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**Invoking The Spectral Body: A Study of Potential Corporealities  
in the Work of Marina Abramovic and Francesca Woodman**

“For there is no ghost, there is never any becoming specter of the spirit without at least an appearance of flesh, in a space of invisible visibility, like the dis-appearing of an apparition. For there to be a ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever.<sup>1</sup>”  
--Jacques Derrida

*Oh there is no use in loving the dyeing/ I have tried. / I have tried, but you can't,/ You just can't guard the dead/ You are the watchman and you/ Can't keep the gate shut.<sup>2</sup>”*  
--Anne Sexton

If I start with this quote by Anne Sexton as well as a quote from Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, it is because I believe that Derrida's text is about the anticipation of death, the possibility of the body re-occurring in death and, most importantly, the impossible longing to touch the dead. Of course, the touching of the dead, as Sexton's poem implies, means that the dead have a body: that they are able to escape the beady eye of the watchman, that they slip like smoke between the gate. I am trying with these very slippery words, with this very vague concept of Derrida's - a concept that claims that the specter *does* have a body, however abstract that body may be - to propose a vision of spectral corporeality. What would a spectral body look like? Would it be part ether, part flesh? How would we touch the spectral body?

Derrida never explicitly defines what a spectral body is. With his skillful, malleable word maneuverings: he says of the spectral body that it is “more abstract than ever<sup>3</sup>” he says that the specter is the “becoming body<sup>4</sup>”; he says the spectral is “the other at the edge of life”.<sup>5</sup> But he does not simply say that the specter is the body resurrected. Nor does he say it with all such a word implies: miracle, surprise, and ultimately -- comfort. Comfort implies touch, a sense that Derrida does not associate with the spectral body, which is barely visible, barely able to be talked to.

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1 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 26.

2 Anne Sexton. *The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton* (New York: First Mariner Books, edition 1999), p. 566.

3 Derrida, p. 26.

4 Ibid., p. xviii.

5 Ibid., p. xviii.

In this paper, I am (pun intended) “fleshing out” Derrida’s definition of the spectral body by very deliberately using the bodies and bodies of work of two women artists: the photographer, Francesca Woodman and performance artist, Marina Abramovic. Derrida’s text is undeniably complex and provocative; it calls for a responsibility towards history, a history that always hovers around us like a specter. The specter is historical and political (as represented by the figure of Marx), but it is also a personal ghost, a psychological haunting (the text begins with the figure of Hamlet). Whether intentional or not, in his text, Derrida creates a specific genealogy of haunting, a specific idea of what type of body can claim, and has a responsibility to, history; it is a genealogy that is male, powerful, white and traditionally educated; this male ‘genealogy’ senses the specter through the auditory and tries to speak to the specter.

With the words of Sexton and, more particularly, with the photographs of Francesca Woodman and the performance art of Marina Abramovic, I am trying to propose a second genealogy of spectral bodies. This genealogy is one that is not unspeaking and auditory and one that is not of the rank of traditional male bodies and traditional male scholars, such as Marx, Horatio, Hamlet or the King. It is a genealogy that is visual, one that attempts to be touched and one that creates through its body the visual depiction of its death and resurrection. What would it mean, as Derrida says, “to live with specters?” or “to touch a body that is more abstract than ever”? What, after all, would it mean to come mirror to mirror with our own specter<sup>6</sup>? What would it mean to create such a specter, so that we might understand and live with our own body in death?

By using the art of Woodman and Abramovic, I am trying to provide an alternate history of specters and spectral haunting. Woodman’s mysterious black and white pictures seem to answer Hamlet’s dilemma: what would it mean to live with your own death? Abramovic’s work reveals how it might be possible to take responsibility for one’s history. Woodman and Abramovic use the

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<sup>6</sup> It would be simpler to use the often used metaphor “face to face”, rather than “mirror to mirror.” However, “face to face” would be inexact. The specter is an image of ourselves, a piece, rather than a whole. We come “mirror to mirror” with our own specters because we are confronting the image of ourselves, not our ‘whole’ selves. ‘Mirror’ implies distortion or change, ‘face’ does not.

visual and the sense of touch to grapple with the body of the specter, a way that is more direct, less fearful and, ultimately, more successful than the male figures Derrida introduces in *Specters*.

