems with staining.

The plastic tape carriers and transparencies could be swabbed directly with acetone. However, adhesive reduction could not be done with mechanical action on the paper support since it
was so fragile and absorbent. A suction platen was used to reduce the staining on the paper support (see figure 2). It was especially important to work locally as the ink used to write the inscriptions on this piece were highly soluble in acetone. The staining was greatly reduced, though not removed completely.

4.2 ADHESIVE TESTING

After the removal of the old adhesive was complete, it was necessary to choose a new adhesive that could be used to readhere the tape carriers and transparencies. A piece of buffered acid-free tissue from University Products was used to create a mock-up for testing various adhesives regarding strength and aesthetics (whether an adhesive looked clear or white, how deeply it penetrated the paper, whether it caused cockling, etc.). The mock tissue paper’s weight and thickness was comparable to the thesis’ support and aided in determining how easily the tapes could be applied to the thin tissue paper, visually measure the reaction of the support, and determine empirically the shear and peel strength of the adhesive. Two mil Melinex® was used as the substitute for the tape carrier.

After a literature search, adhesives tested included Lascuax Acrylic Adhesive 498 HV, Lascuax Acrylic Adhesive 360 HV, 5% Klucel® M in ethanol, and Plextol® B500. Some adhesives were diluted but the dilution weakened the adhesive, and as a result the carriers could be easily peeled back.

The adhesive decided upon was Plextol® B500, an aqueous dispersion of ethyl acrylate and methyl methacrylate copolymers. The characteristics of the adhesive included solubility in ethanol and acetone and medium rigidity when dry; ability to withstand multiple freezing and thawing cycles; slight glossy surface when dry; slight purple haze on surface of some media, but overall transparent; and good light stability. Our physical tests showed that this adhesive had suitable strength, nice viscosity, and overall looked transparent when applied to the carriers – but most importantly had passed the PAT even with a higher pH of 9.5.

4.3 REATTACHMENT

Placement of the transparencies had been decided upon by Andrew Martinez who provided a CD of images to verify the intended location of each. The tape stains left distinctive patterns on the transparencies and paper support, which aided in the placement of the objects. If there was any discrepancy, Martinez was always consulted. Each transparency and respective piece of tape was assigned a number, collated and placed in archival enclosures during treatment.

Some the original tape carriers were missing and replacement carriers were created using 2 mil Melinex®; which had a similar thickness and surface gloss to the original tapes. The edges of the Melinex® were torn along on a tape dispenser, recreating the serrated edges on the replacement carrier (see figures 3 and 4).
Plextol® B 500 was applied using a brush on both the original and replacement carriers.

The tapes and transparencies were then re-adhered to the tissue support and dried under Hollytex, blotter and weights.

4.4 MENDING AND FLATTENING

In order to help make the piece safe to handle, small tears in the paper support were mended with a light-weight Japanese paper and dry wheat starch paste. The tissue paper was not flattened for a couple of reasons. The folds in the paper were original and created by the artist, and during close examination, it was noticed that some writing existed as impressions only, perhaps from a note written on top of the piece or from an un-inked stylus. Preserving this writing and the artist’s intent was of the utmost importance. Given the faintness of these impressions, even local humidification and flattening could disturb or destroy the remnants of the writing, so no such work was done on the tissue support.

Woodman completed this work while she was living in New York City, and had to fold it multiple times to get it in the envelope to mail back to RISD. The majority of these folds accommodated the placement of the transparencies with the exception of one placed squarely on the vertical access of the piece. This
fold caused the right third of this transparency to stick straight up at an almost 90° angle. In order to facilitate reattachment and rehousing of Woodman’s thesis it would be necessary to decrease this fold.

It was decided that heat and pressure would be the most effective way to flatten the polyester base of this object. The transparency was placed between silicone release polyester film to help preserve the high gloss surface and then in a dry mount press with mat boards that had been preheated to 160 °F. The press was turned off and it was allowed to rest overnight, this step was repeated 2 more times increasing the temperature by 10 degrees each time before satisfactory results were obtained at 180 °F. The crease is still visible after treatment, but the object lies significantly flatter and could be re-adhered with the original tape to the tissue support and fit comfortably in its final housing (see figures 5 and 6).

5. DIGITAL IMAGING

Digital imaging also played a valuable role in the preservation of Woodman’s thesis. Even after treatment, handling and display pose certain risks to the object, so an important aspect of this project was providing a safe way to allow access. It was determined that a high quality inkjet facsimile print would be made to scale and stored with the original object. Depending on the nature of the request the facsimile could be used in place of the original. In addition to a scale reproduction of the whole piece, high resolution digital images were taken of the individual transparencies before they were reattached. This allows for appreciation of each image with a depth of detail that would otherwise not be possible. David Joyall, Senior Photographer at NEDCC, took images using both transmitted and reflected light to get the most accurate representation of this object.

In an effort to try to capture the faint impressions, images were taken in extreme raking light to help accentuate the writing (see figure 7). Unfortunately, the full text could not be deciphered from the digital images, but it is hoped that a different imaging technology, such as reflectance transformation imaging, may be better suited to this task.

Figure 7: Close up of raking light shot “love you” highlighted in box
Francesca Woodman, BFA Thesis, 1979, RISD Archives
© Estate of Francesca Woodman
6. HOUSING

Customized housing was created for the thesis to minimize handling and to make it easily accessible to RISD students. The original and facsimile were stored together in a custom drop front box made out of blue board (see figure 8). The level of detail that was able to be rendered in the facsimile was quite impressive, capturing even the creases and folds to create a trompe l’oeil effect. The original and facsimile were each individually housed in polyester L-sleeves and then cornered onto individual archival corrugated boards for support.

A few different designs of reusable corners were considered. It was important to ensure adequate support was provided for the object and that the design was straightforward enough to minimize user error. We decided to use a design with a tab that could be folded under to lock the corner down using heavy weight Renaissance™ paper (see figure 9).

In the bottom of the box, a sink mat was made to house the original envelope and the two loose transparencies. The mailing envelope was left untreated per the request of the archivist at the Fleet Library. The paper support and tapes adhered to the envelope are poor quality materials; however, they do not pose an immediate risk and it was more important to preserve as much of the artifactual value as possible. The envelope was placed in a SilverSafe® folder and the loose transparencies in individual paper envelopes inside of a four-flap enclosure.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Woodman’s thesis piece is inherently unstable, consisting of a support thickly covered with transparencies that are heavy and stiff in comparison with the diaphanous tissue (see figure 10.) This thesis seems representative of Woodman as an artist. Outwardly assured, and yet built upon a fragility that threatens not only to destroy it, but is integral to its success. This analogy is heightened by the tantalizing, but currently illegible writing that exists throughout the work like a secret message waiting to be decoded. The conservation treatment developed for this piece intended to preserve the ephemeral, uncertain, and fragile aspects of the work while helping it survive into the future.
8. REFERENCES


9. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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