Here, let me begin at Derrida's beginning. In his introduction to *Specters of Marx*, Derrida describes four figures that he will follow throughout his text: Marx, Hamlet, the specter of Hamlet's father and the scholar Horatio. I might say that he conjures these figures—that he conjures the bearded Marx, the ashen Hamlet, the shimmering father-specter, the stiff Horatio. But if Derrida does conjure, his manifestations are verbal rather than visual. It is Marx's manifesto, his words that hover over the politics of Europe, and it is Shakespeare's Hamlet, Hamlet's existential mortifications and the dilemma of Hamlet's kingdom, that are to symbolize the constant, perhaps, slightly insidious presence of Marx and his words.

Hamlet is walking on the immense terrace of his castle. His father has died. His mother is playing coy. Hamlet is manic. He feels a confusion, a fuzz growing in his brain. Suddenly, behind him, he hears a sound—a sound like the clank on clank of metal. A sound like the helmet of his dead father. Hamlet panics. He does not want to face the sound; he is hesitant to identify the specter. For to see the specter as his father would mean he, Hamlet, would be responsible to the specter, responsible to both the message and the body that the specter brings. Horatio, the suited and apparently wise scholar is called upon to speak to the specter, this wraith who comes as Hamlet's father. But, Horatio, too, can not speak to it. He can not speak to it because, as Derrida admits, the traditional scholar “does not believe in ghosts<sup>7</sup>”. A traditional scholar is, undoubtedly, cigar in hand, knit on brow, male. A traditional scholar can not speak to specters—he, certainly, can not imagine their body lines, imagine their resurrection to a “body more abstract than ever”, imagine how they can be touched<sup>8</sup>.

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7 Derrida, p. 6.

8 I am arguing that Horatio can be conceived as a ‘traditional male scholar’ because he is (as are the rest of the member of Derrida's genealogy) white, male, educated and, in many ways, part of the traditional patriarchy. Derrida implies in his text that the scholar is called upon to talk to the ‘specter of history’; thus, Horatio, who is a scholar, should be able to talk to the King's specter. But, the traditional scholar, as Derrida says, ‘does not believe in ghosts’—since he does not believe in them, it becomes impossible for him to talk to them. I am arguing here, of course, that a scholar or artist must be non-traditional in order to communicate with the specter; this scholar would have to imagine the physicality of the specter and may have to talk to the specter in non-traditional ways (for example, the scholar might have to ‘touch’ rather than use words to speak to the specter). To be

In order to contrast “genealogies” - the visual to the auditory, Hamlet to Woodman - I will give a brief biography of Francesca Woodman. She began creating pictures at the age of 13. She went to Rhode Island School of Design. She went to Italy. She exhibited at a Surrealist bookstore in Italy<sup>9</sup>. She came back to live in New York. At the age of 22, she jumped out of her apartment building in New York and committed suicide. These are the basic facts. These facts are also why critic Peggy Phelan’s statement that “the possibility that suicide might be the result of a well-considered logic and that Woodman’s photography was a way to help her, and us, survive her disappearance from the surface of the visible world<sup>10</sup>” is so controversial.

While I am not entirely willing to agree that Woodman’s photographs, with their uncanny resemblance to the ghost or spirit photography of the Victorian era (a blur of light, an unidentifiable shadow), are a conscious preparation for death, I do think that Woodman is trying to explore the transitive state of the body—the body not bone and flesh and sinew. The body not as human body, but as ghost, spirit, angel—the body untethered from its living, human form. In her earliest work, this movement from flesh to another, unidentifiable form can already be seen.

In “Self-Portrait at Age 13” [[Figure 1](#)<sup>11</sup>], Francesca<sup>12</sup> sits in what could be a church pew. The features of the face, which give particularity to the individual, have been entirely obscured by hair. Francesca, or who the viewer imagines to be Francesca has a beam of light coming from her hand. The light envelopes the bottom half of Francesca and seems to seep in from every other corner of the photograph. While the beam of light could be coming from Francesca’s hand, indicating that it is she who is the creator of all this miraculous light, it seems more accurate to say

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fair to Derrida and the complexity of his argument, he realizes that Horatio can not speak to the ghost because he can not envision the specter or envision a way to talk to the specter. At the end of his book, Derrida posits that the scholar must recognize the specter and must take on the responsibility of speaking to it. The last line of the book is : “Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio” p.176. He must believe in the specters presence even if he does not see it. He must become an ‘untraditional’ scholar in order to take on the mantle of his responsibility to history.

9 The Maldoror bookshop and gallery in Rome.

10 Peggy Phelan, “Francesca Woodman’s Photography: Death and The Image One More Time”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27, (16, 2002), p. 979-1004, p. 991.

11 Chris Townsend, *Francesca Woodman: Scattered in Space and Time*, (Phaidon, 2006) p. 75.

12 You will note that I am switching from using ‘Woodman’ to ‘Francesca.’ I am doing this deliberately. When I discuss the critical material on Woodman (where she is an ‘object’, talked about, I use the more formal ‘Woodman’). I use the less formal, more personal ‘Francesca’ when I discuss her photographs directly.

that she is pulling the light towards her in a great sword-like sheath. She is, in fact, inviting this boundless misty light: a light like the ether said to surround psychics when they make contact with the ghostly world. Even if she is not becoming specter as she does in later photographs, she is touching, asking to commune with a light presence that could be a specter.

Anca Cristofovici argues that Woodman's ethereal shape shifting has little to do with death or the anticipation of death, but more with the transformation that adolescence and its openness to change brings.<sup>13</sup> Death and transformation are clearly not opposing states: the openness to dream and reality, intuition and reason, as Crisofovici puts it, this blurring of the boundaries between them naturally means that the lines between life, death, afterlife become equally blurry and the line between them becomes equally well-conceived. Francesca is thirteen, her face is hidden because—like the light she is pulling towards her, shaping as she pulls-- it is still being shaped into its final marble form, its final flesh mask. It is quite possible, too that Francesca's face is covered because it is turned, turned in expectation. To Derrida, it is the clank of the specter's helmet, the sigh of his chains, the murmuring musical sounds of his 'O' mouth that give evidence of the specter—but Francesca turns her head, turns to see the specter, see what shape it has made itself into - in and out of light.

In later photographs, the images of Francesca become the shape - the specter - she had in her self-portrait turned her head to see. In "Untitled" [Figure 2<sup>14</sup>], we see a figure climbing through a grave. Again, the figure and face are blurred; the torso and the head are the most unclear, while the hands are the most focused, shapely body part: we can name them as hands. As in Sexton's poem, it looks as though the mouth of a grave, the gate for the dead, has been opened and a ghost is making her escape from a thinly aired underground coffin. Critics<sup>15</sup> have said that it looks as though the figure is more "alive," more substantially human on one part of the grave and more ghost like, more vaporous on the other, so that the figure in the picture is obviously passing from a life state to

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13 Anca Cristofovici, *Touching Surfaces: Photographic Aesthetics, Temporality, Aging* (New York, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) p. 167-191.

14 Townsend, p. 80.

15 The admirable critics (Phelan, Townsend, Cristofovici) that I am referencing seem to interpret the photograph in this way.

a death state. However, I see the figure as *already* being a specter. The molecules of the body are *already* in movement, the transformation from solid flesh, from life has already occurred. Francesca is anticipating this occurrence, this transformation. Her picture is a visually marked time; her body is the site of time in constant movement; she is both the psychic who predicts death and the ghost who comes to whisper in the psychic's ear.

The opaqueness of some of the body parts in the picture, the clarity of others and the seeming randomness of both clarity and obscurity also mirror the imprint of memory. Memory is where Derrida begins his own definition of the spectral: that which he remembers or does not presently see. Hamlet's father is a King, who wills himself into remembrance, tapping the shivering Hamlet on the shoulder. The remembrance of Marx seems a similar type of intrusion on Derrida's mind—the father willing himself into being through his son's memory<sup>16</sup>. I imagine Marx as bearded, boot-tattered, counting money with one hand and workers with the other; his hands are visible, meaty scales. Marx, like Woodman's graveside ghost is shape-shifted repeatedly through the gravestone<sup>17</sup>. In Derrida's book, it is the body of Marx's memory that is re-arranged, reshaped and resurrected (vs. his visualizable, physical body), but it is Francesca's photograph that has made the vividness of memory—a finely etched hand and its sudden loss—the smeared sweep of the face, visual.

Derrida believes that in some way the ghost has language because it has sound: it rustles, it moans, it clicks its wilting bones. He points to Horatio, the scholar, to speak to the specter; Horatio, open-mouthed, jaw dropping from a rusty tin-mouth hinge, can not. Why at the site of transformation, the site between life and death, why at this liminal space - a space of trauma - would the specter not be, as we are, so constantly, so consistently, at a loss: at a loss for language, words, for the way words so primly and inaccurately define. Why, at this moment, does Derrida believe the specter would speak in language? Would he not rather hold out his hand?

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16 Obviously, Derrida is not Marx's biological son. Hamlet is presumed to be the biological son of the King (although there is some question about that, since the Queen may have committed infidelity with Hamlet's uncle). Hamlet's is the king's heir, as Derrida is (in many ways), Marx's intellectual heir. Here, I am trying to trace how the memory of the patriarch is thrust upon a male descendent.

17 That is, he and his memory are transformed repeatedly after his death.

In a direct contrast to Derrida's claim that the specter must speak, Woodman inserts an image—an image of how the specter might speak. At the bottom of the image, she writes: “And then, at one point, I did not need to translate the notes. They went directly into my hands.” [Figure 3<sup>18</sup>] Notes, which are language, do not need to be translated, do not need to be sounded—they are touched, they come seeping into the skin. The spectral possesses the body; it does not speak to it. In this picture, the body is, again, disappearing, not into light or into a grave, but into a commonly imagined space for specters: the space of the house. Again, the face is hidden, ducked under turtle-like, the hands read the wall as though they are reading Braille. Francesca's body is, again, a medium for the spectral: the notes come directly, no scholar of a Horatio stands in the way with his inept translations. The picture is one of direct contact, of direct experience; it could also be a picture of the “spectral muse”: inspiration, art comes directly into the hands through access to the artist's vision. But it could be that Woodman is saying that art, that the translation of these notes is no longer necessary; that in death, artistic expression, which is almost always a translation, is not necessary. Death comes into the hands, *into* the body: it does not need to speak to the body. This is one of Woodman's most mysterious photographs<sup>19</sup>, a picture of which Peggy Phelan, one of Woodman's most skilful critics says: “I am unable to translate this image or find a way to enter it.”<sup>20</sup> Phelan is, like Horatio, at a loss. Woodman's images, particularly this image, are a loss. They display loss: the loss of a face, a limb, the ultimate loss of Woodman herself. The spectral images of Woodman allow us to mourn and, in mourning, touch the spectral image<sup>21</sup>.

Here, I will make a slightly abrupt movement from the filmy images of Woodman to the more carnal, more vividly imagined performances of Marina Abramovic. Abramovic's oeuvre is large and continuous. For years, she performed alone. Then for years she performed with her partner Ulay; though I am sure I will be roundly contradicted for saying this, these performances

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18 Townsend, p. 113.

19 Given the ambiguity of so many of her photographs, this is saying a lot.

20 Phelan, p. 996.

21 Images that allow us to mourn for the spectral in a way that Hamlet (with his lack of a vivid, visual specter) can not. I would argue that Hamlet's attempts to have Horatio speak to the specter are his attempt at mourning the specter.



were arguably duller and flatter. After Ulay, there are more performances. Abramovic was born in Yugoslavia. She is called the “mother of performance art.” Indeed in a performance *Pieta*, she once cradled the limp Ulay in her hands. I added Abramovic, presumptuously<sup>22</sup>, to my lineage of female spectrals because, while she is not as interested as Woodman in embodying the spectral, she is, like Woodman, interested in touching the spectral, in confronting it, in linking limb through limb with it. Unlike the shivering, cow-eyed boy of a Hamlet, she does not hide from the specter or see if he can, after all, lessen the demand the specter makes upon him. Francesca’s images seem to wear a type of spectral grace. They are unweighted. But Abramovic’s performances weigh. She may commune with the specter, touch it, kiss it, even become it for a while, but the load of the specter is apparent<sup>23</sup>.

It is most apparent in Abramovic’s “Balkan Baroque” [Figure 4<sup>24</sup>] which is staged like a modern triptych. On one side of the triptych is a close-up of Abramovic’s father, in suit and tie, his hands gesturing forcefully and, on the other side, Abramovic’s mother with the same close-up, the same hands though her expression is softer, more pleading than the father’s. Between them, in the unfolding of the triptych, Abramovic stands: progeny and spiritual inheritor of both parents. In the middle of these three images sits the present Abramovic clothed in voluminous Mary-like robes: she seriously and fastidiously cleans 1500 bloodied cow bones [Figure 5<sup>25</sup>]. The performance took four days and is clearly a reference to the long and divisive war in the Balkans; it is a shamanistic ritual. By cleaning the bones, Abramovic is cleaning them of the death they represent to her, her parents and the history of her country. Of course, Abramovic’s task is futile. There is no possible cleansing of history. Like other Shakespeare characters, the hand wringing of Lady Macbeth, the handless Lavinia, the blood will not be washed off—and like Hamlet, the tremors of history and the misdeeds of the family will not be shrugged off. For Derrida, the specter is also inheritance. He

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22 Here, I am implying that my entire “lineage” of female spectral bodies may be seen as presumptuous (especially by the traditional, male critic/scholar that I have referred to throughout this paper).

23 The responsibility and inheritance that the specter conveys.

24 Marina Abramovic, *Artist Body* (Milan: Charta, 1998) p. 365.

25 Abramovic, p. 368-369.

writes “There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility.”<sup>26</sup>

Woodman’s spectral inheritance, her responsibility to the spectral’s none too gentle call was to become a prophet to her own specter, to use her body as a conduit for a visual—and without a doubt—a visually beautiful spectrality. “Balkan Baroque” is a performance that traces what the inheritance of a spectral responsibility can look like. Abramovic’s project reveals how a living body—one not shaded by light or shadowed invisible—is always spectral. So that it is not only the parents of Abramovic or the history of Abramovic’s country that haunt her, but because the blood of her mother and father plainly pumps within her, it is also she who haunts them.

It is her body and not some vaporous clanking ghost that is the reminder, the remnant of responsibility<sup>27</sup>. If you look at the video triptych of *Balkan Baroque*, this is how it appears: Abramovic as specter. Abramovic is all in white, recessed at the back of the installation. In a way, her parents emanate from *her* body. So, it could be that it is Hamlet who haunts himself, he who brings back the specter of his father, his own mind that tugs uneasily at a political, historical responsibility that is not yet complete. This is not to say that Hamlet is mad or that the specter is only of the imagination. The spectral is a body that extends from our own bodies. We are, by an invisible string, forever attached to it. This is where the responsibility to the specter becomes apparent: we must recognize this attachment, this string, this symbiotic spectral relationship.

Abramovic’s video image is connected to the limbs of her parent’s images, as Hamlet is to his father’s body, and her attachment signifies her responsibility to history and her responsibility to her own death. In the middle of the stage, in the middle of these video specters, Abramovic cleans the bones of the dead. The specters of herself, her father, her mother have called her to, literally, carry the weight of her history, clean the bones of the kingdom, speak to the dead - who do not breathe into invisibility, but become embodiments of a different kind: relics, bones and blood,

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26 Derrida, p. 91.

27 In short, I am proposing multiple spectral hauntings here. Abramovic and her parents are haunted by the specter of their history, but Abramovic as the youngest descendent of that history haunts her parents (she is the fleshly remnant of their coupling and, thus their history). History, the history of Abramovic’s country, is also haunted by her presence; she is their inheritor and, while she exists, a remnant of the countries history will always exist.

ourselves.

In creating my “lineage of ghosts”, I have focused too forcefully, I think, on the fear that the spectral image evokes: the cowering of Hamlet and the courage of Abramovic and Woodman. But, I think, there is more idealism to Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*; indeed, Derrida’s is an impossibly idealistic philosophy—a philosophy, as I stated at the beginning of my paper, that is comforting. Would we not rather, as Derrida says, “live with ghosts,” have the body echo and echo and echo, than have there be a finite ending? And there is, despite invocations of Sexton and Woodman’s suicide and the bloodied history of Abramovic’s country, a relief in the specter made visual and visible. Perhaps because the photograph (the image, the performance) gives us a relic, a trace of the spectral, a solid object to hold. Perhaps because a relic, a clear visual, gives us a clear sense of responsibility - a clear vision of the body and the history we are responsible for. Perhaps, because living with ghosts, seeing them, allows us to mourn less.

Perhaps - and I hesitate to hypothesize this, because we are not as scholars really allowed to talk about beauty, the instant shock and stop of encountering it - both the comfort and awe of spectrality, of visual spectrality comes from their beauty. Beauty like the specter is ephemeral and unplaceable. Always on the verge of not being. We long to touch it, but often, like Horatio, are slack-jawed before it. And these images of visual spectrality, like Derrida’s own writing in *Specters of Marx*, are beautiful.

Here is Woodman hung like Mary’s annunciating angel, bathed in light [[Figure 6](#)<sup>28</sup>]. Here are Abramovic’s expressive hands and wide eyes looking into the even wider eyes of the skeleton [[Figure 7](#)<sup>29</sup>]. I think in the beauty of these images, we see and believe in what Hamlet (unless we are traditional scholars) refuses to believe and see: the spectral made flesh, the angel made visible.

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<sup>28</sup> Townsend, p. 174.

<sup>29</sup> Abramovic, p. 335.

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